The Branding of a Heretic

by David Klinghoffer

Are religious scientists unwelcome at the Smithsonian?

The question of whether Intelligent Design (ID) may be presented to public-school students alongside neo-Darwinian evolution has roiled parents and teachers in various communities lately. Whether ID may be presented to adult scientific professionals is another question altogether but also controversial. It is now roiling the government-supported Smithsonian Institution, where one scientist has had his career all but ruined over it.

The scientist is Richard Sternberg, a research associate at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington. The holder of two Ph.D.s in biology, Mr. Sternberg was until recently the managing editor of a nominally independent journal published at the museum, Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington, where he exercised final editorial authority. The August issue included typical articles on taxonomical topics -- e.g., on a new species of hermit crab. It also included an atypical article, "The Origin of Biological Information and the Higher Taxonomic Categories." Here was trouble.

The piece happened to be the first peer-reviewed article to appear in a technical biology journal laying out the evidential case for Intelligent Design. According to ID theory, certain features of living organisms -- such as the miniature machines and complex circuits within cells -- are better explained by an unspecified designing intelligence than by an undirected natural process like random mutation and natural selection.

Mr. Sternberg's editorship has since expired, as it was scheduled to anyway, but his future as a researcher is in jeopardy -- and that he had not planned on at all. He has been penalized by the museum's Department of Zoology, his religious and political beliefs questioned. He now rests his hope for vindication on his complaint filed with the U.S. Office of Special Counsel (OSC) that he was subjected to discrimination on the basis of perceived religious beliefs. A museum spokesman confirms that the OSC is investigating. Says Mr. Sternberg: "I'm spending my time trying to figure out how to salvage a scientific career."

The offending review-essay was written by Stephen Meyer, who holds a Cambridge University doctorate in the philosophy of biology. In the article, he cites biologists and paleontologists critical of certain aspects of Darwinism -- mainstream scientists at places like the University of Chicago, Yale, Cambridge and Oxford. Mr. Meyer gathers the threads of their comments to make his own case. He points, for example, to the Cambrian explosion 530 million years ago, when between 19 and 34 animal phyla (body plans) sprang into existence. He argues that, relying on only the Darwinian mechanism, there was not enough time for the necessary genetic "information" to be generated. ID, he believes, offers a better explanation.

Whatever the article's ultimate merits -- beyond the judgment of a layman -- it was indeed subject to peer review, the gold standard of academic science. Not that such review saved Mr. Sternberg from infamy. Soon after the article appeared, Hans Sues -- the museum's No. 2 senior scientist -- denounced it to colleagues and then sent a widely forwarded e-mail calling it "unscientific garbage."

Meanwhile, the chairman of the Zoology Department, Jonathan Coddington, called Mr. Sternberg's supervisor. According to Mr. Sternberg's OSC complaint: "First, he asked whether Sternberg was a religious fundamentalist. She told him no. Coddington then asked if Sternberg was affiliated with or belonged to any religious organization... He then asked where Sternberg stood politically;... he asked, 'Is he a right-winger? What is his political affiliation?' " The supervisor (who did not return my phone messages) recounted the conversation to Mr. Sternberg, who also quotes her observing: "There are Christians here, but they keep their heads down."

Worries about being perceived as "religious" spread at the museum. One curator, who generally confirmed the conversation when I spoke to him, told Mr. Sternberg about a gathering where he offered a Jewish prayer for a colleague about to retire. The curator fretted: "So now they're going to think that I'm a religious person, and that's not a good thing at the museum."

In October, as the OSC complaint recounts, Mr. Coddington told Mr. Sternberg to give up his office and turn in his keys to the departmental floor, thus denying him access to the specimen collections he needs. Mr. Sternberg was also assigned to the close oversight of a curator with whom he had professional disagreements unrelated to evolution. "I'm going to be straightforward with you," said Mr. Coddington, according to the complaint. "Yes, you are being singled out." Neither Mr. Coddington nor Mr. Sues returned repeated phone messages asking for their version of events.

Mr. Sternberg begged a friendly curator for alternative research space, and he still works at the museum. But many colleagues now ignore him when he greets them in the hall, and his office sits empty as "unclaimed space." Old colleagues at other institutions now refuse to work with him on publication projects, citing the Meyer episode. The Biological Society of Washington

released a vaguely ecclesiastical statement regretting its association with the article. It did not address its arguments but denied its orthodoxy, citing a resolution of the American Association for the Advancement of Science that defined ID as, by its very nature, unscientific.

It may or may not be, but surely the matter can be debated on scientific grounds, responded to with argument instead of invective and stigma. Note the circularity: Critics of ID have long argued that the theory was unscientific because it had not been put forward in a peer-reviewed scientific journal. Now that it has, they argue that it shouldn't have been because it's unscientific. They banish certain ideas from certain venues as if by holy writ, and brand heretics too. In any case, the heretic here is Mr. Meyer, a fellow at Seattle's Discovery Institute, not Mr. Sternberg, who isn't himself an advocate of Intelligent Design.

According to the OSC complaint, one museum specialist chided him by saying: "I think you are a religiously motivated person and you have dragged down the Proceedings because of your religiously motivated agenda." Definitely not, says Mr. Sternberg. He is a Catholic who attends Mass but notes: "I would call myself a believer with a lot of questions, about everything. I'm in the postmodern predicament."

Intelligent Design, in any event, is hardly a made-to-order prop for any particular religion. When the British atheist philosopher Antony Flew made news this winter by declaring that he had become a deist -- a believer in an unbiblical "god of the philosophers" who takes no notice of our lives -- he pointed to the plausibility of ID theory.

Darwinism, by contrast, is an essential ingredient in secularism, that aggressive, quasi-religious faith without a deity. The Sternberg case seems, in many ways, an instance of one religion persecuting a rival, demanding loyalty from anyone who enters one of its churches--like the National Museum of Natural History.

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Author Biography:
David Klinghoffer? new book is ?a href="
http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0385510217/qid=1113724477/friendsofaishhat/" target="_blank">Why the Jews Rejected Jesus: The Turning Point in Western History?(Doubleday). His website is www.davidklinghoffer.com.