

The Dangers of Creationism in Education?

An Open Letter to Mr. Guy Lengagne of the Committee on Culture, Science, and Education, European Commission

Dear Mr. Lengagne,

I was deeply moved when I read your report number 11297 (dated 8 June, 2007, presented 14 September, 2007), "The Dangers of creationism in Education." You powerfully articulate many of the values that I endorse and even treasure, those of human rights, the humane importance of technical and scientific progress, and democratic freedom from any form of theocracy. I have written essays and a book defending these values because I think they need to be articulated and defended. As part of my defense of these values I moved to Minsk, Belarus to become a visiting professor at the dissident European Humanities University for five semesters, giving up a big house in a nice city to live in a small, dirty, insect infested apartment in an undeveloped, backward country (February, 1994 to June, 1996). It was a privilege to help the dissidents fighting for democracy and the protection of human rights, rights like free speech, free travel, and freedom of thought, even though it was at a cost for myself, as well as my wife and children.

But I am very concerned because I think you may be afraid of me and some of my friends. You see, I have made real personal sacrifices to defend human rights and democracy and promote the progress of academic knowledge because I believe in Intelligent Design. Not only that, I was a key host of the "Darwin & Design" conference in Prague, October 2005, which drew 700 people from 18 countries to consider the possibility that this universe really is the result of the acts of an Intelligent Designer.

Your report to the Committee on Culture, Science, and Education says:

"If we are not careful, creationism could become a threat to human rights, which are a key concern of the Council of Europe." (Article 1)

“We are witnessing a growth of modes of thought which, the better to impose religious dogma, are attacking the very core of the knowledge that we have patiently built up on nature, evolution, our origins and our place in the universe.” (Article 5)

“Though more subtle in its presentation, the doctrine of intelligent design is no less dangerous.” (Article 7)

“Science has made possible considerable improvements in living and working conditions and is a not insignificant fact in economic, technological, and social development. The theory of evolution has nothing to do with divine revelation but is built on facts.” (Article 8)

“Evolution is not simply matter of the evolution of humans and of populations. Denying it could have serious consequences for the development of our societies. Advances in medical research with the aim of effectively combating infectious diseases such as AIDS are impossible if every principle of evolution is denied.” (Article 10)

“The scientific approach is still not well understood and this is liable to encourage the development of all manner of fundamentalism and extremism, synonymous with attacks of utmost virulence on human rights. The total rejection of science is definitely one of the most serious threats to human rights and civic rights.” (Article 11)

“The war on the theory of evolution and its proponents most often originates in forms of religious extremism which are closely allied to extreme right-wing political movements ... the advocates of strict creationism are out to replace democracy by theocracy.” (Article 12)

“The teaching of all phenomena concerning evolution as a fundamental scientific theory is therefore crucial to the future of our societies and our democracies. For that reason it must occupy a central position in the curriculum.” (Article 14)

“If we are not careful, the values that are the very essence of the Council of Europe will be under direct threat from creationist fundamentalists.” (Article 17)

“The truth and scientific nature of evolution remain irrefutable today. . . . The theory of evolution constitutes a body of fundamental knowledge for the future of our democracies and cannot be arbitrarily challenged.” (Article 89)

“Better teaching or the more appropriate teaching of the sciences and evolution might enable the dissemination of alternative pseudo-theories such as those of the creationists to be combated effectively.” (Article 101)

Before responding to these charges, let me first say that I think you do not need to be afraid of me, and I do not think I need to be afraid of you, though I am very concerned about how you have misrepresented the point of view of many fine people. After hosting the Darwin & Design conference in Prague, I considered trying to organize a conference on Islam and democracy. I decided not to try to organize such a conference because I was afraid. I expected that some people would write some nasty and poorly informed articles and letters in the newspapers after the Darwin & Design conference; I was not disappointed. But I was pretty sure that the level of controversy would be that of words, whether well informed or ignorant, not that of bombs and bullets. And I was not afraid of that type of peaceful controversy. But I am a little afraid of open, public debate with some of our neighbors. When you are debating with Christians in the developed world, please rest assured that we may debate vehemently with words, but we will also make personal sacrifices to defend many of the values you hold dear, such as your freedom to your speech and freedom of thought. Even if we strongly disagree with each other, let’s keep open the option of having a nice dinner together some time. We might become good friends.

But I am very concerned, because you have seriously misrepresented the point of view and the history of Christians in the western world, which will degrade the work of your important committee. Let me respond to some of the ways in which I think you misrepresent or misunderstand the Christian community and tradition:

1. We Christians believe that humans have real rights which must be recognized (not given) and protected by the state, as well as by every person and every social institution. People have these rights because they are created in the image of God, so this is part of the Christian belief in creation. One of our reasons for thinking democracy is a good form of government is

that democracies are usually better at protecting human rights than are other forms of government. In fact, many of us think that the protection of human rights (even the right to freedom of speech and religion for the people who disagree with us) is the first duty of a state and the primary test of its legitimacy.

Please do not blame Christians if some other religious tradition uses its belief in creation as a means of religious attack on human rights or freedoms. Not all religions that believe in creation emphasize the distinctiveness of the humanum in se in the way in which we Christians emphasize the God-given dignity of each human being. Indeed, many of my friends would argue that Christianity has made massive contributions to western culture especially because of the Christian belief in human dignity. I know, of course, that other intellectual traditions would also like to claim that they have made significant contributions to the western grasp of human dignity, and I would not want to dispute all of those claims. But as we Christians interpret our own history, we are proud of our claim that we have contributed to the proper grasp of the value of human life, and thereby to the protection of human rights and the development of democracy.

2. The vast majority of Christians have long given up the foolish notion of a theocracy as being contrary to our own core beliefs. I phrase it in this manner so that it should be clear that our rejection of all theocratic ideas is not a deceptive public relations stunt, nor is it some type of compromise with modern democracies. In the context of the Roman Empire Jesus taught us to "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." (Matthew 22:21) In this light the attempt to impose a "Holy Roman Empire" in Europe seems to have been a terrible mistake by some of our ancestors. But in spite of the mistakes of some of our ancestors in previous centuries, much of western society intuitively felt the need to talk in some way of "Two Kingdoms" or "Two Swords," ways of thinking that led to the distinctively western and Christian notion of the separation of church and state. Such ways of thinking and talking do not need to imply hostility between church and state; these ways of talking only imply that our society will be more properly structured if the state is mostly occupied with matters of justice and the proper administration of life in society, while the churches are mostly involved in proclai-

ming messages about salvation and the ultimate meaning and nature of the universe. The ambiguous lines or borders between these two different functions always have and always will require a lot of patience. But a little conflict between church and state is better than an attempt at a theocracy. You can accuse us of wanting a theocracy only if you have totally neglected your homework, which would totally disqualify you for the office you hold.

3. As you can see, we think that comprehensive democracy, not merely functional democracy, fits consistently with our deepest beliefs. A functional democracy would merely employ the method of elections to select officials. A comprehensive democracy means that protection of human rights is a central purpose of government, and includes a separation of societal institutions (state, church, family, business, etc), the division of powers among different parts of the government (parliament, courts, military, executive, etc.), multiple political parties, and the rule of law. Such an approach to society organically fits with our Christian view of human dignity (created in the image of God), human weakness and fallibility (the tendency toward pride, self-deception, and evil action), the universal moral law (which is God's gift to all mankind), and societal institutions (each of which is created by God and somewhat independent of each other). To describe this as "extreme right wing" or "religious extremism" is simply silly; if you insist on describing this as "extreme right wing" you deserve our pity, not our ridicule.

4. Most of the Christians I know rejoice in the considerable economic and technological improvements in our lives which have been made possible by modern science. In fact, we should give thanks to God for these vast improvements. I would probably have died as a very young man, except for the work of some very gifted medical professionals who were, I think, of various religious persuasions. But all of these great and wonderful gifts are the result of many generations of disciplined scientific research and teaching; none of the particular benefits of science and technology are closely tied to a particular theory of origins, whether evolution or intelligent design or whatever. Scientists and technicians work on particular problems using scientific and technical methods, regardless of the beliefs or philosophy of life of the individual scientist or technician.

Far from attacking science, some of my friends would claim that the Christian tradition has made and can continue to make significant contributions to ongoing scientific progress at two levels, that of providing motivation for the rigors of scientific study and that of explaining how scientific knowledge is possible. At the level of motivation, Christians say and have often said that we should study the physical world because it is God's good creation; the resulting knowledge should be used to love our neighbors. Our historians claim that this was part of the background for the beginnings of early modern science in the sixteenth century. At the level of the possibility of scientific knowledge (epistemology), our philosophers argue that knowledge of the physical world is possible because of a complex correlation among our five senses, our mental categories, and the structures of the physical world, all of which results from having the same Intelligent Designer. Some would be so bold as to suggest that creation provides a more plausible explanation for the possibility of scientific knowledge than does atheism. In my own writing on technological progress I have argued that God is still active in the world, enabling scientific and technological breakthroughs, as part of his ongoing provision for human well being. From my point of view, your claim that belief in creation might undermine scientific progress is really humorous. I only address the question because I know someone might take you seriously. When there is finally a decisive cure for AIDS, I will see that breakthrough as a gift of God which came by means of the tremendous efforts of medical researchers. I hope you will not be unduly offended if I thank God for gifts that may come through the hands and minds of people who have not yet recognized the ultimate source of the gifts they discover.

Mr. Lengagne, there is much more that could be written in response to your report. But then my open letter would become too long, and I might begin simply repeating the ideas in the books written by my friends who are the Intelligent Design scientists and philosophers. I have wanted primarily to respond to your outrageous and irresponsible claim that Intelligent Design theory is a serious threat to democracy that needs to be resisted with all the power of the European Union. Your claims are simply not true; I think you should publicly apologize for such unconscionable falsehood.

In passing you refer to the tragic story of Galileo. Of course some of your readers may still follow the old myths about Galileo, that he was a hero of science standing against the enemies of knowledge represented by faith. I see in Galileo a man who was both a serious scientist by the standards of his day and also a man of deep faith in God, which provided part of his motivation for his scientific studies. It was a real tragedy that institutional authority that was afraid of new ideas tried to stop his work, but both Galileo and the institutional authorities (some church officials), shared similar Christian beliefs. This was a conflict between authorities and an individual thinker, not primarily a conflict between faith and science. Of course this silly attempt made the church look silly for generations. In our time you represent institutional authority that is uncomfortable with the developing ideas of some very clever people; I hope you will not look as silly in the eyes of our descendants as do some church authorities of Galileo's time.

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From February, 1994 until June 1996, Dr. Johnson was a visiting professor of philosophy at the European Humanities University in Minsk, Belarus. From 1998 until 2006 he taught philosophy at Charles University, Prague. Since 2004 he has served as director of the Comenius Institute, Prague (in Czech: Komenského Institut v Praze) which hosted the 2005 Darwin & Design Conference. He is now also Vice President for Research, Martin Bucer Seminary.

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