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HEADLINE: Intelligent Design Might Be Meeting Its Maker

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BODY:

TO read the headlines, intelligent design as a challenge to evolution seems to be building momentum.

In Kansas last month, the board of education voted that students should be exposed to critiques of evolution like intelligent design. At a trial of the Dover, Pa., school board that ended last month, two of the movement's leading academics presented their ideas to a courtroom filled with spectators and reporters from around the world. President Bush endorsed teaching ''both sides'' of the debate -- a position that polls show is popular. And Pope Benedict XVI weighed in recently, declaring the universe an ''intelligent project.''

Intelligent design posits that the complexity of biological life is itself evidence of a higher being at work. As a political cause, the idea has gained currency, and for good reason. The movement was intended to be a ''big tent'' that would attract everyone from biblical creationists who regard the Book of Genesis as literal truth to academics who believe that secular universities are hostile to faith. The slogan, ''Teach the controversy,'' has simple appeal in a democracy.

Behind the headlines, however, intelligent design as a field of inquiry is failing to gain the traction its supporters had hoped for. It has gained little support among the academics who should have been its natural allies. And if the intelligent design proponents lose the case in Dover, there could be serious consequences for the movement's credibility.

On college campuses, the movement's theorists are academic pariahs, publicly denounced by their own colleagues. Design proponents have published few papers in peer-reviewed scientific journals.

The **Templeton Foundation**, a major supporter of projects seeking to reconcile science and religion, says that after providing a few grants for conferences and courses to debate intelligent design, they asked proponents to submit proposals for actual research.

''They never came in,'' said Charles L. Harper Jr., senior vice president at the **Templeton Foundation**, who said that while he was skeptical from the beginning, other foundation officials were initially intrigued and later grew disillusioned.

''From the point of view of rigor and intellectual seriousness, the intelligent design people don't come out very well in our world of scientific review,'' he said.

While intelligent design has hit obstacles among scientists, it has also failed to find a warm embrace at many evangelical Christian colleges. Even at conservative schools, scholars and theologians who were initially excited about intelligent design say they have come to find its arguments unconvincing. They, too, have been greatly swayed by the scientists at their own institutions and elsewhere who have examined intelligent design and found it insufficiently substantiated in comparison to evolution.

'It can function as one of those ambiguous signs in the world that point to an intelligent creator and help support the faith of the faithful, but it just doesn't have the compelling or explanatory power to have much of an impact on the academy,' said Frank D. Macchia, a professor of Christian theology at Vanguard University, in Costa Mesa, Calif., which is affiliated with the Assemblies of God, the nation's largest Pentecostal denomination.

At Wheaton College, a prominent evangelical university in Illinois, intelligent design surfaces in the curriculum only as part of an interdisciplinary elective on the origins of life, in which students study evolution and competing theories from theological, scientific and historical perspectives, according to a college spokesperson.

The only university where intelligent design has gained a major institutional foothold is a seminary. Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., created a Center for Science and Theology for William A. Dembski, a leading proponent of intelligent design, after he left Baylor, a Baptist university in Texas, amid protests by faculty members opposed to teaching it.

Intelligent design and Mr. Dembski, a philosopher and mathematician, should have been a good fit for Baylor, which says its mission is 'advancing the frontiers of knowledge while cultivating a Christian world view.' But Baylor, like many evangelical universities, has many scholars who see no contradiction in believing in God and evolution.

Derek Davis, director of the J. M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies at Baylor, said: 'I teach at the largest Baptist university in the world. I'm a religious person. And my basic perspective is intelligent design doesn't belong in science class.'

Mr. Davis noted that the advocates of intelligent design claim they are not talking about God or religion. 'But they are, and everybody knows they are,' Mr. Davis said. 'I just think we ought to quit playing games. It's a religious worldview that's being advanced.'

John G. West, a political scientist and senior fellow at the Discovery Institute, the main organization supporting intelligent design, said the skepticism and outright antagonism are evidence that the scientific 'fundamentalists' are threatened by its arguments.

'This is natural anytime you have a new controversial idea,' Mr. West said. 'The first stage is people ignore you. Then, when they can't ignore you, comes the hysteria. Then the idea that was so radical becomes accepted. I'd say we're in the hysteria phase.'

In the Dover trial, where intelligent design finally got its day in court, the movement faces perhaps the greatest potential for a serious setback.

The case is the first to test whether intelligent design can be taught in a public school, or whether teaching it is unconstitutional because it advances a particular religious belief. The Dover board voted last year to read students a short statement at the start of ninth-grade biology class saying that evolution is a flawed theory and intelligent design is an alternative they should study further.

If the judge in the Dover case rules against intelligent design, the decision would be likely to dissuade other school boards from incorporating it into their curriculums. School boards might already be wary because of a simple political fact: eight of the school-board members in Dover who supported intelligent design were voted out of office in elections last month and replaced by a slate of opponents.

Advocates of intelligent design perceived the risk as so great that the Discovery Institute said it had tried to dissuade the school board in Dover from going ahead and taking a stand in favor of intelligent design. The institute opposed the Dover board's action, it said, because it ''politicized'' what should be a scientific issue.

Now, with a decision due in four or five weeks, design proponents like Mr. West of Discovery said the Dover trial was a ''sideshow'' -- one that will have little bearing on the controversy.

''The future of intelligent design, as far as I'm concerned, has very little to do with the outcome of the Dover case,'' Mr. West said. ''The future of intelligent design is tied up with academic endeavors. It rises or falls on the science.''

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