

February 2004 Meeting: Professor Barbara Forrest, Darwin Day 2004



New Mexicans for Science & Reason (NMSR) hosted Professor Barbara Forrest (Southeastern Louisiana University, Department of History & Political Science), on "Darwin Day 2004" The free meeting was held on Valentine's Day (February 14th), at the UNM Law Building, and was co-hosted by the New Mexico Academy of Science (NMAS) and the Coalition for Excellence in Science and Math Education (CESE). The meeting came two days after Darwin's actual birthday (Feb. 12th), so that our speaker could make the long trip from Louisiana over the weekend.

Barbara began by saying she was speaking to us as citizens, a role which unites all of us regardless of profession. By "we," she said, she meant citizens concerned with protecting public science education and church-state separation, those who value civic friendship instead of divisive religious politics, and those who regard secular, constitutional democracy as the protector of, not an obstacle to, personal religious freedom in whatever form chosen to exercise it. "We are people who will work hard to protect personal religious freedom, but will work just as hard to keep personal religious preferences from becoming public policy," she said, adding that Intelligent Design (ID) is very much a religious and political movement, and that its proponents are working to get their personal religious preferences enacted as public policy in the nation's schools. Barbara said this goal is called "teaching the controversy."

To explain why the discussion of ID needs to take a new direction, Prof. Forrest reviewed what the ID movement has not done, and also what they are doing. What they have not done, she said, was science. "The ID movement has produced no science in the twelve years since the Wedge's coalescence. Qualified scholars and working scientists -who have produced the science that Wedge scientists have never done-- have critiqued ID and amply demonstrated that it is not science. Indeed, the ID movement is not truly about science. Phillip Johnson confirmed this as early as 1996, when the ID movement formally organized as the Center for the Renewal of Science and Culture: 'This isn't really, and never

has been, a debate about science. It's about religion and philosophy.' Johnson cites the Gospel of John as the biblical foundation of intelligent design."

Barbara also said that ID creationists demand equal consideration for ID as an "alternative theory" in the name of "fairness, but that "fair" does not necessarily mean "equal." And, she said, their demand ignores the point that teaching children real science is fair, whereas allowing them to be pressed into the service of the Discovery Institute's religious/political agenda is not. Forrest said we must therefore keep one spotlight focused on the fact that, after twelve years, ID is a scientific failure.

Prof. Forest discussed the underpinnings of ID "science" (irreducible complexity, empirical detection of ID, etc.), and also the leaders of this political movement (Phillip Johnson, William Dembski, Michael Behe, Jonathan Wells, and others from Seattle's Discovery Institute). She discussed the ID onslaught on school boards, and the use of clever buzzwords like "teach the controversy," "teach strengths and weaknesses," "teach objective origins," "teach the alternatives," "teach critical thinking," "academic freedom," and so on, all used to disguise ID's actual creationist foundation. Barbara discussed recent ID activity in Darby, Montana, and said that while ID creationists have always lost big, they spin everything as a victory and press ahead with their agenda anyway.

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Barbara made a special point to forestall any thought that her position is anti-religious. "ID creationists constantly charge that if one is pro-evolution, one is also anti-religion, or that if one is for secular democracy and education, one is automatically against religion. This is a misconception of the word secular, she said. Many evangelical leaders are shifting toward the idea that "secular" means "anti-religious." "In their view, if an institution such as government or an academic discipline such as science does not explicitly incorporate religious belief, that institution must be understood as overtly hostile to religion. In short, secularism is rejected by people who want their religious beliefs sanctioned as public policy. But secular means non-religious, not anti-religious. Secularism is a political concept vital to constitutional democracy, and we must rehabilitate the concept as such in the public mind," she said, adding "The ID agenda is an anti-secular movement. It is another column in the Religious Right."

Barbara gave many examples of the religious underpinnings of the ID movement, including groups like Friends of the Family, the Eagle Foundation, and others. ID is one of many fronts in a "culture war" that is being waged by Religious Right fundamentalists. She stressed the exclusionary nature of the religious outlook of many ID leaders; for example, Phillip Johnson demonstrated ID's religious exclusionism by slandering the religious faith of Catholic evolutionary biologist Kenneth Miller: Johnson said "The only reason I have to believe that Kenneth Miller is a Christian of any kind of that he says so. Maybe he's sincere. But I don't know that. If he is, I can say this: you often find the greatest

enemies of Christ in the church, even in high positions. There is a kind of person who may be sincere in a way, but is double-minded, who goes into the church in order to save it from itself by bringing it into concert with evolutionary naturalism, for example. And these are dangerous people. They're more dangerous than an outside atheist, like Richard Dawkins, who at least flies his own flag. So I am not impressed that somebody says that he is a Christian of a traditional sort and believes that evolution is our creator. This is, at the very least, a person whose mind is going in two directions, and such people often do a great a damage within the church."

In effect, the ID movement wants their strict, narrow view of God, as one who would never stoop to using evolution, to be mandated as official government policy. This is patently unfair - not just to atheists and agnostics, but also to the many religious people who believe evolution was simply God's method of creation. Barbara mentioned several intellectual believers who have found delight in reconciling their views of science and religion, such as evangelical Christian Keith Miller's new book, "Perspectives on an Evolving Creation." Barbara stressed that there need not be the type of conflict that ID is creating.

Prof. Forrest said that ID proponents are our fellow citizens, and under the Constitution they are entitled to their exclusionary religious views and their dislike of secularism. But, she said, they are not entitled to have those views enshrined as public policy.

Barbara concluded by reflecting on the long and successful marriage of Charles and ??? Darwin, and wishing everyone a Happy Darwin Day and Happy Valentine's Day. She closed with this, from Darwin's "The Descent of Man" : "Females . . . prefer pairing with the most ornamented males, or those which are the best songsters, or play the best antics; but it is obviously probable that they would at the same time prefer the more vigorous and lively males, and this has in some cases been confirmed by actual observation."

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