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THE BLOG

The Politics of Ignorance

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President Bush has now endorsed the pseudo-scientific notion of “intelligent design” (ID) and declared it to be a legitimate alternative to the theory of evolution. This is not surprising, as he has always maintained that “the jury is still out” on the question of evolution. But the jury is not out—indeed it was well in before President Bush was even born—and anyone familiar with modern biology knows that ID is nothing more than a program of political and religious advocacy masquerading as science.

It is for this reason that the scientific community has been divided on just how (or whether) to dignify the spurious claims of ID “theorists” with a response. While understandable, I believe that such scruples are now misplaced. The Trojan Horse has passed the innermost gates of the city, and scary religious imbeciles are now spilling out.

According to several recent polls, 22 percent of Americans are certain that Jesus will return to earth sometime in the next fifty years. Another 22 percent believe that he will probably do so. This is likely the same 44 percent who go to church once a week or more, who believe that God literally promised the land of Israel to the Jews, and who want to stop teaching our children about the biological fact of evolution. As the President is well aware, believers of this sort constitute the most cohesive and motivated segment of the American electorate. Consequently, their views and prejudices now influence almost every decision of national importance. Political liberals seem to have drawn the wrong lesson from these developments and are now thumbing scripture, wondering how best to ingratiate themselves to the legions of men and women in our country who vote mainly on the basis of religious dogma. More than 50 percent of Americans have a “negative” or “highly negative” view of people who do not believe in God; 70 percent think it important for presidential candidates to be “strongly religious.” Because it is taboo to criticize a person’s religious beliefs, political debate over questions of public policy (stem-cell research, the ethics of assisted suicide and euthanasia, obscenity and free speech, gay marriage, etc.) generally gets framed in terms appropriate to a theocracy. Unreason is now ascendant in the United States—in our schools, in our courts, and in each branch of the federal government. Only 28 percent of Americans believe in evolution; 68 percent believe in Satan. Ignorance in this degree, concentrated in both the head and belly of a lumbering superpower, is now a problem for the entire world.

It is time that scientists and other public intellectuals observed that the contest between faith and reason is zero-sum. There is no question but that nominally religious scientists like Francis Collins and Kenneth R. Miller are doing lasting harm to our discourse by the accommodations they have made to religious irrationality. Likewise, Stephen Jay Gould’s notion of “non-overlapping magisteria” served only the religious dogmatists who realize, quite rightly, that there is only one magisterium. Whether a person is religious or secular, there is nothing more sacred than the facts. Either Jesus was born of a virgin, or he

wasn't; either there is a God who despises homosexuals, or there isn't. It is time that sane human beings agreed on the standards of evidence necessary to substantiate truth-claims of this sort. The issue is not, as ID advocates allege, whether science can "rule out" the existence of the biblical God. There are an infinite number of ludicrous ideas that science could not "rule out," but which no sensible person would entertain. The issue is whether there is any good reason to believe the sorts of things that religious dogmatists believe—that God exists and takes an interest in the affairs of human beings; that the soul enters the zygote at the moment of conception (and, therefore, that blastocysts are the moral equivalents of persons); etc. There simply is no good reason to believe such things, and scientists should stop hiding their light under a bushel and make this emphatically obvious to everyone.

Imagine President Bush addressing the National Prayer Breakfast in these terms: "Behind all of life and all history there is a dedication and a purpose, set by the hand of a just and faithful Zeus." Imagine his speech to Congress containing the sentence "Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty have always been at war, and we know that Apollo is not neutral between them." Clearly, the commonplaces of language conceal the vacuity and strangeness of many of our beliefs. Our president regularly speaks in phrases appropriate to the fourteenth century, and no one seems inclined to find out what words like "God" and "crusade" and "wonder-working power" mean to him. Not only do we still eat the offal of the ancient world; we are positively smug about it. Garry Wills has noted that the Bush White House "is currently honeycombed with prayer groups and Bible study cells, like a whited monastery." This should trouble us as much as it troubles the fanatics of the Muslim world.

The only thing that permits human beings to collaborate with one another in a truly open-ended way is their willingness to have their beliefs modified by new facts. Only openness to evidence and argument will secure a common world for us. Nothing guarantees that reasonable people will agree about everything, of course, but the unreasonable are certain to be divided by their dogmas. It is time we recognized that this spirit of mutual inquiry, which is the foundation of all real science, is the very antithesis of religious faith.

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