

The Reality Check

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The Scientific Inquiry Confronts Authoritarian Systems

By Carl Ledendecker

There exists a long history of supernatural religion resisting change. The force of tradition is also, of course, resistive to change. When dogma, especially dogma under the protective cultural shield of supernaturalism, is added, the road to progress can get very rough. As pointed out in this issue's articles, supernatural religion and especially supernatural religion/politics can become a tremendous obstacle to innovative and beneficial changes and discoveries.

One key to understanding this obstructive tendency is found in the role of authoritarianism in supernatural religions. Christian fundamentalists are an illustrative example of this mindset (but certainly not the only manifestation of retrograde thinking to be found in the modern world.)

"Organized religions are the oldest, most static, and past-oriented of institutions, geared at keeping their authority intact. Thus they must consider themselves not a part of history, but beyond it." (Guru Papers p. 170)

Those who believe in a fixed preordained world have great difficulty facing the fluid and complex nature of reality. New ideas and discoveries are a threat to the old world order and therefore a threat to the security of the rigid minded.

This is not to say that change and uses of new discoveries should not be evaluated from both practical and ethical perspectives. That has actually not been done enough, at least from a rational/humanist perspective. Problems result when those ethical and

"practical" perspectives are rigid and archaic.

Subjecting new ideas and discoveries to archaic rigid concepts is both dangerous and immoral. Those closed systems of thinking have no reality based self-diagnostic procedures built in. They are systems that have no positive way to adjust to new information. Instead, they have only two recourses. One is to destroy the new by outright suppression and force. The other is to "adjust" the data and distort the concepts to such extremes as to render them useless except as extensions of authoritarian control.

Much of the current distortion and suppression of science today has been connected to certain groups of conservative Republicans, but they are not

acting alone in this unfortunate regressive mentality. For example, the anti-evolution law proposed in Tennessee a few years ago was introduced by a Democrat, and William Jennings Bryan of Scope's Trial fame, was considered a champion of liberal causes (except science it seems). In addition, as pointed out in Massimo Pigliucci's article, secular authoritarian systems can also be a threat to good science.

Science is not and cannot be authoritarian by the nature of its underlying structure. Science cannot be dogmatic for the same reasons. Scientific understandings cannot provide certainty because certainty is not the nature of reality. It is highly probable though, as Daryl Houston's article shows, that those who seek certainty and simple solutions to complex problems will impede human progress and risk the very survival of the human race.

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Politics and the Progress of Scientific Inquiry

By Daryl L.L. Houston *from*
AtheistParents.org

In Blount County, Tennessee, recently, and in any number of school systems across the Bible Belt, the school board voted down several textbooks that did not cover Creationism as a valid scientific theory. In Alabama, labels advising that Evolution is only a theory and should, in effect, be taken with a grain of salt, have been placed in the front covers of biology text books. On a larger scale, organizations like the Family Research Council and Focus on the Family lobby to modify public policy regarding things like stem cell research to accord with their narrow beliefs.

Fundamentalists are clearly attempting to have their way with the training of those who will make the groundbreaking discoveries of tomorrow and with scientific inquiry at large.

Perhaps more frightening is that the Bush administration has actively thrown barriers in the way of science, often by outright lying about findings and methodologies that brush against a fundamentalist agenda. And yet more disconcerting is that the administration doesn't favor a religious agenda only; information pertaining to the health of our nation and the sustainability of our environment has been manipulated, presumably in order to line the pockets or win the favor of significant campaign contributors. Noted scientific journals have recently begun to question the administration's approach to science, and Rep. Henry A. Waxman has enlisted the Government Reform Committee to prepare a report assessing the treatment of science and scientists by the Bush administration. The report finds that the administration has manipulated the scientific process and skewed findings to support its own agenda and to benefit special interest groups. Among the examples cited in the 40-page report are the following:

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Lead Poisoning

The CDC, working to lower the levels of lead deemed

dangerous in children's blood, butted heads with the lead industry, which sought to keep the acceptable levels pinned where they were. The Health and Human Services secretary removed and rejected several lead poisoning experts from the CDC's Advisory Committee on Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention, opting to appoint several lead-industry-friendly consultants to the committee. It was later revealed that the lead industry played a key role in securing the appointments.

Food Safety

The National Advisory Committee on Microbiological Criteria for Foods works to guarantee food safety by studying the control of e.coli, Salmonella, and other food-borne bacteria that have contributed to outbreaks of illness in recent years. In March, USDA Secretary Ann Veneman appointed nine food-industry members to the advisory panel. The organization one member represents lists as one of its main goals increasing the "profitability of meat and poultry trade worldwide."

Abstinence-Only Education

Based on the premise that "Abstinence has a proven track record of working," the Bush administration has pushed to remove education about other methods of birth control from school curricula, declining to acknowledge that while abstinence may be a sure-fire method of prevention, abstinence-only education has not been proven to reduce sexually-transmitted diseases and teen pregnancies. Health and Human Services has instead reduced performance measurements for Abstinence-Only Education programs in order to make them appear more successful. Rather than tracking actual pregnancies or disease-incidence rates as measurements have in the past, new measurements track attendance of abstinence-education programs and stated attitudes toward the methods discussed therein. The CDC has also ended an initiative

entitled "Programs that Work" that monitored and reported scientific evidence relevant to sex-education programs demonstrated to be effective. Additionally, abstinence-only backer Dr. Joe McIlhaney was appointed to the CDC in spite of serious questions about his credibility by the Texas Commissioner of Health under Bush while he was still governing Texas.

Stem-Cell Research

In spite of the NIH's assertion that stem-cell research showed great promise for those suffering from Parkinson's Disease, heart disease, Alzheimer's Disease, spinal cord injury, and diabetes, Bush banned federal funding for such research on the basis of his religious suspicion that stem-cell research was related in some way to abortion. He stated publicly that his decision would not adversely effect the research, as some 60 lines of previously-harvested cells were available for further testing. In fact, only 24 - 25 lines of cells had matured enough to render them usable for research, many of which could not be shipped safely to facilities for research and many of which may have had genetic problems. Although new methods for reliably developing lines of stem cells using cells from adult human beings have been discovered, Bush's broad mandate does not allow them to be put to use.



HIV/AIDS

Political watchdogs are on the lookout for scientific grant applications that use terms like "men who sleep with men" and "homosexual," presumably with the aim of singling them out for special scrutiny to prevent their funding. Further, Bush appointed marketing consultant Jerry Thacker to the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS. Thacker has branded gays with inappropriate terminology and openly promotes a reparative therapy wherein religion plays a significant role in reforming homosexuals in spite of the APA's suggestion that such therapy is ineffective and tends to be sought in response to social stigmatization of just the sort Thacker practices.

Among other topics Waxman's commissioned report addresses are agricultural pollution, arctic national wildlife

preservation, breast cancer, condoms, drinking water, education, environmental health, missile defense, oil and gas, prescription drugs, reproductive health, substance abuse, wetlands, workplace safety, and Yellowstone National Park. The Bush administration has displayed a consistent lack of regard for sound scientific principles and accurate reporting of findings. What's more, the administration has not only impeded positive progress but has encouraged regress when findings have conflicted with its fiscal and religious agendas. Such backpedaling arrests scientific inquiry not only directly, however; scientists must now also devote resources to doing public relations for their field to counter the bad PR generated by the 98.7 percent of Congress who are not members of the scientific community, an administration dead set against supporting progress in any direction but its own narrow path, and a rising and wealthy fundamentalist population.

It is no new thing for governments to attempt to limit the progress of critical thinking and science. Consider DaVinci's necessarily clandestine snatching of corpses for research; or the death sentence imposed upon Socrates; or Galileo's exile. One would have hoped that in the several centuries that have passed and the Enlightenment that has taken place since, amid unparalleled progress and breathtaking discoveries, we might have moved past scientific limitations driven by personal politics and superstition.

Jefferson's words in the "Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia" (which became Virginia law in 1786):

" our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics and geometry:: ... that the opinions of men are not the objects of civil government, nor under its jurisdiction.."

The Wedge - What Happens If Science Is Taken Over By Ideology

by Massimo Pigliucci

From: N. 12, July 2001 Rationally Speaking

By all accounts Phillip Johnson, a law professor at the University of California at Berkeley, is a congenial fellow with whom I'd like to have a beer one of these days. At the same time, he is keen to implement one of the most potentially destructive assaults on science ever consciously planned by a human being. He calls it the "Wedge" strategy, the idea being that there is a natural crack in the edifice of science and that evolution-deniers and other anti-intellectuals only need to widen the initial interstice to eventually bring down the whole evil tree of knowledge.

Johnson published a short version of the wedge idea in his book with the unintentionally ironic title *Defeating Darwinism by Opening Minds*, and has followed up with another book called *The Wedge of Truth*. He publishes a weekly update on the Web site of the so-called Center for the Renewal of Science & Culture (CRSC), a mostly conservative Christian think tank consisting of a number of major creationists and intelligent design "theorists."

The "crack" that Johnson thinks is going to be so fatal to science is the very well-known fact that science is based on some (reasonable) philosophical assumptions (such as the existence of a physical reality independent of the observer), and it is therefore not an entirely self-consistent enterprise. I will return to this point in another column because it is too important to treat it in a few words here. What I'd like to discuss instead is what the Wedge strategy is and what would happen if it succeeded. For the first task, I will rely on Johnson's own words and on a document published by the CRSC. Lacking a crystal ball but firmly believing that we do learn from history, I will attempt the second feat by briefly discussing what happened in another occasion in which ideology overcame good science in the recent past.

.... the underlying idea is essentially to turn the United States from a democratic republic into a theocracy dominated by conservative Christian groupthink.

The Wedge strategy document starts out with predictable rhetoric to the effect that belief in a personal God has been the bedrock of Western civilization, implying that if people should abandon such belief the end of the world would surely follow shortly thereafter. By the same token, of course, slavery was the economic cornerstone of the economy in the southern United States during the first century of its history, but-amazingly-that economy has survived and prospered even without slavery.

The core of the Wedge consists of a detailed program, spanning 20 years, during which efforts will be made to bring about three phases labeled "Scientific research, writing and publication," "Publicity and opinion making," and "Cultural confrontation and renewal." The first phase is apparently already almost over. It took only a few years, no peer-reviewed publication, and a handful of books for intelligent design supporters to claim to have established the truth of their point of view and demolished hundreds of years of painstaking scientific research conducted by tens of thousands of

scientists in laboratories world-wide. Kudos to the hyper-efficient fellows of the CRSC. We are now in the midst of the second phase, which interestingly includes such serious attempts at educating the public as engaging talk-show hosts and lobbying dimwit politicians on the evils of materialistic science. Hardly something one would expect from a serious intellectual think

tank, but these are strange times indeed. Most interestingly, the third phase of the Wedge is entitled "cultural confrontation," something that immediately conjures up images of religious wars, and for a good reason: the underlying idea is essentially to turn the United States from a democratic republic into a theocracy dominated by conservative Christian groupthink.

Suppose Johnson and co.-God forbid-will succeed. What will likely happen? Let us turn to a fairly recent example of ideology passed for science, how it came about, and what consequences it brought. In 1940 the leading Russian biologist Nikolai Vavilov was arrested

and sent to a concentration camp at Saratov. The reason was that he was denounced by a rising star of the Soviet establishment, Trofim Denisovich Lysenko, an agronomist who had come to believe half-baked ideas about the inheritance of acquired characteristics that had been rejected by mainstream science a century earlier.

Lysenko's wacky ideas fit perfectly well with Stalin's ideology: if the twisted version of dialectical materialism officially endorsed by the Soviet Union was true, then plants and animals (and by extension people) had to be infinitely pliable by changes in their environment and Mendelian genetics and Darwinian evolution must be simply the result of sick capitalist propaganda. Accordingly, Lysenko and his cronies took over Russian genetics and agriculture, exiling or putting to death the best scientists of that country and causing an economic catastrophe that probably didn't help the USSR withstand Western-imposed pressure during the arms race.

Lysenko retained control of Soviet biology well into the 1960s, essentially holding the progress of Russian science in that area to pre-WWII levels. Of course, the rest of the world progressed while in Russia countless lives were ruined, economic opportunities were lost, and huge setbacks in science education afflicted a country in which ideology reigned supreme over reality.

This, I submit, is what would happen in the United States if Johnson and his buddies succeed in implementing the Wedge strategy. It will not be the end of the world, and not even the end of science. There will be a brain drain of scientists and educators (and probably artists) toward more fertile intellectual grounds in other countries, and the good ol' US of A will be left behind and will eventually have to struggle to catch up over a period of decades (unpleasant as it may be, reality does have a way of reminding people of the practical limits of their fantasies). Meanwhile, we will experience the same kind of waste of human potential and economic resources that cursed the USSR under Stalin and Lysenko.

It is somewhat amusing to ponder the symmetry between the two cases: communist and atheist

ideology for Lysenko, religious and conservative for Johnson. The real danger does not seem to be either religion or atheism, but blind commitment to an a priori view of the world that ignores how things really are. In fact, if I believed in conspiracy theories, I would be tempted to suggest that the Wedge strategy is a communist plot to have the West experience the same kind of tragedy that the East went through and level the playing field. But I am too busy attempting to insure the failure of Johnson's dangerous campaign to idly speculate on whose orders he may be following. For all I know he could be a lonely evil genius acting directly on the Devil's orders.

“When the apes called barbarians
settled down in Europe and started
being civilized Nations,
2 And decided to have a great Dark Age,
3 They naturally turned to the Christians
for help,
4 Because because the Christians had
priests who knew how to explain
everything,
5 Completely,
6 So no more questions would be
needed,
7 For a thousand years,
8 And no one would have to think about
anything,
9 For a thousand years,
10 Which meant that everything
could stay almost exactly the way it
was,
11 For a thousand years,
12 Which is the whole reason
for having a Dark Age in the first place.”

*The Boomer Bible, A
Testament For Our Times,*
R. F. Laird, Workman
Publishing, New York,
1991, page 36



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Reality Check
Rationalists of East Tennessee
2123 Stonybrook Road
Louisville, TN 37777