SCIENCE IN SOCIETY

Short Paper #4: **Intelligent Design?**

A recent controversy in science education arose in the debate over the place for "Intelligent Design" (ID) [http://msnbcmedia.msn.com/i/msnbc/sections/news/051220_kitzmiller_342.pdf]. In Dover Pennsylvania, the school board attempted to legislate introduction of ID in public school science classes, proposing reading of the following paragraph in biology class discussions of evolutionary theory:

"The Pennsylvania Academic Standards require students to learn about Darwin's Theory of Evolution and eventually to take a standardized test of which evolution is a part. Because Darwin's Theory is a theory, it continues to be tested as new evidence is discovered. The Theory is not a fact. Gaps in the Theory exist for which there is no evidence. A theory is defined as a well-tested explanation that unifies a broad range of observations. Intelligent Design is an explanation of the origin of life that differs from Darwin's view. The reference book, Of Pandas and People, is available for students who might be interested in gaining an understanding of what Intelligent Design actually involves. With respect to any theory, students are encouraged to keep an open mind. The school leaves the discussion of the Origins of Life to individual students and their families. As a Standards-driven district, class instruction focuses upon preparing students to achieve proficiency on Standards-based assessments."

In the resulting lawsuit, it was found that this was a violation of the constitutional separation of church and state, and that it infringed on the individual religious rights of students. Several quotes from the decision are reproduced:

"To be sure, Darwin's theory of evolution is imperfect. However, the fact that a scientific theory cannot yet render an explanation on every point should not be used as a pretext to thrust an untestable alternative hypothesis grounded in religion into the science classroom or to misrepresent well-established scientific propositions.
...we do not question that many of the leading advocates of ID have bona fide and deeply held beliefs which drive their scholarly endeavors. Nor do we controvert that ID should continue to be studied, debated, and discussed. As stated, our conclusion today is that it is unconstitutional to teach ID as an alternative to evolution in a public school science classroom."

Historically, an instructor of SCI 4300 might ask for you to respond thoughtfully to a similar scenario – being asked to introduce ID in a biology class. But, I would argue that this exercise is too easy for you! Instead...

Imagine the following scenario: You are a science teacher, at a *private non-sectarian* high school (removing constitutional legal issues). In school meetings, the question is raised as to whether there is any merit in classroom teaching of ID – but not in the form you might expect. It is proposed that it may be useful in senior level biology classes, as an example of an "untestable hypothesis" in teaching the scientific method, and to illustrate the distinctions between science and faith. You, perhaps simultaneously appalled and intrigued, are inspired to explore this issue and write two essays – one in opposition to teaching ID in this manner, and another in favor of teaching ID in this manner. There are many ways to go about this!

Please follow the usual format guidelines, with one page for each component. References will be helpful (hint: Dembski, Dawkins, Behe, Forrest...). Hints may be available in class for the asking, since this is a challenging (but hopefully thought-provoking) assignment.