

**Response by John G. West (Discovery Institute) to Paul Gross article,
“Intelligent Design and that Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy”**

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“Darwinism... is the ‘politically correct’ of science,” observes Italian geneticist Giuseppe Sermonti. (“Darwin is a Prime Number,” *Rivista di Biologia*, 95 [2002], p. 10). Perhaps the best that can be said of Paul Gross’s “Intelligent Design and that Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy” (*Science Insights*, Sept. 2003) is that Gross succeeds rather spectacularly in proving Sermonti right.

Gross is convinced that scientific critics of neo-Darwinism must be “crackpots,” “bogus scientists,” or “scientific illiterates” who are driven by their religious fanaticism and whose ideas can be dismissed without a fair hearing. Demonizing one’s opponents in this way is standard practice in much of what passes for public life today. That doesn’t make such harrangues particularly constructive, and as a member of NAS, I was surprised that an organization so devoted to defending the academic freedom of scholars would print an essay that seems directed at shutting down debate rather than encouraging it.

Nevertheless, on reflection I am thankful Gross’s piece was published, if only because it provides such a clear example of the self-righteous and dogmatic mindset exhibited by many leading Darwinists. It also exposes just how lacking in self-reflection some Darwinists are about their own beliefs.

For instance, only someone blissfully unaware of what he is saying could indict others for conspiracy-mongering while at the same time accusing them of being part of a “vast right-wing conspiracy”! Presumably that part of the title of Gross’s article was supposed to be playful, but the article itself makes clear that Gross really *does* think there is a sinister conspiracy afoot to undermine modern science by using “the power of money, public relations, and politics to convince millions of good but credulous people of the truth of what is in fact baloney.” According to Gross, this conspiracy is headquartered at the big bad Discovery Institute in Seattle, and its object is nothing less than overthrowing the separation between church and state. Prof. Gross’s effort to caricature the scientific controversy over Darwinism as a struggle between religious extremism and enlightened science is a tactic so old it has whiskers on it. I fear Prof. Gross has watched one too many re-runs of *Inherit the Wind*.

For the record, Discovery Institute is a secular think tank, and its fellows and board members represent a variety of religious traditions, including mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish, and agnostic. Until recently the Chairman of Discovery’s Board of Directors was former Congressman John Miller, who is Jewish. Although it is not a religious organization, the Institute has a long record of supporting religious liberty and democratic pluralism. In fact, it sponsored a program for several years for college students to teach them the importance of religious liberty and the separation of church

and state. Our fellows and board members would be rather surprised to find out that they are at the heart of some sort of theocratic cabal. As for whether teaching intelligent design would violate the First Amendment establishment clause, interested readers might want to consult the views of legal scholars rather than Gross. Francis Beckwith, associate director of the nation's most respected university institute on church-state studies, has just published a book arguing that teaching about intelligent design is perfectly constitutional. (Beckwith, *Law, Darwinism, and Public Education: The Establishment Clause and the Challenge of Intelligent Design* [Rowman and Littlefield, 2003]; also see DeWolf, Meyer, and DeForrest, "Teaching the Origins Controversy: Science, Religion, or Speech?" *Utah Law Review* (2002), available on the web at <http://147.222.27.5/people/dewolf/utah.pdf>.)

Others are better equipped to handle the few scientific points actually raised by Gross. I would like to focus instead on what seems to be his primary argument, which is at once stunningly simple and breathtakingly unscientific: According to Gross, scientists and other scholars supporting intelligent design have religious motives. Therefore, their writings about science can be dismissed. Q.E.D.

For someone presumably devoted to the scientific method, such an argument (if I may charitably call it that) is rather astonishing. Scholars are supposed to be evaluated on the quality of their evidence and arguments, not their motives. Moreover, I expect most NAS members (as well as most Americans) are likely to find Prof. Gross's blatant religion-baiting singularly unappealing. Last time I checked, scholars who believe in God are just as entitled to a fair hearing in the public square as anyone else. Using someone's religious beliefs as a method of stigmatizing his scientific views is little more than bigotry.

If Prof. Gross genuinely believes that motives are enough to rebut someone's views about science, then he will have to be a lot more consistent if he wishes to be taken seriously. In particular, he should start applying his litmus test to fellow Darwinists, many of whom have rather strong personal motivations of their own.

For example, Darwinists Francis Crick and James Watson, co-discoverers of the structure of DNA, are outspoken atheists, and Crick has indicated that his scientific research was motivated by a desire to undermine belief in religion. (See Crick's comments in Roger Highfield, "Do our genes reveal the hand of God?" *The Daily Telegraph*, March 20, 2003.) Ditto for physicist and Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg, another champion of Darwinism, who says that he hopes the demise of religion "is something to which science can contribute and if it is, then I think it may be the most important contribution that we can make." (See, "Free People from Superstition," <http://www.ffrf.org/ftoday/april2000/weinberg.html>.) Physicist Victor Stenger, who Paul Gross recommends, has similar views. Stenger laments that "most scientists would probably classify themselves as *agnostics* rather than *atheists*," but adds that he hopes "some of these agnostic scientists will take a more careful look at the empirical data and realize, as I have, that these data are already sufficient to make a strong, scientific statement about the very likely nonexistence of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic God. I also hope that scientists will realize that they cannot sit back and ignore the current challenges

to science being made by religious zealots who wish to suppress this fact.” (See, <http://spot.colorado.edu/~vstenger/Found/00Preface.pdf>.) Does Gross think that the aggressive atheism of these scholars is relevant to assessing the truth of their scientific views? Or is it only *religious* motives that make a scientist’s work suspect, not anti-religious motives?

Similar questions might be asked about Gross’s comrade-in-arms Barbara Forrest, who is building her career by outing and denouncing the presumed religious motives of academic critics of Darwin. Prof. Forrest serves on the board of directors of a group called the “New Orleans Secular Humanist Association,” which describes itself as “an affiliate of American Atheists, and [a] member of the Atheist Alliance International.” (See <http://nosha.secularhumanism.net>.) Do Prof. Forrest’s anti-religious beliefs disqualify her as a legitimate philosopher of science according to Prof. Gross? Applying Prof. Gross’s own motivation standard, should people dismiss his new book with Prof. Forrest as nothing more than the rant of a militant secularist?

For my part, I hope not. Professors Gross and Forrest deserve to be refuted on the demerits of their arguments, not on speculations about their motives. But the same courtesy should be extended to scholars who are challenging Darwinian theory. In any case, Prof. Gross and other Darwinists should apply a consistent standard when dealing with the questions of motives. Either motives don’t matter for any scientist, or they matter for all of them.

In addition to his preoccupation with motives, Prof. Gross criticizes proponents of intelligent design for engaging in what he calls politics and public relations to promote their cause. As a political scientist, I always find it amusing when someone accuses an opponent of engaging in “politics” while he happens to be employing tactics straight from the world of partisan campaigning himself. This is especially so in Prof. Gross’s case, because he relies heavily on such hardball political tactics as guilt by association (e.g., conflating intelligent design with creationism) and character smears (e.g., denigrating his scientific opponents as simply religious zealots). At the end of his article, he even appeals to a public relations stunt, invoking last year’s resolution condemning intelligent design by the board of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS).

The AAAS resolution is typically touted by Darwinists as some sort of authoritative determination from the “scientific community” about the scientific legitimacy of intelligent design. But was the resolution an example of science or politics? After the resolution was issued, I surveyed members of the AAAS board about what books and articles by scientists favoring intelligent design they had actually read before adopting their resolution. Alan Leshner, the Chief Executive Officer of the AAAS, declined to specify any and replied instead that the issue had been analyzed by his group’s policy staff. Two other AAAS board members similarly declined to identify anything they had read by design proponents, while yet another board member volunteered that she had perused unspecified sources on the internet. In other words, AAAS board members apparently voted to brand intelligent design as unscientific without studying for

themselves the academic books and articles by scientists proposing the theory. Does Prof. Gross wish to hold this up as a model for how the “scientific community” should determine scientific truth? Does he think it is good science (or even science at all) to condemn a new scientific idea without even bothering to read those scientists who are proposing it?

Presumably even Prof. Gross won’t defend such a procedure, but he may respond by reiterating his complaint that intelligent design proponents don’t publish their work in peer-reviewed journals. Except that they do. Michael Behe has defended his theory of irreducible complexity in *Philosophy of Science* (published by the University of Chicago) and *Biology and Philosophy*. (See Prof. Behe’s response for references.) Then there are academic books like *The Design Inference*, published as part of a peer-reviewed monograph series put out by Cambridge University Press. The fact of the matter is that design scientists are publishing in peer-reviewed venues. When critics of design are forced to admit this fact rather than ignore it, they end up drawing artificial distinctions. They may insist, for example, that *Philosophy of Science* and *Biology and Philosophy* are not “relevant,” even though such theoretical journals are an appropriate place to debate a new scientific theory, and both journals are indexed in standard scientific databases such as *Biosis* and the *Science Citation Index*. Other critics may try to claim that peer-reviewed books “don’t count,” despite the fact that the evaluation process for peer-reviewed academic books is for all intents and purposes the same as for peer-reviewed journals. In both cases, a manuscript is sent out to one or more anonymous experts who are expected to critique its content, judge its accuracy, and determine its contribution to the discipline. It should be noted that design scholars have published peer-reviewed work on this topic even though some Darwinists have actively sought to disqualify articles supportive of design on *a priori* grounds. The editorial board of one science journal, for example, rejected a submission by Michael Behe with the following explanation: “As you no doubt know, our journal has supported and demonstrated a strong evolutionary position from the very beginning, and believes that evolutionary explanations of all structures and phenomena of life are possible *and inevitable*.” (emphasis added) Evolutionary explanations for “all structures and phenomena of life” are “inevitable”? Is this an empirical statement or an ideological one? (See Behe, “Correspondence with Science Journals: Response to critics concerning peer-review,” <http://www.discovery.org/scripts/viewDB/index.php?program=CRSC%20Responses&command=view&id=450>.) Despite such efforts to stop discussion before it starts, other scientists are beginning to draw on the work of design theorists in their own articles, such as a recent article in the *Annual Review of Genetics* that favorably cites the work of both Behe and Dembski. (W.-E. Loennig & H. Saedler, “Chromosome Rearrangements and Transposable Elements,” *Annual Review of Genetics*, 36 [2002]: 389–410.) The “no peer review” charge is a convenient soundbyte, but it distorts reality.

Readers who want to go beyond soundbytes and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of intelligent design theory for themselves should consult *Darwinism, Design, and Public Education*, another peer-reviewed book just published by Michigan State University Press that includes scholarly articles from both proponents and critics of design. (See <http://msupress.msu.edu/bookTemplate.php?bookID=725>.) Readers interested in an

account of the history of the modern design movement by a third party might also read *By Design* (Encounter Books, 2003) by journalist Larry Witham. Of course, those who love conspiracy theories and want to cling to the old religion vs. science stereotype may prefer to read the new book by Professors Gross and Forrest instead. I'm sure they will find it suitably reassuring.

While the effort of Darwinists to demonize their scientific critics may continue to be an effective public relations strategy for a few more years, this line of attack is going to become increasingly implausible as a new generation of biologists, biochemists, mathematicians, and physicists continue to develop the theory of intelligent design. Instead of acting like beleaguered defenders of a sacred dogma, modern Darwinists would be better advised to follow the example of the founder of their theory and respectfully engage their critics rather than demonize them. No scientific theory is so sacrosanct that it should be immune to critical questioning. When Charles Darwin faced scientific criticisms, he responded for the most part with evidence and argument rather than invective. He also acknowledged that "a fair result can be obtained only by fully stating and balancing the facts and arguments on both sides of each question." (Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, introduction.) Open debate is a hallmark not only of good science, but of a free society, and it ought to be welcomed rather than discouraged. Prof. Gross should heed the words of the founder of his own university, who wrote to one of his correspondents, "We both value too much the freedom of opinion... not to cherish its exercise even where in opposition to ourselves." (Thomas Jefferson to P.H. Wendover, 1815)

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