I attended the Glasgow Skeptics meeting on 15th September 2011 at which Dr Eugenie Scott, the USA based Executive Director of the National Center for Science Education, spoke on 'Evolution and Global Warming Denial – How the Public is Misled'. Dr Scott's organisation is committed to 'Defending the Teaching of Evolution in Public Schools' and 'keeping creationism out', in order to promote good science education.

The evening was a vast improvement over the previous rabble which was the P Z Meyers presentation. Dr Scott is altogether a more civilised individual who advocates respectful debate. She advocated that opposing views should be discussed, not derided – a comment which was timely after the obligatory jeer when I raised a question about Intelligent Design (ID).

The good news, according to Dr Scott, is that the general public, which is being misled by a conspiratorial combination of the American religious and political right, can relax and be reassured. Dr Scott's message is that there is no contrary evidence to evolution and global warming. The science is settled and we simply need to respond to it.

One of Dr Scott's main points was that school science education should reflect the scientific consensus. I happen to agree with that. That's why the ID movement in the UK is not targeting schools. However, I do think school students should be aware that all scientific theories are ultimately tentative and contradictory evidence needs to be considered. Indeed students should be aware that some crucial scientific discoveries were made by individuals who challenged the consensus. The reality of science is that one individual scientist with sound evidence can trump the consensus.

Dr Scott did concede that research scientists, rather than school pupils, should debate any contrary evidence. But as she thinks there's none anyway, that debate won't last long. In any case, I have not noticed any great willingness on the part of academic scientists to engage in any such debate.

I think that Dr Scott's linking of scepticism about evolution and global warming was ill-judged and only confuses each debate. These matters need to be treated separately and the evidence judged on its own merits. Not altogether surprisingly, one questioner wanted to lump in 'Holocaust denial' as well. Just a touch of stereotyping I think.

I don't know enough about global warming to disagree with Dr Scott, but on her contention that there's no contrary evidence to evolution, she is well wide of the mark. It was interesting that in response to a question about what sort of 'evolution' she was talking about, Dr Scott seemed strangely vague. The problem here is that 'evolution' is a slippery word. If you mean adaptation and change over time through variation and natural selection, it is uncontroversial. If you mean common ancestry and the descent of all living things from a single ancestor, it is debateable. If you mean the generation of new genetic information and body plans by random mutation, it is highly speculative. The idea that 'evolution' in all its meanings is beyond any scientific challenge is just plain nonsense.

I think Dr Scott needs to read or re-read 'Evolution – A theory in Crisis' by Michael Denton (1986), 'Darwin's Black Box' (1996) and 'Edge of Evolution' (2007) by Michael Behe, 'Evolution under the Microscope' (2002) by David Swift, 'Icons of Evolution' (2000) by Jonathan Wells, and 'The Design of Life' (2008) by William Dembski and Jonathan Wells. There is, I suggest, a substantial body of contrary evidence about evolution and none of it is religious.

The aspect of Dr Scott's presentation that most irritated me was the occasional reference to 'Intelligent Design Creationism'. This is the old guilt by association trick – hardly scientific – and it is just plain wrong. Whatever ID is, it is not a religious argument. ID may have religious implications, but it is not a religious position. When I asked her about it, she said that any suggestion of intelligent causation of the universe necessarily meant the position is 'creationist'.

So there you have it. Science cannot countenance that kind of explanation, and it must therefore be rejected. Never mind the evidence. It doesn't count. Perhaps that's why in the Dover Trial in the US, Judge Jones concluded that ID may well be true, but it is not science. Well, as a modest science educator, I'm on the side of truth.

What escapes people like Dr Scott is that ID is not primarily an argument about the validity of evolution. In fact, ID proponents take a range of positions on evolution. ID deals with more fundamental questions about the origin and nature of life. What ID challenges, from the evidence of design, is the proposition that the origin and development of life is a blind and

purposeless process.

Evolutionists often claim that, strictly speaking, the origin of life does not lie within their subject area, but they are not slow to propose Darwinian mechanisms to account for it. Richard Dawkins is more honest: he says he doesn't know how life began and that it might have come from another planet. ID proponents say that the evidence shows clearly that life is programmed. So much so, in fact, that Bill Gates has said that DNA is more complex than Microsoft's software.

Stephen Meyer, in his ground-breaking book, 'Signature in the Cell' (2009) makes a compelling argument for intelligent causation for the vast store of genetic information in the living cell. He uses 'inference to the best explanation' – an argument much used by evolutionists – to deduce that the functional information in DNA has its roots in intelligent mind. This is consistent with all our experience of the generation of information – whether in print, electronic media or software. Dr Scott may not like this argument, but it is most certainly worthy of scientific debate. Interestingly, Prof Thomas Nagel, who is actually an atheist, nominated Meyer's book for an award because of its cogent treatment of what he saw as the 'fiendishly difficult problem' of the origin of life.

ID, of course, draws on other sources of evidence such as the fine tuning of universal constants and forces, and the irreducible complexity of many living systems. The case for intelligent design is substantial and growing. For example, the slow retreat of the scientific community from its much cherished 'junk DNA' evidence for evolution in the light of discoveries of ever more complex information is certainly one to watch.

Anyway, thanks Dr Scott for an interesting lecture. However, perhaps you should take a break from the lecture tour and read a few books on the subject on which you claim to be a voice for the scientific consensus. I think you'll be surprised just how much contrary evidence there is.

Alastair Noble

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