

# Intelligent design renews debate between science and religion

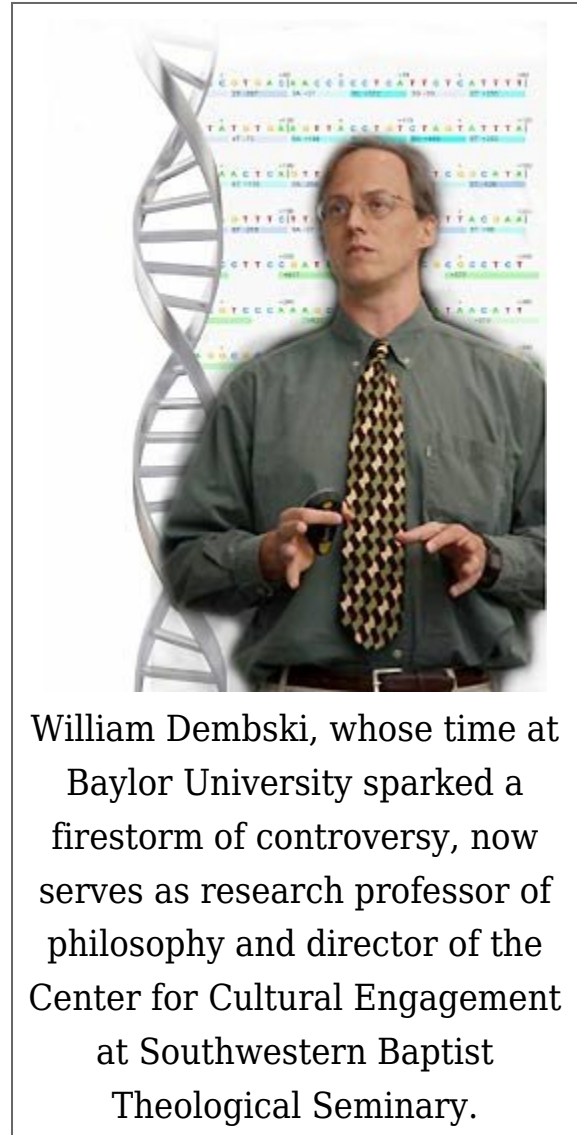
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WACO (ABP)—If there ever were a chance that conflict between evolution and religion might die a natural death, it ended with the birth of intelligent design.

Just ask William Dembski. Educated as a probability theorist, Dembski had a “Eureka!” moment in 1988 when he heard a statistician say at a conference that mathematics can define what randomness is not but not what it is.

It made sense to Dembski, a born-again Christian who later earned a master of divinity degree from Princeton Seminary. If God created the world, it should exhibit order instead of chaos. Scientists’ difficulty in defining the randomness driving the evolutionary model, therefore, actually could be evidence of an intelligent designer.

In 1996, Dembski met Robert Sloan, at the time president of [Baylor University](#) , who had read some of his work and was impressed. Three years later, Sloan approached Dembski not only about teaching, but also offering him a whole center dedicated to the relationship between faith and science.



William Dembski, whose time at Baylor University sparked a firestorm of controversy, now serves as research professor of philosophy and director of the Center for Cultural Engagement at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

The center was to be named the Michael Polanyi Center for Complexity, Information & Design after Michael Polanyi, an outspoken physical chemist from the 1930s, and housed within Baylor's Institute of Faith and Learning.

Although Dembski met with a few members of the Baylor faculty, most heard nothing about the arrangement until the center's website went online and colleagues in other institutions around the country began asking if it meant Baylor was surrendering to fundamentalism and planned to start teaching creationism instead of evolution in its science classes.

The chair of the Baylor Faculty Senate called the ensuing controversy "one

of the most divisive issues to have arisen on the Baylor campus during my 32 years on the faculty.” Incensed they were not consulted before launching a major venture overlapping with other teaching disciplines, the faculty eventually called on the administration to dissolve the Polanyi Center. Sloan refused.

The faculty and administration reached a compromise, and an external peer review committee determined that while controversial, the dialogue between science and religion had a place on a university campus. The committee proposed broadening the center’s work, establishing an advisory committee composed of faculty members from related disciplines and dropping the Polanyi name.

Dembski responded with a press release hailing the report as a “triumph of intelligent design as a legitimate form of academic inquiry” and “a great day for academic freedom.”

Dembski’s exultation further enraged his opponents, who had expected an olive branch. The next day, Dembski was relieved of duties as director of the center and reassigned as a research professor, with an explanation that his actions did not promote collegiality.

Dembski eventually left Baylor to become the first director of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary’s Center for Theology and Science in 2005. After one year, he moved to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, citing professional and family reasons, where he now serves as research professor of philosophy and director of the [Center for Cultural Engagement](#).

Supporters of intelligent design view Dembski’s story as part of systematic censorship of a theory that questions the dogma of Darwinian evolution. Dembski’s celebrity earned him a role in Ben Stein’s 2008 independent documentary film [Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed](#) , which argued that

mainstream science suppresses academicians who see evidence of intelligent design or criticize evidence used to support evolutionary theory.

Like its cousin, the creation science movement in the 1960s, intelligent design is a reaction to Charles Darwin's notion of natural selection, which explains the emergence of life as a series of random events governed by natural laws without any need of a creator.

Critics of intelligent design, in fact, say it is nothing more than a modern reincarnation of creationism—a political Trojan horse being used to undermine scientific consensus about evolution and inject religion into public education in ways otherwise prohibited by the separation of church and state.

Proponents strongly deny the charge. Dembski says intelligent design differs from creationism in that it sets out not to prove the Bible's account of creation, but rather challenges Darwin's assumption that evolution occurred devoid of any intentional purpose.

Advocates of intelligent design argue that some patterns in nature are best explained not as accidents, but rather the result of some kind of intelligent cause. Biochemist Michael Behe, for example, uses an analogy of a mousetrap to describe microscopic organisms that are "irreducibly complex."

Composed of a wooden base, a spring and a trigger, a mousetrap doesn't work at all unless all the individual components are present, begging the question of how interacting parts of the simplest organisms could have evolved without a previous function of their own.

Dembski cites the example of Mount Rushmore. If humans went extinct and aliens discovering the massive sculpture in the future had no direct evidence it was manmade, how would they know it wasn't simply the natural result of wind and erosion?

For Dembski and other “design theorists,” it comes down to a formula called “specified complexity.”

In the novel *Contact* by Carl Sagan, for example, astronomers discover a long sequence of prime numbers being transmitted from outer space. Because the sequence is long, it is interpreted as unlikely to have occurred by chance. Because it is mathematically significant, the scientists are convinced it is evidence of extraterrestrial intelligence.

But when the same criteria are applied to biology and the natural sciences, Dembski says, it is denounced as creationism and false science. Dembski insists the problem is that science currently is dominated—both in the secular and Christian academy—by naturalism, excluding any appeals to anything “non-natural” or supernatural.

As long as that remains so, Dembski says, there is no possibility of integrating science and faith. For him, the key is “an enriched conception of nature that leaves room for intelligent causes.”

Dembski is a fellow of the [Discovery Institute](#), a Seattle-based think tank that supports scientists and scholars who challenge evidence of neo-Darwinian theory and develop the theory labeled intelligent design.

The group promotes curriculum in high schools and colleges that examines both strengths and weaknesses of evolutionary theory. Seven states so far have adopted science standards requiring learning about scientific controversies related to evolution, and a textbook battle currently is raging in Texas.

As a matter of public policy, the Discovery Institute opposes mandatory teaching of intelligent design—reasoning that would only further polarize the debate and hinder fair and open discussion. But the institute insists when intelligent design is brought up, it is constitutional and ought to be presented fairly.

