

Willful Ignorance

By Stephan A. Schwartz

For most of human history, we knew very little, and what we did know, was known by very few. Thomas Young (1773 –1829), an English scientist, researcher, physician and polymath is usually cited as “the last person to know everything,” by which is usually meant the then contemporary academy of Western scholarship.¹ He was popularly known as “Phenomenon Young,” spoke a daunting number of languages, and made contributions to many fields of science, including translating the Rosetta Stone, and coining the term energy. Einstein praised him for his work on Newton and his physics in his 1931 foreword to an edition of Newton's *Optics*. For most of modern history people took pride in being knowledgeable and the deep drive of Western cultures, particularly in America, was to expand knowledge, and make it more widely known.

Benjamin Franklin who, more than any other Founder set in motion the processes that have become the American culture, had a very particular kind of culture in mind and open-minded education was a major part of it. His America was solidly middle-class. It encouraged upward mobility, and did not permit hereditary privilege. It absolutely separated church and state, yet was tolerant of individual religious beliefs or, with equal equanimity, the complete absence thereof. It was urbanized, technologically oriented, sentimental about family, honest and good hearted, and proud of skills and prosperity attained through work done with integrity, but not solemnity. He saw the power of technical training to create prosperity in his own life, and the advantage conferred by technical sophistication, even in immigrants who had arrived with little more than the tattered clothes they were wearing.

He would be appalled to learn that there has arisen an antipodal force, consciously working against those Franklinian values. Although no politician dare say so, the most important political and intellectual reality in America today can be seen in a poll conducted by CBS News, in 2006. In it they found:

"Americans do not believe that humans evolved, and the vast majority says that even if they evolved, God guided the process. Just 13 percent say that God was not involved."²

The Gallup Organizations addressed the same issue, but also included the age of the Earth, and conducted a series of polls of American adults in 1982, 1991, 1993 and 1997. In each survey the wording of the questions was kept the same, so that the polls would be equivalents, and multi-year analyses could be carried out. The results turned out to be generally consistent across time, although the Creationist position became more popular. Here are the 21-24 November 1991 results:

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Stephan A. Schwartz is the editor of www.schwartzreport.net, columnist for *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing*, and Scholar-in-Residence at Atlantic University.

Correspondence: saschwartz@earthlink.net.

Belief System	Creationist View	Theistic Evolution	Natural Evolution
Groups of Adults	God created man Pretty much in his Present form at one Time with the last 10,000 years.	Man has developed Over millions of Years from less Advanced forms of Life, but God guided This process, including Man's creation.	Man has developed Over millions of years from less advanced forms of life. God had no part in this process.
Everyone	47%	40%	9%
Men	39%	45%	11.5
College graduates	25%	54%	16.5%
No High School Diploma	65%	23%	4.6%
Income over \$50,000	29%	50%	17%
Income under \$20,000	59%	28%	6.5%
Caucasians	46%	40%	9%
African-Americans	53%	41%	4%
1997 Everyone	44%	39%	10%
1997 Scientists	5%	40%	55%

From Religious Tolerance.org

In 2005, The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, carried out a poll involving 2,000 adults, that gives us another nuance of this prospective.³ They reported 42% of the public believed that “humans and other living things had existed in their present form since the beginning of time,” and that this rose to 70% amongst White Evangelical Protestants, and decreased to 32 % in mainline Protestant churches, and — surprising to some, perhaps — to 31% amongst White Catholics.

By 2006, the Creationist position was affirmed by 55 per cent of Americans. Think for a moment about what this means: More than half of America has discarded much of the hard won knowledge of the past 500 years — essentially the age of modern science and medicine. Astrophysics. Gone. Astronomy, Gone. Paleontology. Gone. Geology. Gone. Biology. Mostly gone. Genetics. Gone. The general laws of physics such as the speed of light found to be defective. It is impossible to believe the Earth is 10,000 years old, that God manufactured it in six days, and that dinosaurs and humans once co-inhabited the planet, and accept any of those disciplines. What many would think of as the crown jewels of the human intellect, part of what makes it possible to be optimistic about humanity, are of little or no interest. Because, from the Creationist perspective, they are no more valid than phrenology seems to a modern physician.

That said, in the interest of full disclosure, let me state my personal perspective. I am a nearly life-long meditator, and much of my adult life has been spent as an experimentalist doing peer-reviewed research on the nature of consciousness. Both subjectively and objectively, it has left me convinced that there is an aspect of consciousness outside the time-space domain. One that can be experienced, producing what would be traditionally described as spiritual states, and can also be studied under the most rigorous scientific protocols. My default position is to trust well-researched data, and it is absolutely clear: There is not a shred of evidence to support Creationism. The six day literalism I can understand, it is

Scripturally based. But nothing in the Bible says anything about 10,000 years. It is worth asking: where does this date come from?

As it happens it traces back to James Ussher (1581-1656). Living at the end of the reign of Elizabeth I, and into Cromwell's government, he rose to become head of the Irish Anglican Communion, in Roman Catholic Ireland, Archbishop of Armagh, and Vice Chancellor of Trinity College, Ireland's great university. He had begun as a brilliant scholar training at Trinity and, like many academics was very competitive about advancing his scholarly prowess. Being a minority he was passionately committed to showing that Protestant scholarship was in scholarship as in faith superior to the Jesuit academy which dominated his world. Creationism had nothing to do with it. His was a 17th century version of an academic smackdown. It wasn't the date per se, it was widely believed the world was about 4,000 years old. The Astronomer Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) placed the date at 3992 B.C. What Ussher was trying for was less an exercise in theology than one in finer computation.

Working through the chapters of the Bible with great care, counting generations, and using whatever waypoints the Bible provided, "Adam lived 930 years and he died," Ussher pursued his self-set problem for 20 years, finally arriving at a date he felt he had proved. In the summer of 1650 he published from London, *The Annals of the Old Testament*. It begins: "In the beginning, God created heaven and earth, which beginning of time, according to this chronology, occurred at the beginning of the night which preceded the 23rd of October in the year 710 of the Julian period." In a marginalia in the right side of the opening page of his own copy of his work he scribbled, the date in "Christian" time — 4004 B.C.

Although Ussher gets the credit, he was actually preceded by six years, 1644, by his contemporary Sir John Lightfoot (1602-1675), Vice Chancellor of Cambridge (also a Protestant). In 1897, historian Andrew D. White wrote,

...an overwhelming majority of the most competent students of the biblical accounts was that the date of creation was, in round numbers, four thousand years before our era; and in the seventeenth century, in his great work, Dr. John Lightfoot, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, and one of the most eminent Hebrew scholars of his time, declared, as the result of his most profound and exhaustive study of the Scriptures, that "heaven and earth, centre and circumference, were created all together, in the same instant, and clouds full of water," and that "this work took place and man was created by the Trinity on October 23, 4004 B.C., at nine o'clock in the morning." ⁴ (Emphasis added)

Why, then, do we know Ussher, and not Lightfoot, with whom he agreed, and who advanced a chronology honed to the hour? We do so because when Clarence Darrow was doing research for the 1923 Scopes "monkey" trial, in which he would examine William Jennings Bryan, he decided to use the Ussher chronology as a rhetorical weapon. He would force the anti-evolutionist Bryan to affirm or deny it. In one of history's great ironies, it was the examination that made people aware of it, and, thus, Ussher's bizarre date entered American evangelical consciousness.

How is it possible that 55 per cent of Americans have chosen what should be an obscure academic story, recounted at history conferences, over the millions of hours of scientific inquiry that have gone on since the 17th century publications of Lightfoot and Ussher? How could something like 150,000,000 million people be so willfully ignorant?

Faith is the easy but inadequate answer, because it provides no real insight. And let's be clear: For the most part pollsters who do these surveys say it is not that Creationists know better, but publicly say something they feel they must to be good members of their denominations. No. This is something they believe. It is an act of proactive denial. And it has nothing actually to do with the spiritual aspect of human consciousness. It is entirely cultural. Spiritual awareness is Gnostic and subjective, and universally sees all life as inter-connected, and interdependent, while demanding no particular intellectual mindset about how physical reality is organized. It is as easy to be a spiritual Tibetan lama, as a Hopi shaman, a Jewish rabbi, or a meditating physicist.

Creationism although passionately defended and interwoven into modern American culture is a cultural artifact, it is not a universal or even common view of Christianity. Very few other Christian nations indigenously have anything like this belief and when it is introduced it is very alarming. Like a public health concern over a virus. When German Education Minister, Karin Wolff, failed to make what German scientists considered a strong enough response condemning Creationism, the vice-president of the Association of German Biologists, Ulrich Kutschera, came out publicly saying, "On the one hand we have scientific fact, on the other, 2,000-year-old Christian myths. It is unacceptable to question the reality of evolution."⁵

If this were a dispute about the nature of the Trinity, or if Allah was God's last messenger, or whether it was Joseph Smith, it might be of passionate concern to some, but would have little impact on public policy, and the science and medicine which helps us improve our lives, and may be necessary to help us save our planet and ourselves from the insults we have inflicted on the Earth. But Creationism has direct political implications. As anyone who reads a newspaper, or looks at a television knows, it has come to dominate the discussion of our science and our politics. In April, at the appositely named Messiah College in Pennsylvania, we actually required two of our Presidential candidates to state publicly their profession of faith, and CNN anchor person Campbell Brown, thought nothing of asking Senator Barack Obama, whether he believed the world was "created in six days."⁶

It is the Founder's miracle that they devised, and each generation of America has honored, the cyclical bloodless revolutions we call elections. We are about to get another chance. To choose whether it is science or the calculations of two academics from shortly after the time of Shakespeare, intent on academic one-upmanship, which will define how we conduct ourselves scientifically and medically. Are we open to what we do not know, or do we surrender to the dogma of Willful Ignorance? Our decision matters.

References

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⁴ Andrew White. *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*, D. Appleton and Co., n.p. 1897, p. 9.

⁵ German Scientists Concerned About Rise in Creationist Belief. Deutsche Welle. 2 November 2006.

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⁶ CNN. The Compassion Forum. Messiah College, 13 April 2008.