

## Nancy Pearcey (intelligent design)

### Charles Strohmer Talks with Author Nancy Pearcey about Intelligent Design, Creationism, and Evolution

Last year in the States (2005), a perennial quarrel between members of religious and scientific communities turned into a blistering courtroom battle that captured the nation's attention for many weeks. The context was education. The news media had camped out for weeks in Dover, Pennsylvania, where the school board, in October 2004, had passed a resolution: students were to be made aware of gaps and problems in Darwin's theory. This would commence in January, 2005, when teachers in Dover's public high school would be required to read a brief disclaimer to students in the ninth grade biology class, to the effect that Darwin's theory was not a fact, that intelligent design "is an explanation of the origin of life that differs from Darwin's view," and students should "keep an open mind" with respect to any theory. A lawsuit was filed to stop this, and the amped-up television coverage of the ensuing legal tête-à-tête in Judge Jones's courtroom reached such a pitch at times that some days it actually displaced the carnage being imaged out of Iraq. The judge's landmark decision (December 2005) against the school board favored the godlike control that "the separation of church and state" exerts over American jurisprudence. It also resonated with Dover voters, who had defeated at the polls all eight members of the school board seeking reelection.

The case stimulated a national awareness of intelligent design (ID), but it takes more than television news coverage to really understand ID, whose proponents argue that "certain features of the universe and of living things are best explained by an intelligent cause, not an undirected process such as natural selection" (from the Discovery Institute website, which is a strong proponent of ID). As a scientific theory, however, ID has critics screaming, "Foul!" So it seemed timely for an Openings conversation with Nancy Pearcey, a Christian apologist, author, and ID advocate. Pearcey is a senior fellow at the Discovery Institute, where she focuses on the cultural and philosophical implications of the evolution controversy.

Pearcey, who paid her way through college on music scholarships by playing violin in orchestras, became a Christian at the Swiss L'Abri Center, founded by the late Dr. Francis Schaeffer. "I studied there during my college years," Pearcey told me, "and it still gives shape to my thinking today. It helped me to think of Christianity as a complete worldview, instead of seeing it as a secular-sacred split, where Christianity is your devotional and worship life, but that's all."

Pearcey has been writing and teaching on science and Christian worldview for more than 20 years. She is one of the more reasonable Christian voices seeking to articulate a viable alternative to the belief in human origins that has been fostered for decades in American classrooms through the theory of evolution, whose atheistic base is as much an ultimate faith assumption as ID is theistically-based. Many critics argue, however, that intelligent design is not a theory capable of competing with Darwin in the classroom or the lab. With the release of her recent book, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity*, Pearcey has been in demand as an Evangelical spokesperson for Intelligent Design, a topic she covers in her book. Our initial conversation took place by phone in January 2006 and was tweaked via email correspondence in May. Some of her views may surprise you.

**Charles Strohmer:** Give us a thumbnail sketch of intelligent design.

**Nancy Pearcey:** A key element is the claim that God's design is empirically detectable. It says: let's look and see whether there are certain hallmarks or diagnostic traits of intelligence in nature itself. The evidence I find most persuasive is DNA. It has the kind of structure that's found in a language and is not produced by natural causes acting by chance. For example, when I took my little boy to the park, we found a large beech tree covered with graffiti. Even a seven-year-old knows that when you see a message ? "George loves Wendy" ? carved into a tree, it's not the result of some type of acid etching or other nature force. Information is always the product of an intelligent agent.

**CS:** Well, I'll skip the joke about whether George is smart about loving Wendy! Are you saying that the claim of ID is similar to Paley's watchmaker analogy?

**NP:** Yes, but my understanding is that the main difference would be that Paley spoke in terms of knowing the Designer's purpose. That left him open to the objection: how can we know the Designer's purpose, what's in His mind? So you may not yet know the

purpose, or the rules, but you can at least know that something has been intelligently manufactured, because it has a particular structure that natural causes don't produce but that intelligent causes do produce.

**CS:** So there's an intelligent cause behind the DNA?

**NP:** Right. There are three major areas where ID builds its case. One is the fine tuning of the universe, the many physical constants of the universe that seem to be so finely tuned to allow life to emerge. Fundamental constants like gravity and the electromagnetic force have to be so incredibly precise in their values ? and there are so many of them ? that it boggles the mind to think they are merely all "cosmic coincidences." It begins to look, then, like they have the value they do because someone intended it that way. This is so widely recognized by cosmologists today that "the God question" is now a very open discussion. The second area where ID scientists are developing positive evidence for design is Mike Behe's argument that many structures in the cell do not seem to be the kind of things that could come about by a gradual process.

**CS:** Irreducible complexity?

**NP:** Yes, but the media tend to misstate the argument in terms of "it's too complex to have evolved." That's too simplistic. It's really a logical question about what kind of structures can be constructed in gradual steps and which structures have to be organized at the beginning. Is it an aggregate structure ? like a pile of sand, which can be built up one piece at a time ? or is it a complex structure, for which you need a blueprint from the beginning because all the parts interrelate? A kind of structure that can't be built up gradually. And the third area where ID is building its case is the argument from DNA and information theory; that is, where does complex biological information come from? Do natural causes as we know them produce information?

**CS:** Is there a difference between ID and creationism?

**NP:** The difference that I see is that creationists start out with the assumption that Scripture is true and then they ask: what does Scripture imply about our understanding of science? That's a perfectly valid line of inquiry, but that's not the way you do apologetics. To do apologetics you have to bracket your Christian faith and ask: what is it that we can say from the data itself, and can we show nonChristians something from the data that would lead us to certain theological implications? So ID starts with the scientific data itself. There are some similarities between creationism and ID, such as in their criticisms of purely naturalistic forms of evolution, but ID is not another form of creationism. Its logic is quite different.

**CS:** In 2005, a lot of controversy swirled in the media over the Dover school board's formal disclaimer about evolution and its penchant for ID. This was strongly resistance by many educators, scientists, and parents. What's the nub?

**NP:** The Discovery Institute's stance, which I basically agree with, is that you don't mandate the teaching of ID, mostly because that's coercive. I disagree with being coercive in principle. ID is not going to be taught very well by teachers who don't understand it and don't agree with it and don't want to teach it. But I think there should be academic freedom for teachers who do want to teach it and are well prepared to teach it in an objective manner that is appropriate for the public schools.

**CS:** What about the strong objection by many that ID is not a scientific theory but a religious belief?

**NP:** Well, ID really is more of a meta-theory than a strictly empirical theory. And in that sense it parallels Darwinism, which I see as a meta-theory as well. When Darwin proposed his theory he was enough of a scientist to admit that his work could be falsified; here's where it's still weak, here's where it needs more data, and so on. But, he said, it's a wonderfully unifying paradigm. It brings together data from a lot of disparate fields and seems to unify and make sense of them. I think that's what ID does as well ? being a meta-theory.

**CS:** So the criticism that ID is not a scientific theory would be valid.

**NP:** Depending on how you define "science." There are different levels of theories, from the ones that deal directly with empirical data versus the higher-level theories that organize lower- level theories. So ID is a higher-level meta-theory, and in that sense I think it belongs in the classroom, in the same way that Darwin does.

**CS:** So you wouldn't you go as far as to concur with persons like conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer and the Vatican's chief astronomer Rev. Coyne when they conclude that ID is not science?

**NP:** No.

**CS:** If ID was taught in the classroom, what purpose would it serve?

**NP:** One purpose would be that, since meta-theories have empirical implications, genuine differences between ID and Darwin could be pointed out. And I think the public is interested in the very different philosophical implications of each. Evolution, for instance, has been used as a major tool for undermining theistic belief. As William Provine of Cornell says: it's been the most powerful engine of atheism ever invented.

**CS:** So what is the engine that drives ID? God..., the Designer?

**NP:** Among my friends who are working in science, many see ID simply as good science. Of course in science, even wrong ideas turn up something interesting, because any theory that gets you into the data is going to turn up something. But wrong ideas will ultimately end up becoming a dry well. So if ID is true then ultimately it will be more fruitful. The other side of it is that most scientists are already driven by a sense of design. What are they doing in the laboratory? They call it "reverse engineering," which means they are presuming design. Stephen J. Gould says: What's "fitness"? Fitness is good engineering design. So they are presuming engineering design in order to do experiments. ID advocates would say that a lot of science is already driven by a notion of design. It's just that the evolutionist is having to say to himself, parenthetically: of course it's not really designed, it's just produced by random mutation and natural selection; but now that it exists it's functioning as though it were designed. That's why Dawkins can say: biology is the study of complex things that appear to be designed.

**CS:** In the Dover decision, Judge Jones ruled that teaching ID in public schools may be interesting theology but it's not science.

**NP:** I thought it was a little presumptuous for a judge to say what science is.

**CS:** But he allowed a lot of evidence in, for almost thirty days, from both sides.

**NP:** I know, but the question took him into what's called the demarcation problem: can we come up with a definition of what is science, so that we can definitely rule out certain things as not being science? All philosophers of science say: no you can't. There's no agreed upon demarcation principle of what constitutes science. If philosophers of science can't come up with a definition, it seems a little presumptuous for a judge to.

**CS:** But as the judge, he had to rule on the legality of what was going on in that school district.

**NP:** Sure. But I think he over-reached.

**CS:** Do you agree with his decision?

**NP:** I disagree with the Lemon principle per se.

**CS:** The what?

**NP:** In First Amendment issues regarding religion and public issues, it's called the Lemon test. In the early-1970s there was a Supreme Court case, *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, in which the justices came up with three principles: 1) a statute can't have a religious motivation; 2) it cannot foster excessive entanglement between religion and the state; and 3) it must neither advance nor inhibit religion. These three prongs are called the Lemon test. It's used whenever there are religious rights or religious freedom issues. I think that starting with the first principle, we need to go back to the drawing board. What it means is that you could have two groups of people who both agree on the same principle, but if one had a religious motivation, that group would be disenfranchised, not allowed to promote it. So Judge Jones leaned heavily on the fact that the school board members, who had passed this policy, had a religious motivation.

**CS:** He thought they were trying to smuggle ID in as creationism.

**NP:** Yes, but I just read an interesting comment by Albert Alschuler, a lawyer and professor of law at the University of Chicago. He said that from the facts of the Dover case, it's pretty clear that they were old-fashioned creationists, but they were willing to accept ID because they thought that was the acceptable way to promote it in a public school setting. He said they should be commended because they didn't get what they wanted but were willing to compromise, to include just what could be discussed in an objective manner in the public setting. I think they were acting in a very democratic manner, he said, because they were willing to compromise, to go with much less than creationism offers. But my point is that with the Lemon test, it doesn't matter if you're

willing to compromise, to go with less. An attorney can dig around and say, "Aha! He's really got a religious motivation and that invalidates the policy he stands for." That's why I think our critique has to go further than just this one ruling. It has to go to the grounds that it was made on, which was the Lemon test.

**CS:** Here's what I've concluded. I'm wondering what you will think about it. It seems to me that ID has not reached the level of a science that is, well, worthy of the classroom ?

that it is way too soon to be arguing for that, especially in a courtroom, let alone among opposition scientists. Personally, I don't yet know enough about ID to know if I could ever become a fan, but from what I currently do understand, I think that if I were a proponent, I would have been strongly arguing among my peers, long before Dover, for a much more natural evolution [laughs] of ID into a theory before trying to get it into the curriculum-- allow the process (if even it becomes so capable) to more naturally shoulder out opposition elements within Darwinism and thereby eventually earn respect among the wider scientific community. So whatever its merits in the future may be, it seems to me that ID advocates have set back their cause for years, maybe decades, by trying to force ID into the classroom now. Does this make sense to you?

**NP:** Yes. Absolutely. I totally agree. Interestingly, a more natural process has been happening. According to a Los Angeles Times article, many teachers are reporting that it's students who initiating discussions about ID. And that's where it should start.

**CS:** I can also appreciate why biologists, for instance, are resisting ID at its current level of development and argument. After all, evolutionary theory is the only theory they have to work with in the lab. So when ID advocates argue against it, I think the biologists quite rightly say: You're nuts. You're asking us to give up a theoretical basis that has given the world medical and scientific breakthroughs no one would want to live without ? you're asking us to give that up, but you've got no replacement theory.

**NP:** That's a good point. A good analogy might be to a very reductionist view of the human person, for example, in psychology. We might say, from our perspective of human nature, that's not true. But reductionism can be very useful. We can discover many things from a reductionist paradigm, so you can't just stop doing what you're doing. But I don't think that to bring in God is a science stopper, as many scientists believe. There is a tendency for them to think that if you start talking about God in science then all you do is shrug and say: Well, God did it, so there's nothing else to be known or investigated. But history disproves that. Belief in design was historically very invigorating for scientists for hundreds of years, inspiring a tremendous amount of investigation of that design. After a lot of historical and cross-cultural research, sociologist of religion Rodney Stark found that science doesn't get off the ground in any culture unless there's a belief in a rational creator who created an intelligible order. In that sense, history is clearly on the side that belief in God is not a science stopper but a science starter.

By the way, Judge Jones's ruling was a little bit odd in that he totally bought into the idea that evolution is theologically neutral. This was his argument: if you bring ID into the classroom, you have a "God-friendly science" over against evolution, which is a neutral science that says nothing pro or con about God; therefore public education would be unbalanced in favor of the God-friendly science because you've then got one pro and no con and therefore the state would not be neutral. I thought this was hilarious because scientists like Stephen Gould have said that evolution is "implacably materialistic." The outspoken, atheist evolutionist Richard Dawkins says anyone who doesn't believe in evolution is either "ignorant, stupid, or insane." And remember Provine's statement [see above]. These are not Christians arguing that evolution is atheistic. These are atheists themselves arguing it. It seems strange to me that the judge essentially said by fiat that these scientists are wrong and can be ignored.

**CS:** Do you see any one big issue in our culture surfacing with the public debate about ID?

**NP:** What interests me the most is that with Darwinian evolution our culture, philosophically, has seen the shattering of the unity of truth, especially regarding the fact/value split and the impact that has had on people's understanding of religion and morality. People no longer see religion and morality as forms of knowledge but merely as private, personal preferences.

**CS:** In Total Truth you discuss some of the societal effects when facts become separated from values. Is that what you mean, here?

**NP:** Yes. I discuss the history of how it developed, which is very helpful because a lot of people don't recognize the fact/value split, or its importance. Here's how I would summarize the process. In the past, people believed in "the unity of truth," which was a phrase commonly used. What they meant was that all the different branches of knowledge would agree, ultimately, in the sense that science and religion would be mutually supportive ? that religion was the basis for morality, that scientific knowledge about how humans functioned would support morality, and so on. So there are different fields, but they are part of one integrated, comprehensive,

coherent stem of knowledge: the unity of truth.

Harvard historian Julie Reuben traces, from history, how facts got separated from values [in her book *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality*.] She (and others) say that after Darwin published his theory, the unity of truth began to founder: people couldn't pull knowledge together anymore because after Darwin there was too much conflict between religion and science. By 1930, according to Reuben, universities basically gave up the goal of the unity of truth, because they no longer saw a way to fit all the branches of knowledge together. So they accepted fragmentation and specialization, and religion and morality were reduced to a noncognitive status; they were no longer forms of knowledge but forms of personal inspiration, personal preference. And scientific knowledge became the sole form of knowledge that "counted" as truth. This is now called the fact/value split. The realm of facts are considered objective, scientific, publicly verifiable. Values are in a separate realm and considered subjective, personal preferences, part of your ethnic background or cultural tradition but not a matter of anything that could be called true or false.

**CS:** So Judge Jones, unbeknownst to him, perhaps, had a value in his worldview that said: I'm not going to rule in favor of letting ID in the classroom because it can't be proven to true.

**NP:** Right. It cannot be part of the organized knowledge that we put forth in a curriculum because it doesn't qualify as knowledge any more. Further, if it's just personal preference, it's contaminating, distorting. I recently read a book tracing how morality came to be seen as contaminating the objectivity of research ? *Value Free Science* by Richard Proctor, a historian at Penn State.

**CS:** In *Total Truth*, and also in the Study Guide for the book, you show how the fact/value split is not only a worldview problem for nonChristians but also for Western Christians who don't realize how this is affecting how they approach life. For instance, you discuss that Christians often employ the word "values" in their activism, thinking that the word is communicating, but the people looking on may be thinking: Oh, that's just what they believe, their personal preference.

**NP:** Christians really need to get a handle on this shift in terminology. Dallas Willard, who teaches philosophy at the University of Southern California, says that even at the highest academic level most people don't realize that the West has now absorbed a noncognitive or emotive view of morality. It's now part of the way the West thinks. And it's a powerful way in which Christians today are disenfranchised. It says to us that it's inappropriate for us to bring our faith into our academic work, our professional life, and so on. For example, a journalist once said to me: when you enter the newsroom you have to leave your faith behind; you can't bring your faith into your reporting. In one article, a Christian philosopher said that he had definite religious convictions but that he would consider it wrong to bring those convictions into his professional work.

**CS:** So the fact/value split undercuts attempts to bring the faith into all of life.

**NP:** Yes. I think we are being terribly disenfranchised. It is a major reason that we are not experiencing the power and joy and focus that God intends for us. If our faith is the light to our path ? to all our paths ? then it should be bringing light and power to everything we do.

(Originally published in *Openings* #23, July-Sept. 2006. Slightly edited for the Web.)

Copyright. Permission to reprint required.

Comment on this conversation here