

The Fall of Foolish Faith

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From a talk on March 4, 2012 at the CFI (Center for Inquiry) Meeting, Orlando, Florida:
"Moving Secularism Forward"

I want to talk about a particular group of secularists -- scientists -- and their interaction with religion. Most scientists prefer to stay out of any conflicts with religion. They don't want to endanger their sources of research funding and generally just don't want to be bothered. They have better things to do, or at least they think they do.

I want to urge those of you who are not scientists to try to convince those who are to stop pussyfooting around with religion and confront the reality of what it is and always has been -- a blight on humanity that has hindered our progress for millennia and now threatens our very existence.

Scientists have to help the rest of the secular community to work toward reducing the influence of religion to the point where it has negligible effect on society. I don't believe this is impossible. Astrology and the reading of sheep entrails are no longer used to decide on courses of events, such as going to war. Why can't we expect the same for the imagined dialogues with an ancient tribal sky god that at least one recent president has used to justify his actions?

Let's look at some of the places where scientists have been slow to recognize the negative impact that religion is having on important scientific matters. Since the 1850s, human population has exploded causing an unsustainable exploitation of Earth's resources. This growth cannot continue indefinitely. Only by reducing our dependence on fossil fuels and leveling population can we expect to survive.

Rather than helping, religion hinders these efforts by discouraging birth control and other absolutely essential measures needed to achieve these goals.

Already, three million people die every year from the pollution caused by fossil fuels and biomass. And this will only increase if we continue on the present path.

However, a livable future is not out of our reach. Liquid thorium nuclear reactors could provide the world with all the energy it needs for a thousand years, safely, with minimal environmental impact, and no application to nuclear weapons. If they had thorium reactors, there would have been no Three-Mile Island, Chernobyl, or Fukushima disasters. The only reason uranium and plutonium are used in nuclear reactors is you can build bombs with them. You can't build bombs with thorium.

Solar power would already be economically competitive with oil, if the economy were to properly price oil to include the costs of its damage to the environment, human health, and the military needed to defend sources and transport. Imagine a world without oil. I can.

So why don't we move in these directions already clearly marked out by science? Because since the late nineteenth century we have lived in a plutocracy in which petroleum and other fossil energies

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dominate almost every sector of our economy by virtue of the enormous wealth they bring to their producers and distributors.

Now, what does this have to do with religion? Since prehistoric times religion has served as the handmaiden to those in power, helping them to maintain that power. Tribal chiefs, kings, and emperors always had shamans and priests at their sides to assure their subjects that they led by divine right.

In America today, petro-dollars fuel a giant Christian propaganda machine that works to undermine the efforts of scientists to find solutions to the problems that face us with overpopulation, pollution, and climate change. They use techniques that were pioneered 30 years ago by the tobacco industry to suppress the evidence that smoking causes cancer and heart disease. And these techniques exploit the antiscience that is inherent in religious belief.

A new technique that in recent years has been added to the arsenal of global warming denialism is to frame climate change as a theological issue. Global warming deniers say that God would never allow life on Earth to be destroyed. After all, he gave humans dominion over the planet. Besides, the world is coming to an end soon anyway, so it doesn't matter.

Republican politicians are in the forefront of the battle over climate change. John Shimkus, Republican of Illinois, has said that climate change is a myth because God told Noah he would never again destroy Earth by flood. All the current Republican presidential candidates have either always said climate change was a hoax or have backed off previous statements in which they agreed that warming is taking place.

The Cornwall Alliance for The Stewardship of Creation has issued what it calls "An Evangelical Declaration on Global Warming." The statement asserts that Earth and its ecosystems are "robust, resilient, self-regulating, and self-correcting, admirably suited for human flourishing, and displaying the glory of God." The statement denies that Earth and its ecosystems are the "fragile and unstable products of chance," and particularly that Earth's climate system is vulnerable to dangerous alteration because of what they call "minuscule changes in atmospheric chemistry." The Cornwall statement claims that there is no convincing scientific evidence that greenhouse gases produced by human activity are causing dangerous global warming. It also denies that carbon dioxide is a pollutant and claims that reducing greenhouse gases cannot achieve significant reductions in future global temperatures

Approximately 500 people, including a large number of non-expert scientists and other academics, endorsed this statement. This is not simply the view of a small fringe group but that of the large majority of Evangelical Christians, who wield far more influence than their actual numbers justify.

While the petrocrats use science in every aspect of their businesses, they hypocritically exploit the antiscience that is inherent in religion in order to undermine any scientific findings that threaten their power and fortunes.

Most scientists do not realize that science and religion are fundamentally incompatible. This is not because they have thought about it. It is because they prefer not to think about it.

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Fundamentalists know science and religion are incompatible, since science disputes so much of what is in the Bible, which they take as the literal word of God. To them, science is simply wrong and must be Christianized. A well-funded effort exists to do just that, while most scientists sit on the sidelines because they prefer not to get involved.

But science and religion have always been at war, and always will be. One of yesterday's speakers said that he did not like to use the word "religion" but rather called it a "belief system." Well, there are different kinds of belief systems. Science is a belief system based on reason and evidence. Religion is a belief system based on bullshit.

Moderate Christians claim they support science, but they still hold to beliefs that have no empirical basis. Moderates will tell you that they accept evolution, but then they insist it is still guided by God. This is not Darwinian evolution. This is intelligent design. There is no guidance, divine or otherwise, in Darwinian evolution.

A recent phenomenon is the joining of forces between the climate change deniers and evolution deniers, who have no link other than a common motivation based on religion. Several legislatures have passed bills requiring teachers to present "all sides" of the evidence on evolution and global warming. Now, that would be no problem if the arguments on all sides were presented accurately and honestly. But we know that's unlikely to happen, since the only purpose of these bills is to create the illusion of scientific controversy on topics where, in truth, a strong consensus within the scientific community exists. It's like demanding equal time for flat-earth geology.

Christopher Hitchens once said that he was not just opposed to organized religion, but also to religious belief. Religion would not be such a negative force in society if it were just about going to church socials and celebrating rites of passage. However, the magical thinking that becomes deeply ingrained whenever faith rules over facts warps all areas of life. It instills superficial beliefs which, having been adopted without reason, cannot be displaced by reason. Magical thinking ignores evidence and favors whatever opinion is the most convenient or socially acceptable. While scientists also tend to follow the crowd, at least they can be convinced to change their minds when the data warrant it.

Magical beliefs are not just limited to religion, but extend to economics, politics, and health. It's not that the public lacks information. Today we're all inundated with information, especially on the Internet. However, much of that data is untrustworthy and it takes a trained thinker to filter out the good from the bad. Magical thinking and blind faith are the worst conceivable mental system we can apply under these circumstances. They allow the most outrageous lies and stupidities to be accepted as facts.

Nowhere is this more evident than in America today where the large majority of the public hold on to a whole set of religious and pseudoscientific beliefs despite the total lack of evidence to support these beliefs, and indeed, in the face of strong evidence that denies them. This is the folly of faith and demonstrates why it must be fought. Relying on blind faith is no way to run a world.

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As I have noted, religious believers are being manipulated to work against their own best interests in health and economic well-being in order to cast doubt on well-established scientific findings. This would not be possible except for the diametrically opposed world-views of science and religion.

Science and religion are fundamentally incompatible because of the opposing assumptions they make concerning what we can know about the world. Every human alive is aware of a world that seems to exist outside the body, the world of sensory experience we call the natural. Science is the systematic study of the observations made of the natural world with our senses and scientific instruments. The knowledge gained in this manner has proved effective when applied to human needs.

By contrast, all major religions, including Buddhism, teach that humans possess an additional "inner" sense that allows us to access a realm lying beyond the visible world--a divine, transcendent reality we call the supernatural. If it does not involve the transcendent, it is not religion. Religion is a set of practices intended to communicate with that invisible world and use its forces to affect things here on Earth.

The working hypothesis of science is that careful observation is our only reliable source of knowledge about the world. Natural theology accepts empirical science and views it as a means to learn about God's creation. But religion, in general, goes much further than science in giving credence to other claimed sources of knowledge such as scriptures, revelation, and spiritual experiences.

No doubt, science has its limits. However, the fact that science is limited doesn't mean that religion or any alternative system of thought can or does provide insight into what lies beyond those limits. For example, science cannot yet show precisely how the universe originated naturally, although many plausible scenarios exist. But the fact that science does not--at present--have a definitive answer to this question does not mean that ancient creation myths such as those in Genesis have any substance, any chance of eventually being verified.

The scientific community in general goes along with the notion that science has nothing to say about the supernatural because the methods of science, as they are currently practiced, exclude supernatural causes. I strongly disagree with this position. If we truly possess an inner sense telling us about an unobservable reality that matters to us and influences our lives, then we should be able to observe the effects of that reality by scientific means.

If someone's inner sense were to warn of an impending earthquake unpredicted by science, which then occurred on schedule, we would have evidence for an extrasensory source of knowledge. So far we see no evidence that the feelings people experience when they perceive themselves to be in touch with the supernatural correspond to anything outside their heads, and we have no reason to rely on those feelings when they occur. However, if such evidence or reason should show up, then scientists will have to consider it whether they like it or not.

We cannot sweep under the rug the many serious problems brought about by the scientific revolution and the exponential burst in humanity's ability to exploit Earth's resources made possible by the accompanying technology. There would be no problems with overpopulation, pollution, global warming, or the threat of nuclear holocaust if science had not made them possible. The growing

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distrust of science found now in America can be at least partially understood by observing the disgraceful examples of scientists employed by oil, food, tobacco, and pharmaceutical companies who have contributed to the unnecessary deaths of millions by allowing products to be marketed that these scientists knew full well were unsafe.

But does anyone want to return to the prescientific age when human life was nasty, brutish, and short? Even fire was once a new technology, and through the ages a lot of people have died in fires. But we don't stop lighting them. Unsafe products are more than overshadowed by drugs, foods, medical knowledge, and technologies, which have made all our lives immeasurably better than those of humans in the not-too-distant past. At least in developed countries, women now rarely die in childbirth and most children grow to adulthood. This was not the case even just a few generations ago. Unlike our ancestors, most of us lead long, fulfilling lives largely free of pain and drudgery. The aged are so numerous that they are becoming a social problem. All this is the result of scientific developments.

We can only solve the problems brought about by the misuse of science by adhering to the scientific method, and by more rational behavior on the part of scientists, politicians, corporations, and citizens in all walks of life. Religion, as it is currently practiced with its continued focus on closed thinking and ancient mythology, is not doing anything to support the goal of a better, safer world. In fact, religion actively and vigorously opposes that goal.

Religion has destroyed our trust by its repeated failure. Using the empirical method, science has eliminated smallpox, flown men to the moon, and discovered DNA. If science didn't work, we wouldn't do it. Relying on faith, religion has brought us inquisitions, holy wars, and intolerance. Religion doesn't work, but we still do it.

Science flies us to the moon. Religion flies us into buildings.

Science is not going to change its commitment to the truth. And religion is not going to change its commitment to nonsense. And that is why I call upon scientists and all thinking people to focus their attention on reducing the influence of religion in the world, with the goal of the eventual fall of foolish faith. The future depends on it.