

Is God Unconstitutional?

The Established Religious Philosophy of America

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Meet the Author: Phillip Johnson

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On February 27, 1994, The Los Angeles Times published an editorial defending orthodox science against a host of enemies. First on the enemies' list came the infamous creationists, of course, who engage in what the Times called "pernicious efforts...to infiltrate the public schools with the arrant nonsense of 'creation science.'"

The *L.A. Times* warned that science also faces new enemies on the left, however. These include Afro-centrists who promote theories of black racial superiority and Native Americans who question the "well-established anthropological fact" that their ancestors migrated to America from Asia across the Bering Strait.

The *Times* also deplored the fact that aid and comfort is given to these enemies of science by certain "post-modernist" scholars, who argue that all knowledge is relative and that mainstream Western scientists therefore have no greater authority to explain reality than other thinkers.

In short, *The Los Angeles Times* saw the authority of science as being under attack from all directions, with some of the attacks coming from prestigious or fashionable academics of the left. The editorial response was a straightforward declaration of cultural war against the critics. The newspaper did not consider the possibility that the contemporary scientific world view might actually contain any subjective or debatable elements, although it did acknowledge that individual scientists sometimes commit fraud or error.

With respect to any challenge to scientific doctrines from religion, the *Times* quoted the current President of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, genetics professor Francisco Ayala of the Irvine Campus of the University of California and a former Catholic priest, as saying that "science does not contradict religion."

In interpreting what it took Ayala to mean, however, the *Times* drew a firm line in the sand. It stated, "Religion has a legitimate role in the discourse over the ultimate origin of matter, a mystery that science may never solve." After that ultimate beginning, however, to ascribe any role to God in the history of the cosmos would be to "seek refuge from scientific uncertainty in the irrational." The editorial went on to warn that departure from scientific orthodoxy on the subject of biological evolution would lead inevitably to "intellectual and economic suicide," because "scientific and technological prowess is critical to American competitiveness in a global economy." The *Times* even advertised a "hotline" 800 number that "right-thinking" parents and teachers were encouraged to call for assistance "in resisting the forces of ignorance."

Intolerance Bordering on Hatred

An on-going academic freedom case at San Francisco State University provides another illustration of the extreme disapproval with which the current scientific orthodoxy regards the concept of a God who does not retire from all further activity after the ultimate origin of matter. Biology professor Dean Kenyon was the co-author 26 years ago of a respected book entitled *Biochemical Predestination*, which supported the orthodox scientific theory that living organisms evolved from non-living chemicals through natural chemical processes. As the years went by, Kenyon's doubts grew, however, and eventually he concluded that the evidence did not support the assumption that unintelligent material processes are capable of forming living organisms by chemical evolution.

As instructor of a large introductory course for non-majors, Kenyon taught his students the prevailing theories of chemical and biological evolution, but he also taught the weaknesses of those theories and suggested that life might in fact be the product of "intelligent design" - however distasteful that prospect might be to orthodox scientific materialists. A few students complained, and the professor was called on the carpet. The department chairman and the dean of science told him that his teaching of intelligent design amounted to Biblical creationism, and that to consider this possibility favorably was to bring the forbidden topic of religion into science. To ensure that he had no further opportunity to advocate such absurdities, Kenyon was removed from his regular classroom duties and relegated to laboratory supervision.

Kenyon challenged this administrative action by bringing a complaint before SFSU's Academic Freedom Committee. The committee ruled that professors of biology, like those who teach other subjects, have a right to dissent from the prevailing orthodoxy in their field. It, therefore, unanimously urged the administrators to reinstate Kenyon in his normal teaching assignments. The dean and department chairman balked at first, but they gave way after the full academic senate voted to support the committee's recommendation. Kenyon had won a victory, and students at San Francisco State will at least temporarily be exposed to a viewpoint which the reigning authorities in the scientific world regard with a disgust bordering on hatred.

How long this victory will last is questionable, however. In February, the biology faculty at San Francisco State adopted, by vote of 27 to 5, a resolution declaring, "There is no scientific evidence to support the concept of intelligent design," and therefore "the intelligent design view is not scientific." In context, the statement, like many others on the subject from the scientific community, tries to combine two discordant propositions. On the one hand, the scientific

authorities want to say that intelligent design is not eligible for consideration because it is religion, not science, and on the other hand they want to say they have thoroughly considered the concept and rejected it as false.

The apparent purpose of this confused declaration is to set the stage for some effort to prevent Kenyon from telling students that he thinks there is evidence for intelligent design, but what will happen next is anybody's guess.

A Creating God vs. a Created God

The bitter debate over whether "creation" or "intelligent design" may be considered as a possibility in scientific discourse is no minor matter. Behind it lies one of the most important questions of human existence: Did God create Man, or did Man create God? Theism - whether Christian, Jewish, or Islamic - proclaims the former. Scientific naturalism, the philosophy of contemporary natural science, proclaims the latter. According to the scientific naturalist version of cosmic history, nature is a permanently closed system of material effects that can never be influenced by something from outside - like God, for example. For governmental and educational purposes today, science is defined as proceeding from naturalistic premises, and science is given exclusive authority to portray objective reality. This means scientific naturalism is effectively the established religious philosophy of America.

God, in this metaphysical system, is inherently a product of human imagination, and therefore a relic from prescientific times, when humans knew no better than to attribute to a supernatural being their own existence and that of everything else they encountered. Science has allegedly changed all that, and made all educated persons aware that we are in reality products of mindless, purposeless, material processes. In the words of one of the most influential of modern Darwinists, the Harvard paleontologist George Gaylord Simpson, the "meaning of evolution" is "Man is the result of a purposeless and natural process that did not have him in mind." Evolutionary scientists often blur that message for tactical reasons, but they will never abandon it. Whatever you may think that word "evolution" means, the people who direct science education mean by it that our existence is an accident, and we are responsible to no creator.

Some scientific naturalists are aggressive atheists, but most take the line of The Los Angeles Times editorialist: God may exist, and may even be allowed to establish the initial conditions at the absolute beginning of space and time, but thereafter God must mind his own business and stay out of "our" cosmos. In particular, God must neither program the evolutionary process in advance nor step in from time to time to give it a nudge - unless He is prepared to endure the combined wrath of The Los Angeles Times and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. We might say the problem with God is not that He does not exist, but that naturalistic philosophy has relegated Him to the ranks of the permanently unemployed.

Scientific naturalism provides our established religious philosophy with its picture of reality. Liberal rationalism provides its ethical and political starting point. If we are accidental products of a purposeless cosmos, as science currently tells us, then there are no objective values which we are obligated to respect. Value is inherently a human creation in a naturalistic universe. As individuals or as societies, we create values out of our imagination, just as we created God, and

we can recreate those values as we choose. That is why marriage, for example, can be culturally redefined at any time. Marriage is not inherently a lifetime union between a husband and a wife, looking to the production of children. It was defined that way in a pre-modern culture, and our modernist or post-modernist culture can redefine it to include arrangements intended to be only temporary, or same-sex unions, or even arrangements involving multiple partners. Why not, now that we know the God who supposedly created marriage was in fact created out of the imagination of our ancestors?

Modernism Defined

The long name for our established religious philosophy is scientific naturalism and liberal rationalism; for convenience I will simply refer to it as "modernism." Modernism is typically defined as the condition that begins when people realize God is truly dead, and we are therefore on our own. Modernism has a number of real or apparent advantages that have enabled it to become the ruling philosophy of our time. I will first state these advantages now, as a defender of modernism might describe them. My critique will come later.

(1) Modernism's metaphysical foundation rests firmly upon scientific naturalism, which is "the way things really are." Through science we now know that nature, of which we are a recently evolved part, really is a purposeless system of material causes and effects, whether we like it or not. Any other system - particularly one based upon supposed divine commandments - would therefore be founded upon illusion rather than reality. The fact is man invented God, rather than the other way around. Once science has established the facts, there is no going back to prescientific beliefs, however attractive those beliefs may have been in their time.

(2) Modernist naturalism equals rationality because it excludes consideration of miracles, defined as arbitrary breaks in the chain of material causes and effects. This way of defining rationality is particularly important to scientists, who see the success of science as inextricably linked to the presumption that no supernatural mind or spirit ever interferes with the orderly (but purposeless) course of natural events. For most modernists, the identification of naturalism with rationality is so complete that they do not think of naturalism as a distinct and controversial metaphysical doctrine, but simply assume it as part of the definition of "reason."

(3) Modernist naturalism is liberating, especially in gender roles and sexual behavior, because it frees people from the illusion that outdated cultural norms have permanent validity as commands of God. Persons who attack scientific naturalism, or the theory of evolution, probably do so as part of a disguised agenda to re-establish a patriarchal and stifling code of sexual behavior. Thus *The Los Angeles Times* has repeatedly attacked the Vista, California (San Diego County), School Board for threatening to allow challenges to Darwinism in the curriculum and for attempting to institute a sex education curriculum based upon abstinence rather than "safe sex." The modernist media see challenges to Darwinism or sexual freedom for teenagers as equivalent manifestations of religious fundamentalism, and hence unconstitutional.

(4) Modernist naturalism supplies the philosophical basis for democratic liberty, because it relies only upon knowledge which is in principle available to every citizen. Persons who wish to make

public policy from some divine revelation are inherently undemocratic, because they assert authority based on knowledge revealed only to them, and hence is not available to others.

In contrast, the observations and methods of reasoning employed by science are universally accessible in principle, although the special study required limits the capacity of ordinary citizens to understand them in practice. If public debate is carried out only on the basis of knowledge derived from sensory experience and scientific investigation, then in principle everyone can participate on equal terms. Debates between competing supernaturalistic ideologies can be settled only by force, whereas debate on naturalistic principles is open to reason and hence to peaceful solution.

(5) Finally, modernist government is acceptable even to many religious people, including theists who prudently want to avoid clashing with natural science. Modernism is not anti-religious, as we have seen, provided that "belief in God" stays in its proper place in private life. Believers may have their own churches, and may send their children to private religious schools if they can afford to do so, provided they do not try to claim a place for their views in the public square by, for example, seeking to advocate them in the public schools.

To the extent that the religious folk agree to remain in the sanctuary of private life, and cede control of the public square and especially public education to the modernists, the modernists can afford to leave them alone. If faced with a genuine challenge to their right to rule the culture, however, modernists would have to fight back by making explicit what is already implicit in their philosophy: man created God rather than the other way around. Theistic religion can escape the potentially lethal scrutiny of modernist science only by accepting modernist domination of public life.

Rule by modernists may actually be more acceptable to many theists than rule by theists. Theistic religion takes many forms, and Protestants, Catholics and Jews may in some cases be more suspicious of each other than they are of modernist agnostics, who claim to be "neutral" on disputed questions of religious doctrine.

The restriction of religion to private life therefore does not necessarily threaten the vital interests of the majority religion, if there is one, and it protects minority religions from tyranny of the majority. It also provides theistic religion in general with a measure of protection from the potentially lethal scrutiny of scientific naturalism.

When I describe modernist naturalism as the established religious philosophy of America, therefore, I do not mean that everyone is required to believe it. The American version of modernism does not aspire to obliterate theism, as Soviet Marxism did, but to marginalize it and thus render it harmless. Modernism is established in the sense that the intellectual community, usually invoking the power of the federal judiciary and the mystique of the Constitution, vigorously and almost always successfully insists that law and public education must be based upon naturalistic assumptions.

Although the national motto may be "In God We Trust," good citizens of the modernist state trust in God only with respect to matters that concern no one but themselves and their families. When they take actions that affect others, trust in God becomes unconstitutional.

Despite the great cultural authority of modernist philosophy today, I believe its hegemony will come under severe challenge in the 21st century. This is a complex subject that requires book-length treatment, but I will attempt here to describe briefly how the five apparent advantages of modernism may turn into disadvantages.

First, naturalism is not "the way things really are." The impression that science has validated naturalism is a metaphysical illusion. What has happened is the enterprise of historical science--the scientific picture of the history of the Cosmos from the big bang to the appearance of human consciousness--has been defined by metaphysical naturalists as the application of their philosophy to cosmic history. This is best seen in terms of the history of life, where it is axiomatic with evolutionary biologists and chemists that only purposeless, unintelligent material processes were involved in creating the immensely complex and diverse forms of life that exist today.

As the experience of Dean Kenyon, professor at San Francisco State University, illustrates, the alternative possibility--that a pre-existing intelligence brought life into existence for a purpose--is ideologically unacceptable and may not be considered. In my experience many evolutionary scientists, including professors at Christian institutions, are so thoroughly indoctrinated in the premise that science means naturalism that they are unable to formulate the concept of intelligent cause as a hypothesis, or to imagine how something might show signs of being created by intelligence rather than by non-intelligence.

The dogma that life is the product of unintelligent material processes is not only unproven, it is quite improbable when it is not assumed as part of the definition of science. An attempt to back up that statement would be beyond the subject of this paper; the case is made in books like my own *Darwin on Trial* and Thaxton, Bradley, and Olsen's book *The Mystery of Life's Origin*. A substantial literature following up on these books is already in press or in preparation, and I am confident that unbiased investigation will eventually undermine the monolithic materialism of the biological research community.

My point for now is not to argue the case for the existence of a creator, but to point out the importance of the issue. Many Christian intellectuals have mistakenly assumed that naturalism in science can be smoothly combined with theism in religion and ethics, as if naturalism and theism were "two truths" that do not conflict with each other. But theological or ethical reflection makes sense only against a corresponding background reality. If naturalism is "the way things really are," then theistic religion does not go out of business, but it does change its character. It becomes tacitly understood as part of human subjectivity, so that the test of a good religious belief is not objective truth, but whether the belief has beneficial effects in the life of the believer.

The spirit of religion in a culture where only naturalism can be objectively true is captured by the remark attributed to President Eisenhower: "Every American should have a religion, and I don't

care what it is." The same relativistic spirit pervades Yale Law Professor Steven Carter's recent defense of "religion in general" in *The Culture of Unbelief*.

The metaphysical problem explains why Christians as such have next to no scholarly standing in the secular academy. When George Marsden complained in a recent paper that theistic thinking remains shut out of academic discourse, Berkeley History Professor David Hollinger replied by doubting whether theists have anything distinctive of value to say. It is a fair point in a naturalistic academic culture. If God is a product of the human imagination, how can attributing human beliefs to this imaginary being add anything of objective value to the conversation? On the other hand, if God is objectively real, and if our culture is ignoring that reality, then theists have something as valuable to say as did the prophets of Israel in their time.

Does Modernism Equal Rationality?

The second advantage claimed for naturalism is that it is equivalent to rationality, because it assumes a model of reality in which all events are in principle accessible to scientific investigation. Recall the Los Angeles Times editorial, which characterized reliance on the supernatural (after the ultimate beginning) as "seek[ing] refuge from scientific uncertainty in the irrational." When an unusual scientist like Dean Kenyon suggests the possibility that organisms may contain a kind of complex information that can come only from intelligence, scientists--including many who are professors at Christian institutions, recoil in horror from the thought. Any visible sign of God's activity seems to threaten a world of constant miracles where nothing can be predicted with confidence.

The assumption that nature is all there is, and that nature has been governed by the same rules at all times and places, makes it possible for natural science to be confident that it can explain such things as how life began. This advantage comes at a heavy price, however. Naturalism opens up the whole world of fact to scientific knowledge, but by the same token it consigns the whole realm of value to human subjectivity. This consequence is unavoidable, because humans created by purposeless material processes can have nothing but themselves to look to in deciding how life ought to be lived. On questions of value, science, the only source of objective knowledge, cannot supply answers. On naturalistic assumptions science can say a lot about how creation may have occurred, but one thing it can never say is that the world so created is good. Only God can say that.

Of course I am describing the famous fact/value dichotomy, which says that we can have knowledge of facts but only beliefs about values. The inevitable consequence is that the relativistic position on values or ethics always has the upper hand. Yale Law Professor Arthur Leff expressed this whimsically in an outstanding lecture that I have quoted elsewhere. Say that adultery (for example) is wrong, Leff said, and you are likely to be met by "the grand sez who." There may be arguments against committing adultery, but there are counter-arguments as well (love must not be denied). Who can decide? A bumper sticker common in college towns like Berkeley says "Question Authority." I have heard of another sticker that reads: "Who are you to tell me to Question Authority?"

The practical consequences of this anarchy on value questions are visible in our naturalistic universities today. On the "fact" side of the campus, in the hard sciences, a model of objective knowledge rules. On the "value" side, in the humanities, we find multiculturalism, post-modernism, and deconstruction. The most influential voices in the humanities tell us our thought should not seek to provide a "mirror of nature," and that truth is relative to particular interpretive communities, who interpret texts by standards valid only for them. Multiculturalism and postmodernism are even beginning to threaten part of the realm of natural science, as the panicky tone of the Los Angeles Times editorial indicates. Where science continues to provide valuable technology it will probably be safe, but historical sciences like physical anthropology have little to do with technology and provide fertile terrain for mythmaking.

The growing irrationalism on value questions suggest that a need may be felt for a broader concept of rationality, one which invites us to consider the possibility that writers like Dante and Milton knew something important which we have forgotten in our desire to maximize our control over the material world. Of course, a desire to have a more comprehensive model of rationality cannot be satisfied if modernist naturalism is "the way things really are," but it may dispose humanists to look favorably upon efforts to sub-ject naturalistic assumptions to critical scrutiny.

Does Naturalism Liberate?

The third advantage claimed for modernism is that it is liberating, especially in the area of sexual behavior and gender roles. Obviously the death of God makes people free from rules based upon what had been thought to be the word of God, and therefore invites a rethinking of such things as gender roles and sexual morality. We all know that this trend has gone very far, but some people think it should go still farther. Kristine Gebbie, the White House Assistant for AIDS programs, says that we are still a repressed, Victorian society that does not talk frankly about sex, especially in terms of emphasizing the positive side of sexual experience to teenagers. I would not have thought our faults lay in that direction, but Ms. Gebbie's view that the sexual revolution has not gone far enough is common in some circles, and especially among sex educators.

My own opinion is Gebbie does not represent the wave of the future. Our nation is undergoing an epidemic of illegitimate births, with rates of illegitimacy among whites now soaring to 28 percent while rates among inner city blacks in some areas are over 80 percent. The majority of these illegitimate births are to teenagers.

A constitutional democracy is in serious trouble if its citizenry does not have a certain degree of education and civic virtue. That virtue is not likely to be cultivated effectively in families headed by unmarried teenagers. Experience has shown condoms are not the answer to the problem of teen pregnancy, nor do they help make absent fathers more responsible. If our opinion leaders do not grasp the dimensions of the problem, and persist in thinking our situation calls for more sexual liberation rather than self-control and family responsibility, I think they may learn better before long. But changing this situation will take powerful medicine, and not just words of exhortation. It may take a basic change in thinking.

Is Naturalism Democratic?

The fourth advantage of modernism is said to be that it is democratic. Consideration of this claimed advantage takes us back to the naturalistic model of rationality. Modernism begins with the death of God, and this begins when modern people, enlightened by science, grasp that God was never anything but a projection of our own selves, or perhaps our fathers' selves. It seemed to follow that when we discarded the illusory God, we would retain everything of value in religion, but relocate it in human experience, which is where religion must have come from in the first place. Knowledge founded on human experience, and thus in principle accessible to everybody, would provide a basis for a democratic political and ethical conversation to which all could contribute on equal terms. Combined with free public education, a secular monopoly of public discourse could secure democratic liberty and minimize religious discord.

It should be evident by now, however, that things may work out very differently. What modernism may lead to is a growing doubt that there is any such thing as objective truth, with a consequent fragmenting of the body politic into separate groups with no common frame of reference. We hear much less about truth these days in the academic world than we hear about knowledge and power. Power ideologies, as 20th century history has demonstrated, are every bit as dangerous as religious fanaticism. Fragmentation in the academic world mirrors the fragmentation in geography, where empires are splitting up and the remnants are threatening to go to war with each other. The great need of the 21st century may turn out to be a unifying vision, and I do not think that science will be able to provide it.

Benevolent Neutrality of Modernism?

Finally, I noted that modernism as a ruling philosophy has been acceptable or even welcome to many theists. If each religious group could maintain its identity and values in private life, under the benevolent neutrality of modernists indifferent to religious controversies, then why protest? This comfortable arrangement depends, however, on a large and robust sphere of private activity. In the early twentieth century, the scope of government, especially national government, was modest. As the decades have gone by, however, the institutions of government directed by modernist philosophy have grown much more all-encompassing. Confining religion to private life means something entirely different when practically everything is regulated by public standards.

For example, even public schools used to be private in the sense they were responsive to parents and local community values; now they are much more under the control of professional educators carrying out national policies based on modernist assumptions. Anti-discrimination laws also reach very far, and informal coercive policies of the same sort (such as have been directed against the Boy Scouts) reach even farther. Accrediting agencies are beginning to impose "diversity" standards upon private colleges, and this concept may eventually require institutions not only to accept students and faculty who do not believe in or practice Biblical moral standards, but even perhaps to maintain a campus atmosphere that is supportive of practices that the churches have traditionally discouraged. Legal scholars are already discussing proposals to remove tax exemptions from churches that do not meet secular requirements of gender equality. The political climate may not be prepared for such strong measures yet--but the history of anti-discrimination and affirmative action laws shows how rapidly such measures can expand.

These examples are symptomatic of a broader problem. Believers in God cannot effectively insulate themselves from modernist influence by retiring to the sanctuary of private life. Modernism invades the sanctuary not only in the form of legal regulation, but through television, academic literature, and every form of cultural penetration. As a result, religious colleges, seminaries, and church bureaucracies are saturated with modernist thinking. As this becomes increasingly apparent, Christians are not likely to remain satisfied with a naturalistic culture that will not leave them alone.

I will give just one current example. My own denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), is embroiled in a controversy over an international women's conference that denominational bureaucrats helped to sponsor last year, titled "Re-Imagining God, Church, and Community." The publicity has focused upon various horrors that occurred there, involving worship of the goddess Sophia, but I will not go into details because my point is a more general one. The very title of the conference implied its modernist foundations, regardless of what specific events were planned. The conference organizers considered it natural to "re-imagine God" because they took for granted the modernist assumption that God was imagined by humans in the first place. In re-imagining God to fit late 20th century feminist ideology, they were merely doing what modernists think theists always do. They were projecting their own qualities and desires onto an imaginary deity, and worshipping themselves. That such a conference could be planned by church staff, and subsidized with church funds awarded through regular processes, indicates that a very large party within the church has no idea that there is anything wrong with that way of thinking about God.

In some ways the situation is discouraging, but in other respects it is good that the corruption is so apparent that many congregations within the denomination are finally grasping what is at stake and taking strong action to curb the abuses. The important thing is they learn that the problem goes beyond specific abuses and reflects a penetration of the church by a non-Christian philosophy which employs God-talk for relativistic ends. I am seeing many signs that the willingness to challenge modernist assumptions is growing among Christians. I find this very encouraging, because modernist penetration of the church is most dangerous when its philosophical roots are concealed, and Christians are fooled into thinking that they and the modernists are still fundamentally on the same side.

If modernist naturalism were true, there would be no objective truth outside of science. In that case right and wrong would be a matter of cultural preference, or political power, and the power already available to modernist ideologies would be overwhelming. We would have no hope. But modernism is not true, and scientific research does not really support it if we can disentangle science from its domination by naturalistic metaphysics. All that requires is a determination to focus attention on the verbal manipulations and circular reasoning by which naturalism retains its power. Once the light is in the world, we know that the darkness can never put it out.

Editor's Note

This concludes an article taken from a lecture Johnson delivered for a March 1994 conference on "Regaining a Christian Voice in the University," sponsored by Fieldstead & Company and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.