

IGNORANCE IN RELIGION AND THE WIDER CULTURE

By Ken Olson Lewistown, Montana July 2021

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), the writer, was born in Dublin, Ireland. His full name (this for the benefit of any who might think their own name to be some sort of handicap) was Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde. Another little-known fact about him is that he toured America in 1881 for the entire year, giving 141 lectures. He must have had the idea that he gained as much as he gave, for he said, afterwards, "It is well worth one's time to go to a country that can teach us the beauty of the word Freedom and the value of the thing Liberty."

In his *Impressions of America*, Wilde told of encountering a man in Colorado who had become very rich during the boom in silver mining. That individual built a huge mansion on the outskirts of Denver and filled it with treasures from abroad. He knew that such a designation applied to a statue called Venus de Milo, so he sent away for a fine copy of it. In Wilde's own words: "So infinitesimal did I find the knowledge of Art, [in the] west of the Rocky Mountains, that an art patron — one who in his day had been a miner — actually sued the railroad company for damages because the plaster cast of Venus of Milo, which he had imported from Paris, had been delivered minus the arms. And, what is more surprising still, he gained his case and the damages." Apparently, nobody thereabouts knew that the original statue of Venus had no arms when it was discovered on the Mediterranean island of Melos. No one in the courtroom, including the judge, knew that the copy was faithful to the original. So, the court determined that the railroad shipping department must have damaged the statue and had sent it to him without the broken arms. Truth and Justice were miscarried by ignorance. The obvious lesson from the obvious mistake: very commonly held beliefs can, nevertheless, be in error.

Along the same lines is the story about Harry Cohn, the former tycoon of Columbia Pictures, who once bet his brother Jack \$100 that the latter did not know and could not recite The Lord's Prayer. Jack accepted the wager and began his recitation: "Now I lay me down to sleep...." A disappointed Harry interrupted him to fork over the money, saying, "That's enough. I didn't think you knew it."

On the topic of ignorance, I have *way* too much material, and so would anyone else attempting to address it. Teachers of English and History have sometimes kept records of "bloopers" made by their students in tests and essays. A composite "history of the world," even, could be compiled having nothing but mistakes. There may be many such documents, each of them several pages, and, I assume, they are continually being expanded. Here's a small sample from one. The students who contributed ranged from high school through college:

"Jacob, son of Isaac, stole his brother's birthmark." "The Greeks had myths; a myth is a female moth." "In the Olympic Games, Greeks ran races, jumped, hurled the biscuits, and threw the java." "When they fought, the Greeks outnumbered the Persians, because they had more men." "William Tell shot an arrow through an apple while standing on his son's head." "When Queen Elisabeth the First exposed herself before her troops, they all shouted, Hurrah!" "Shakespeare was famous only for his plays." "The Revolutionary War was caused by the British putting tacks in their tea." "Benjamin Franklin invented electricity by rubbing cats backwards and declared,

‘A horse divided against itself cannot stand.’ “Under the Constitution, the people enjoy the right to keep bare arms.” “Abraham Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address while traveling to Gettysburg on the back of an envelope.” “Bach was the most famous composer in the world, and so was Handel.” “Karl Marx became one of the Marx Brothers.” “The sun never set on the British Empire, because the British Empire is in the East, and the sun sets in the West.”

One element of this essay concerns ignorance as expressed in religion, this of the fundamentalist variety and its concept of the biblical Flood of Noah. However, that cannot be separated from ignorance of a more general sort in the wider culture. The development of modern science is where we begin, but not where we will end.

The first thing to be noted is that science, at least as we know and practice it today, is a rather modern thing. Francis Bacon, often regarded as the “father” of modern scientific method, wrote in the early 1600s, about the time of Shakespeare. Since ancient times, there had been a good deal of progress in things such as mechanics and erecting buildings. No doubt the general method of science had been utilized long before Bacon, intuitively, as people looked at the world and tried to figure out how it worked and how they could manipulate it to their advantage; the bow and arrow is a weapon from very ancient times. New inventions were not always met with welcome. In c. 200 BC, in what sounds like an epistle from Codgerville, the Roman playwright Plautus complained about the sundial:

The gods confound the man who first found out
How to distinguish hours! Confound him, too,
Who in this place set up a sun-dial,
To cut and hack my days so wretchedly
Into small portions.

In 1620, Bacon published *Novum Organum*, translated as “The New Instrument.” The book articulated the scientific method as something to be applied to countless situations in a utilitarian manner. Bacon was not seeking pure knowledge, for its own sake, as we like to say, but he was interested in manipulating nature for human use. [Instead of Bacon, a case could be made for Leonardo da Vinci, a hundred years earlier, to be regarded as the first “modern” scientist; in fact, there’s a fine book with that very title: *Leonardo: The First Scientist*, by Michael White. Leonardo did not spell out the method, in detail, as did Bacon, but it is obvious that he *used* it in his wonderful inventions.]

As we all know, the method begins with observation, proceeds with experimentation, repetition for verification of the results, and then the formulation of a theory that best encompasses the facts in question. In hindsight, the methodology is utterly simple. It must have struck many who read of it in the same way that Darwin’s idea of natural selection struck Thomas Huxley, when he said, “How stupid of me not to have thought of that!” Bacon’s scientific method deals with the questions of What: what is this or that, what is the composition of the atmosphere, the structure of the nervous system? etc. And How: –How does something work: how does A interact with B? It is the principle of Cause and Effect.

Religion is as ancient as human culture, but religious fundamentalism of the Christian variety – which is what you encounter in a museum’s dinosaur halls, with people sometimes disturbed,

confused, or agitated by the displays—that is a rather new thing, also. If you go back to the first few centuries of Christianity, to Origen, Irenaeus, and Augustine: they were not agitated about what the Bible says, “literally.” In fact, they were always writing about the parables and about the “parabolic” meaning of all sorts of passages. Annie Dillard, in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, writes that “The question from agnosticism is, Who turned on the lights? The question from faith is, Whatever for?” Christians paid attention to the second question: *Why? What for?* The one that had to do with meaning, significance, and purpose.

Literalism made no sense to Origen (the “Logos” theologian, born in the 2nd century), shown by his writing concerning the Genesis creation accounts:

“For who that has understanding will suppose that the first, and second, and third evening, and morning existed without a sun and moon? ...And who is so foolish to suppose that God, after the manner of a husbandman, planted a garden, towards the east, and placed in it a tree of life, visible, and that one tasting of the fruit by the bodily teeth obtained life? and, again, that one was a partaker of good and evil by masticating what was taken from a tree? ...I do not suppose that anyone doubts that these things *figuratively* indicate certain mysteries.” (*The Writings of the Ante-Nicene Fathers*, IV, 365)

“And who is so foolish to suppose...?” --How about, these days, nearly half the American population? Transported to today, Origen would be astonished that some quarters of religion are stuck on literalism and that there is next to no appreciation of the biblical world’s use of figurative speech, imagery, symbolism, poetic or picture-language. The result of that failure is that religion is, indeed, now all-too widely equated with ignorance.

Occasionally, literalism in relation to Scripture began to make an appearance. At the end of the 4th century, Saint Augustine found it necessary to warn the Roman citizenry that to take passages literally, other than the obvious ones dealing with facts or historical events, would open the Scriptures to be “being laughed to scorn” –ridiculed. Such guidance was usually sufficient. And so, for more than a thousand years thereafter, all through the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, the focus was not on “it says here” but, instead “it says here, *and there’s the whole context, the culture, the style, and the intellectual presuppositions of the writers that we must take into account.*” So, not just, “it says” but “it likely *signifies.*” Again, it had to do with the *meaning* for belief and values for one’s life. Who am I? and Why am I? What is life *for* and what should be my ultimate concern? --those were the main questions. Of course, they still are. And, I think, they are the questions for which science has not even the slightest answer. Science can analyze the constituent elements of a wedding cake or a trophy, but that gives no clue to the meaning of the occasions at which they are used, all those deeply embedded sentiments and commitments.

In the days of the Protestant Reformation, John Calvin was a younger contemporary of Martin Luther. In 1554, he said, about the Bible, “He who would learn astronomy and other recondite arts, let him look elsewhere.” Then, there was little to no conception of the immensity of time involved in earth history, so that issue was not an item of much debate in the churches. The Bible was not seen to be about science, because, again, science and religion were really asking

and answering questions on non-competing levels. It appears that most people knew better than to mix the two.

Bacon, himself, tried to head off any misunderstanding of the method and purpose and scope of science when he wrote, "There are two books of God: The book of God's Word and the book of God's Works. They are not to be confused in their nature, language, or purpose, and we must not unwisely mingle or confound their learnings together." This was true, in the same century, in relation to the famous debate that Galileo had with the Church about whether the sun or the earth was the center of the solar system. A hundred years earlier, Copernicus had proposed the idea that the sun was central, and Galileo was defending it with observations made with the newly-invented telescope. Most historians of science now see the issue as having involved, not so much a conflict with Scripture, as a conflict of the heliocentric view with the obsolete and sanctified "quasi-science" of Aristotle and Ptolemy, concepts that had hardened into conventional wisdom. It was a case of new science conflicting with old.

Thus, science and religion simply ask different questions of the world. The language of religion, in line with the type of subject, i. e. faith and values, is non-literal and mythological, instead of direct and matter of fact. (Myths, said the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, are "those things that never happened, but they are eternally true.") Only fairly recently has there been much confusion and conflict about that.

But gradually, in some quarters, early in the last century, the literalist interpretation of many things in the Bible was a chord that began to be strummed, and in a manner quite unlike in the past. People started thinking, wrongly, that you should go to Bible for answers even concerning such things as earth history and cosmology. So seen, with those glasses on, the issue *then* became "Whom shall my heart believe?" For, what was being fabricated was a choice between near-opposites. On the one hand—there was the scientific conception of a universe of billions of years in age that has been changing and "evolving" over time—and, on the other hand—a universe created almost "abracadabra," only 6,000 years ago, and unchanged, except for the catastrophe of the Flood, invoked to explain the earth's geology. It has become the choice, on the one hand, between regarding living things as a vast Tree of Life that has been anything but static; it has been evolving over vast stretches of millions and hundreds of millions of years, with humanity, too, sharing, in that evolutionary process --and on the other hand, the view that species have been fixed since their creation, all at once, just a few thousand years ago.

Most mainline religions had already accommodated and some had even celebrated the new factual knowledge about evolution provided by science. Thus, it had not taken long for the Church of England to recognize that evolution was very likely the *way* God created variety. This is indicated by, among other things, the fact that Darwin's funeral was held in London's Westminster Abbey Cathedral, and he was buried there, inside, right next to Isaac Newton. Since then, the papacy of the Roman Catholic Church has issued a number of encyclicals and teaching documents stating that evolution makes sense and is not a threat to faith in a Creator. After all, natural selection only deals with the secondary causes: the mechanism, the details,

the process. As science, it can say nothing about the ultimate source. All that has been “On the one hand. Again, “the other hand” has developed into fundamentalist creationism. Theodore Rozak, in his 1972 book, *Where the Wasteland Ends*, was irate: “Only Christians, especially Protestant Christians, have ever been so far gone with the disease of literalism as to produce a monstrosity like biblical fundamentalism.”

It has only gotten worse since then. Fundamentalism also includes a way of looking at all sorts of things (judgments about morality, etc.), but foremost is that creation is seen as recent and that the concept of evolution is viewed as being either a huge mistake or an outright lie. And, Fundamentalism, accenting that idea, has been booming. In almost every community, new churches with the biggest buildings are of this sort. Also, in small rural communities, nearly every “wide spot in the road” that, previously, couldn’t support a church now has one. Television evangelists speak to millions, and speakers tour the continent to demonize the scientists and any and all others who accept evolution. Most often, the message is that you must accept one *or* the other, take your choice, --with eternity in the balance --it’s *either* science *or* religion, their kind. (I know of a religion professor who received a letter from a teacher in another institution, saying that the recipient was to be condemned to hell, literally, simply for accepting the idea of evolution; it was signed by some fifty of the sender’s students.)

When fundamentalist creationists read Genesis 1-11 literally, they do this out of a prior commitment to a young earth. That is not simply a conception, it is a *pre*-conception. It amounts to a prejudice, a *presupposition*, which means “to suppose beforehand,” i. e. before you even look at the evidence. They start with the assumption that the Genesis creation stories are intended as *history* and as *fact*. Of course, *that* is an interpretation. There’s nothing self-evident in the text itself to indicate that it is to be read that way, and many things to suggest the opposite. It is the same with the idea of a worldwide flood, invoked as an agent for wiping out the dinosaurs and other prehistoric life in a single massive event, this instead of extinctions (with a few dramatic exceptions) being spread over millions of years, as is the view of modern science. The Flood, then, is a key component in the attempt to provide an alternative to the concept of evolution. As such, it functions as a filter -- a “*lens*” --that irrationally colors thoughts on science in general and on evolution, in particular.

So, consider the Flood, which creationists implicate as the cause of the entire fossil record. Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), recognized fossils for what they were, traces of once-living things. In that, he was a so-called rare bird. In Europe, in the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, the most common idea on the subject was actually that fossils were merely “freaks of nature.” The prevalent concepts were that fossils germinated from some sort of “seeds” in the rock, or were the result of emanations from stars, the latter being an idea in tune with Astrology (not Astronomy). However wrongly construed, these popular explanations were, nevertheless, naturalistic: the world simply worked that way, and it always had.

It was not until about 1695 that the “new” explanatory idea took off, that of the Flood of Noah, as described in Genesis. There were several promoters of this theme, the foremost being Johann Scheuchzer, in both Germany and in Switzerland. In order to overthrow the commonly accepted idea of the plastic forces in the rocks, he wrote a pamphlet entitled, “*Complaints and*

Justifications of the Fishes.” Published in 1705, it uses the literary device of putting words in the mouth of a large pike dwelling in Lake Constance. The fish comes forth, on behalf of all the other fish, to prove that fossils are “not mineral offspring of stone and marl ...but remains of true living beings.” (And, in that, he was correct!) “We, the silent host of swimmers,” the pike declares, “herewith bring our complaints before the throne of Truth.” His testimony was that fish and other dwellers in the water suffered the effects of an immense Flood, through no fault of their own, paying for human sins and left “high and dry” to expire when the waters receded. However, said the pike, instead of people recognizing their remains for what they are, people have degraded them, calling them lifeless figure-stones. No. “We are fishes,” the pike declares, “not mere animal-like shapes sprung from the bowels of the earth, but a race borne along by the waves, living before the flood and succumbing to it, victims of the madness of others.” Strange, to say the least, that the writer used vivid *picturesque* language in order to promote a wooden *literalist* view of Scripture!

Another thing that solidified Scheucher’s idea of the “factual” nature of the Flood, was a rock that someone had given him, for it contained a string of vertebrae, as well as a flattened skull that looked rather like this: ☺ He named it *Homo diluvia testis*, “Man who was witness of the Flood.” Just a few years later, this “Deluge Man” was recognized for what it was: the fossilized skeleton of a giant salamander. (Knowledge of anatomy was steadily improving.) However, like many other corrections, it was not enough. People had already taken up the tinted glasses that saw it all through the Flood of Genesis, chapters 6-8. They began with that supposition, and, if they looked around and about, it was only for evidence to support it.

And that’s the method of the hugely popular 1961 book by Whitcomb & Morris, *The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and its Scientific Implications*. For millions of fundamentalist Christians, it is second only to the Bible (in many ways, 1st) and is the main inspiration for all those creationist museums sprouting along the highways, big and small, with their models of the ark, etc. –and which are so embarrassing to many of us. (About as embarrassing as those television shows dealing with “Ancient Aliens” on the once-respectable History Channel are to the archaeologists. There, countless episodes run and rerun, promoting the idea that wonderful structures from ancient times are mostly the work of beings from outer space, since the locals were incapable of such feats. Hiram Bingham, who discovered Machu Picchu in 1911, must be spinning in his proverbial grave, because of *that* ignorance.)

So, there continue to be “investigative teams” mounting expeditions to the top of Mount Ararat in Turkey. There are people who claim to have seen the biblical ark, up there, when they were kids and their fathers took them to the heights. But, since then, of course, “a mountain glacier has covered it.” Or you have the accounts of a Soviet pilot during the late 1940s, who had photographed the great vessel stranded there –but, of course, the photos have been lost. And, O, later on, the pilot crashed, so there can be no corroboration and no eyewitness testimony. It all reads like supermarket tabloid stuff --and it is. (Never mind the inconvenient detail that Mount Ararat is a stratovolcano and that its huge, many-layered form rests on *top* of the marine sediments of the region.)

Thus, all sorts of contortions are contrived to make the story of the literal ark fit the preconception, including the idea that large amounts of space were saved on board the jam-

packed ark containing every species on earth, because they didn't need to pack tons of vegetation for the plant-eaters. You see, God made all the animals go into hibernation. *Tyrannosaurus rex* must have been sleeping, to not get hungry for a *Triceratops* flank. (But, in the Garden of Eden, *before* the Fall, *T. rex*, the carnivore king, *ate grass*, because, death did not yet exist. --Yes, this is what numerous creationist museum displays do say!) ---How strange that, in the service of a supposed *literal* reading, such totally wild liberties are taken with the text and that such bizarre elements are added on top of the biblical account! These are examples of ignorance on stilts. So, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Gerhard von Rad, and William Albright, great theologians and biblical scholars, are spinning in their respective graves, too, -- and at the speed of dynamos! (An illustration of non-literal speech. Insert smiley face here.)

It is not only many believers that have taken Genesis 1-11 literally. Many skeptics and cynics have been entirely happy to read it that way, also, but this in order to debunk it. There's an old publication from the 1890s by the Freethinker Society of New York, which retold the biblical stories as subjects of ridicule, quoted thus: "There is a fable believed by certain persons in New Jersey, and by the less intelligent elsewhere, that at a remote period in the history of our race a flood of water occurred which drowned all but one family of the inhabitants." The writer, Robert Ingersoll, then did the math about how long it would take a sloth from South America to journey to and from the ark in Mesopotamia: "These creatures cannot travel to exceed three rods a day...At this rate, they would take a mile in about a hundred days. They must have gone about 6,500 miles to reach the ark. In order to complete the journey before Noah hauled in the plank, they must have started years before the world was created." Such poking-fun worked, to some degree, I'm sure. But others, it seems, are impervious to ridicule and double-down on ever-more far-fetched rationales to make the story hang together.

Again, both the literalists and the scoffers were being way, way too rationalistic about a story that originated in a culture that expressed itself mainly in non-literal terms, in symbolic and picture-language, as I illustrate, in some detail, in *Lens to the Natural World: Reflections on Dinosaurs, Galaxies, and God*. Those who, by literalism, attempt to defend the Bible and those who gleefully attack the contradictions in such an approach are much of the same mind. They both traffic in a kind of hyper-rationalism; preoccupied with contradictions. They reduce profound mystery to matters of supposed historical fact. The terse comment of Emerson comes to mind: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."

Some years ago, a nationally known professor and theologian, who has written a great deal on science and religion, gave a lecture in Great Falls, Montana, a city of some 100,000. The well-advertised topic had to do with any possible difference that might be made in our conception of God, if intelligent alien life-forms were discovered to actually exist. I made the 220-mile round-trip to hear the evening lecture. In attendance, were the speaker, his sponsoring colleague, myself, and three others. I may be wrong, but I doubt it: if the topic would have been a supposed piece of wood from the Ark, said to have been found on Mount Ararat, then a stadium, not a lecture hall, would have been needed to accommodate the huge crowds that would have sought to attend. Sad to say, but ignorance sells.

And all of this is, indeed, so very ignorant. We need to call it what it is. It is ignorance, often, of what science actually teaches, but is ignorance, also, of the language and culture out of which

the Bible came. It is ignorance of the *purpose* of the magnificent creation stories that have almost bottomless depth. Concerning “the two trees” in the Garden: they are surely unlike any trees that you or I have ever seen, the Tree of Life & the Tree of the Knowledge of Good & Evil. That about covers everything: the sacred animating force present in all of life and the unique place of conscience that defines us as human beings. Those have to do with vast truths about nature and human nature that are cast in the literary form of a story. The Genesis stories have to do, not with what happened, but with what happens, all the time, in each and every Age. They are true, not about some imagined past, long ago and far away, but about right now. They concern humanity’s relationships, both to God and to the Creation. Since they are so much more profound than mere historical events, matter-of-fact language is useless in explicating them. They are, already, at a depth, beyond which one cannot go. The famous ballerina Anna Pavlova was once interviewed about an especially fine performance and was asked about the meaning of the dance. She answered, “If I could say it, do you think I would have danced it?”

The theologian Conrad Heyers chaired the Religion Department at Gustavus Adolphus College, a Lutheran (ELCA) institution in Minnesota. He writes in *The Meaning of Creation: Genesis and Modern Science*, here quoted at length:

“The Genesis accounts of creation are not in conflict with scientific and historical knowledge, not because they are in conformity with this knowledge, but precisely because they have little to do with it. They belong to a different literary genre, type of knowledge, and kind of concern. ...Scientific and religious language, correspondingly, serve different functions, operate out of different assumptions, draw upon different experiences, and deal with different types of truth. ...People reared and educated in this environment have difficulty thinking, feeling, and expressing themselves *symbolically*. In a literalistic culture the forte’ lies in counting, calculating, calibrating, computing, collecting, classifying, and cataloging. ...Poetry is turned into prose, truth into statistics, understanding into facts, education into note-taking, art into criticism, symbols into signs, faith into beliefs. Words mean one thing, and one thing only. They don’t bristle with meanings and possibilities; they are bald, clean-shaven. Literal clarity and simplicity offer a kind of security in a world (or Bible) where issues otherwise seem incorrigibly complex, ambiguous, and muddy. Yet it is a false security, a temporary bastion, maintained by dogmatism and misguided loyalty. Literalism pays a high price for the hope of having firm and unbreakable handles attached to reality ...emptying symbols of their amplitude of meaning and power, reducing the cosmic dance to a calibrated discussion.”

There is, in my judgment, no better book on all of this than this one by Heyers. First published in 1984, it is excellent, and I highly recommend it.

However, it is not just theologians from mainline churches who have this perspective; many scientists do, as well. That science and religion comprise two “Non-Overlapping Magisteria,” different realms that ask and seek to answer very different types of questions, was the concept promoted by Steven Jay Gould of Harvard, who died in 2002. He is considered by many to have been the foremost evolutionary biologist of the 20th century and he was also a paleontologist. Not to be regarded an orthodox believer, Gould nevertheless spoke to a wide audience with his book, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fulness of Life*, and said:

“I do not see how science and religion could be unified, or even synthesized, ...but I also do not understand why the two enterprises should experience any conflict. Science tries to document

the factual character of the natural world, and to develop theories that coordinate and explain these facts. *Religion*, on the other hand operates in the equally important, but utterly different, realm of human purposes, meanings, and values. ...We live with poets and politicians, preachers and philosophers. All have distinctive ways of knowing, valid in their proper domains. No single way can hold all the answers in our wondrously complex world."

As we all know, religious fundamentalism has become a powerful influence in politics. It seems that "the 3 Rs" of a basic education can simply result in making ignorance more articulate, or at least just enough so to mount a campaign. The great majority of Republican politicians self-identify as so-called evangelicals, cultivating a huge base that, mostly, views the earth as just a few thousand years old, invoking flood-geology, and the like.

There are those in Congress who, in fact, *got elected* on platforms of ignorance, the newest crop buying into the bizarre conspiracy-lies of QAnon –about Satanist cabals of Democrats drinking children’s blood-- that are beyond any rational description. Entire campaigns have been based on the premise that enough supporters either wouldn’t know or care about the difference between a fact and a lie. Ignorance is sometimes construed, even, as a virtue and, thus, the way is open for demagogues. "In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king."

Ignorance threatens our democracy, as when Wayne LaPierre, spokesman for the National Rifle Association, promotes the paranoia that surrounds even the smallest sort of gun control. In a speech that I watched, he said, "The Founding Fathers had it right: Those with the most guns make the rules!" The line got huge cheers. But that’s fascism, the absolute opposite of a participatory democracy, and the Founders fought *against* that idea that Might makes Right. Democracy depends upon an informed public. Jefferson wrote, in 1816, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be." (These days, I’m thinking that what we do or have not done with seat-belts and pandemic masks is a rather sound indicator of where we stack up, and it’s not good.)

The topic of climate change is often in the news. It was on the mind of State Senator Brandon Smith (Republican from Kentucky) in 2014 when he said, "I won’t get into the debate about climate change." Then, he did, saying, "But I’ll simply point out that I think in academia we all agree that the temperature on Mars is exactly the same as it is here. Nobody disputes that." Regarding just that absurd sentence: his background is not in academia but in business, so? And, "actually," *nobody* in academia would agree with such comparison of temperatures, since, on earth, the average temperature on earth is 57 degrees Fahrenheit, while on Mars, it is a *minus 81* degrees. A difference of 138 degrees is not exactly "exactly." Smith continued, "Yet there are no coal mines on Mars. There are no factories on Mars, that I am aware of." Well, he got that right: there has been no industrialization of The Red Planet, not yet. But his point appears to have been that, therefore, you cannot blame what he *thought* was the "warm" Martian temperature on pollution from fossil fuels ...so neither can you implicate it in climate change *here* on earth. (And Alabama recently elected as US Senator someone who could not name the three branches of government.) How’s this for intelligence from our elected leaders?

Fox News host Greg Gutfeld said, "Bob, isn’t fossil fuel the ultimate renewable energy? It’s renewed once. It used to be a dinosaur. Now it’s fuel. How is that not renewable?" A Fifth

Grader could have told him how: that almost all of the contributors to fossil fuel were not dinosaurs, but plants and microscopic one-celled critters, and that the process took tens and even hundreds of millions of years. Not exactly renewable, for us.

The consequences of ignorance in public life are many, especially in politics, wherein decisions are made, almost daily, that affect the lives of every single one of us, decisions up to and including issues of war and peace. And, again, it should be noted that the same public figures who, with so little qualms, display their ignorance in that realm are so often the same ones who think the world is just 6,000 years old. That, plus current attempts, in many states, at voter suppression force one to remember that progress toward equality and justice is not foreordained. In the early part of the 20th century, there was optimism in such things, but soon there was the huge resurgence of the Klu Klux Klan to a membership of several million, and hooded Klansmen marched, openly and in immense throngs, on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D. C. The 1915 silent film, *The Birth of a Nation*, all about the Klan, normalized and glorified violence against blacks. Often described as the first Hollywood blockbuster, it had a cast of 10,000, was seen by millions throughout the country, and was the first movie screened at the White House. The movie spectacular, adjusted for inflation, had one of the highest box-office takes, ever, i. e. in the \$1.8 billion range of *The Titanic*. Hugely influential, the film helped gravitate ignorance and racism toward a perverse lowest common denominator.

That decade provided the background for Sinclair Lewis' great novel, *Babbitt*, published in 1922. The upbeat slogans, the boosterisms, the self-hypnotic commercial hype touted by George F. Babbitt and his fellow businessmen were symptomatic of an underlying emptiness and of a pervasive ignorance in their community and in the nation. [In the following quotation, G. A. R. stands for Grand Army of the Republic, i. e. a fraternal organization of veterans of the Union Army.] "At that moment, a G. A. R. veteran was dying. He had come from the Civil War straight to a farm which, though it was officially within the city-limits of Zenith, was primitive as the backwoods. He had never ridden in a motor car, never seen a bath-tub, never read any book save the Bible, McGuffey's Readers, and religious tracts; and he believed that the English are the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, and that the United States is a democracy."

Well, we trust that it is, and more than in name only. However, as the last few years have clearly demonstrated, democracy is under serious threat, and part of the threat is ignorance. As Martin Luther King bluntly stated, "Nothing in the world is more dangerous than a sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity." The words of Susan Jacoby, in her 2008 book, *The Age of American Unreason*, are also relevant: "Science ...can by itself provide no remedy for those who, out of ignorance or in servitude to an anti-rational form of faith, know little and care less about the basic principles that constitute the scientific method. Technology, our servant, has also become our master, as the information highway –potentially our greatest tool for learning ever devised—has, for too many, become a highway to the far-flung regions of junk thought."

Thus, as in the past, many of today's problems are traced to ignorance. However, as Jacoby suggests, the phenomenon is broader than it being associated simply with certain types of religion. In fact, it's there *because* of the broader syndrome. You may have heard of *The Darwin Awards*. It was a book –now a whole series of books— filled with examples of how individuals have accidentally killed themselves by attempting very, very stupid things. The

award is given for the deceased doing posterity a *favor*, “by taking themselves out of the gene pool.” (It was my intent to relate some of those incidents, but my better self soon realized that such accounts, intended to be funny, are, instead, so very, very sad.)

Most so-called information put forth in many political campaigns consists of distortions and blatant falsehoods, supported by obscene amounts of money to propagate them, because the perpetrators think the public is dumb enough to be swayed by blatant lies. And, as has been demonstrated often enough by Donald Trump, they are not wrong about that. I think of Adlai Stevenson, who was running for President in the 1950s, when he spoke at Brown University. One of the students shouted out, “You’ll get the vote of every thinking person in America!” He shot back: “That’s not enough. I need a majority!”

Stevenson, an intellectual, was running against Eisenhower, which provided some interesting dynamics. A poll by one news organization asked a single question of the public: “Do you think that Dwight Eisenhower has scruples?” By far the largest number of responses were along the following lines: “O, no, not him; not the great General Eisenhower. I’m quite sure that he is a person of high moral standards. I can’t imagine him having scruples.” But what does the word mean? It simply means high ideals, principles, moral convictions, in line with the word *unscrupulous* having to do with a lack of the same. Apparently, the people polled thought that “scruples” sounded like a sexually transmitted disease, or some such thing, and a pretty nasty one, at that. Thus, people don’t always say, “I don’t know,” even when they should. They are reluctant to admit ignorance, even when it’s obvious. And so, it persists.

Neil Postman zeroed in on a large part of the reason for the prevalence of ignorance. He is the author of *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Written a generation ago, it’s still right up to date concerning the huge effects of television. The discourse he references also includes that of religion. In a chapter called “Shuffle Off to Bethlehem,” he writes:

“There is no great religious leader—from the Buddha to Jesus to Mohammed to Luther—who offered people what they want. Only what they need. But television is not well suited to offering people what they need; it is ‘user friendly’. Religious programs are filled with good cheer and celebrate affluence. *Because* their messages are trivial, the shows have high ratings. I believe I am not mistaken in saying that Christianity is a demanding and serious religion. When it is delivered as easy and amusing, it is another kind of religion altogether....Everything that makes religion an historic, profound and sacred human activity is stripped away; there is no ritual, no dogma, no tradition, no theology, and, above all, no transcendence. On these shows, the preacher is tops. God comes out as second banana.”

Studs Turkel interviewed a wide variety of people for his book, *The Great Divide: Second Thoughts on the American Dream*. Roy Larson, a Methodist pastor for two decades before he became the religion editor for the Chicago Sun-Times, is quoted concerning fundamentalist religion on TV: “You don’t have to learn anything before you listen to these television programs. You do not have to have mastered the liturgy. It’s fast food. ...You’re given answers. You’re not presented with problems. The idea is to not reflect, because that’s disturbing. What the television preachers do not do is challenge you, challenge your existing way of looking at things.

They reinforce it. ...It has all the depth of a television commercial or a sitcom. There's no texture, no history. You don't have to know anything. It's a handicap if you do."

Postman's assessment, further, is that the instant-visual mode, as opposed to the print-mode of communication that existed for centuries prior, affects virtually everything. Television is composed of ultra-short packages of visual stimulation, meaning that Intellectual content of substance is, *ipso facto*, ruled out: "What I am claiming here," he says, "is not that television is entertaining but that it has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience. ...How television stages the world becomes the model for how the world is properly to be staged. ('All the world's a stage.') ...Americans no longer talk to or visit with each other; they entertain each other." In other words, most everything is dumbed down. Thus, in spite of our ubiquitous and many-faceted tools of communication that operate at the speed of light, it may be that we have less, at least of substance, to say to each other than ever before.

The problem first began to show itself quite some time ago. Thoreau, in *Walden*, considered the meaning and implications of the technology available in his own time, taking note of project to build a telegraph from Maine to Texas, and wondering just what they would have to say to each other. In *Walden*, he assessed the urgency with which people, even then, desired to know just the superficial "what's happening:"

"Hardly a man takes a half-hour's nap after dinner, but when he wakes, he holds up his head and asks, 'What's the news?' ...After a night's sleep the news is as indispensable as breakfast. 'Pray tell me anything new that has happened to a man anywhere on the globe,' –and he reads it, over his coffee and rolls, that a man had his eyes gouged out this morning on the Wachito River; never dreaming the while that he lives in the dark unfathomed mammoth cave of this world, and has but the rudiment of an eye himself. ...The news: How much more important to know that which was never old. ...Read not the Times. Read the Eternities. ...In proportion as our inner life fails, we go more constantly and desperately to the post-office. You may depend on it, that the poor fellow who walks away with the greatest number of letters, proud of his extensive correspondence, has not heard from himself this long while."

The situation existing in Thoreau's 19th century has been amplified in the present. In spite of all the social networking, the emails and I-phones, and Facebook and Twitter, etc. people are not only less articulate now, but, as the studies are finding, they are 25% more lonely than just a few years ago. All of us, naturally and normally, have a need for attention, but the desire has been increased exponentially by feedback loops and now and appears insatiable, as evidenced by all those people checking, without end, for that personal affirmation, "You've got mail!"

Thus, our technologically sophisticated culture is in the business of continually improving the *means* but for *unimproved ends*. And what is that, but ignorance? All these communication devices --to which *we* have become a kind of appendage-- seem to be not communicating in the things that matter most. For, admit it or not, what we want is not just to know what's in lots of letters or messages, but to *be*, ourselves, truly known and understood. And, for so many, that's not happening. Our culture works against it, producing many acquaintances, but few friends. There is the play by Ionesco, *The Bald Soprano*, that tells of a man and woman who happen to meet on a subway and engage in polite conversation. In the process, they find that they have

many things in common, including the fact that they each have two kids, that they live in the same neighborhood in a certain part of the city and, in fact, in the very same apartment building. Finally, they discover that they are husband and wife.

Any subject that has to do with ignorance must acknowledge that intelligence is relative. So, one thinks of *The Far Side* cartoon by Gary Larson that has God on a quiz show blowing away the competition. (Larson always depicts God as the huge exaggerated man with the long white beard, the cartoon version of the deity on Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel.) The show is "Trivia Tonight," and the moderator says, "Yes, that's right! The answer is 'Wisconsin.' --Another 50 points for God! And ...uh, oh, looks like Norman, current Champion, hasn't even scored yet!" Well, how could he? God, being omniscient, really skews the curve.

Ignorance and intelligence are certainly relative, and taking that seriously would add so much more humility and tolerance to the world. The superb one-liner of Will Rogers comes here to mind: "Everybody is ignorant, just on different subjects." I don't know much at all about the human genome and, very likely, neither do you, and most of us can't tell a proton from a crouton. In this Information Age, where the quantity of factual information is doubling every few years, nobody can know more than a tiny amount of the entirety.

That said, I would suggest that at least a general knowledge of history and culture should be essential for citizens in our time. An example: How can Americans not be expected to know something of the Bible, the book that deeply influenced so much in western civilization? It was the Sunday School movement in England that started public education on the one day of the week that kids had off from working in the mines. It was the Christian churches that established the first universities of our land. And yet, today, a full majority of adults in the United States cannot name the four Gospels or even identify Genesis as the first book in the Bible. Or, look where you will, to fields such as basic science, and the case is much the same. Twenty percent of our population is still with the pre-Copernicans in thinking that the sun revolves around the earth. With this lack of awareness, and in the increasingly complicated context of the modern world, huge problems lurk to pounce.

Ignorance has stood in the way of progress in the sorts of things that science has sought to address. I think here of the old *Saturday Night Live* comedy sketch that Steve Martin used to do, the one where he played a barber of the 14th century, "Bjork from York." Barbers were "somewhat" the physicians of the time. There was Martin, in the costume of the time, out in the medieval street with dirt and filth, horses, and rats. He spoke to this terribly ill woman about the advances which his profession was making, and said: "Fifty years ago, we would have thought that your trouble was caused by evil spirits or demon possession. But we've now made much progress in medicine. ...Now, we know that your trouble is caused by a small dwarf or by a toad living in your stomach." Not totally a joke, for the blood-letting panacea of the barbers lasted centuries, and it is very likely that George Washington died, not just from an illness, but from that bogus cure carried to extreme. Tremendous progress has been made in the field of medicine, for which all of us are grateful. Yet, medical mistakes account for nearly 100,000 deaths each year, so we have yet some way to go.

Regardless of what is cause and what is symptom, you can find ignorance nearly everywhere you look. The Discovery Channel, now leaning into the Syfy & History Channel fiction modes, recently aired a documentary-type episode called “Mermaids Are Real.” TV also abounds with misnamed “reality shows.” Some are about “paranormal investigators,” those intrepid seekers, armed with sophisticated technology and looking for ghosts under every mattress. (Strangely, with all the detectors they have, completely absent is the one for BS.) I read recently that there are now more than some 4,000 such “investigative teams,” who must be scouring every attic in the country. One such team member complains, “We’ve been doing this for six months, and we still don’t have our own TV show!” Among them is a plumber in Boston who advertises that he can, in addition to soldering the copper connections to the new shower, determine whether the rumbling in your pipes is due to some otherworldly being that has taken up residence in there. (The movie *Ghostbusters* was a great spoof, and it should be left at that.)

It seems that critical thinking either cannot be taught in school, or it simply isn’t being taught. In philosophy, Logic is course # 101, for you can’t read the greatest thinkers in the history of the western world without a well-developed reasoning ability, but it’s becoming apparent that you can’t do much else, either. Scratch the surface, go a little deeper with *most* questions, and you have stepped into the realm of presuppositions, world views, assumptions, things philosophical.

For example, a look at the Declaration of Independence, and, at first, we might think that we have to do with items of history and politics, and those quite straightforwardly. After all, the document says, “We hold these truths to be *self-evident* that all men are created equal and are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” –But immediately, you are up to your ears in questions that no fact-based science, which is helpful for many things, has not even a shred of hope of answering. For starters: What *is* liberty or what *kind* of liberty are we talking about? A famous hymn sings that “Our fathers chained in prisons dark were still in heart and conscience free.” And what is that thing called *happiness*, anyway? Ben Franklin –famous for the adage, “A penny saved is a penny earned” – also said, “Money never made a man happy, nor will it. There is nothing in its nature to produce happiness. The more a man has, the more he wants. Instead of filling a vacuum, it makes one.”

In addition, we note that The Declaration does not *promise* happiness, only the *pursuit* of it, since it is notoriously difficult to attain. In fact, as many have confirmed, it is best found when you do *not* pursue it. Happiness is sort of like chasing butterflies: difficult to catch, but if you busy yourself with *other* things, they might just come and land on your shoulder, which is to say, happiness is a by-product of doing something worthwhile. In addition, must we not affirm that mere happiness is far too shallow a goal? Isn’t success so much more than that? And how many definitions are there of success? For, we live not by bread, nor by Buicks, alone. What we need and want, at the deepest level, is something closer to *fulfillment* as human beings, and neither freedom nor material things guarantee *that*.

The Peter Principle: Why Things Always Go Wrong is the title of a book by Laurence J. Peter and Raymond Hull that was first published in 1969. It has had numerous printings, because, its diagnosis of the problem specified in the subtitle is confirmed by the personal experience of almost anyone who thinks about it. It’s also very funny. Claiming to be “the most penetrating

and social and psychological discovery of the century,” the Introduction asks, “Dare you read it? Dare you face, in one blinding revelation, the reason why schools do not bestow wisdom, why governments cannot maintain order, why courts do not dispense justice, why prosperity fails to produce happiness, why utopian plans never generate utopias?”

The central thesis is that so much goes wrong because so many people who do a good job at one thing have, thereby, earned a promotion to another job, and this at a level in the hierarchy for which they are not qualified: “In time,” says The Peter Principle, “every post tends to be occupied by an employee who is incompetent to carry out its duties.” In the words of a cliché, “they are in over their heads.” Off the top of *my* head, I can think of quite a few. So, a good Teacher becomes a school Principal, but that’s actually quite a different job; and a good Principal is made a Superintendent: same deal. A top assembly-line worker is made Foreman; an outstanding professor is elevated to President of the college; an exceptional doctor becomes Hospital Administrator; a good rancher –or a good football coach-- becomes a politician who “doesn’t know what the hell he is doing” and who substitutes empty (or hateful) rhetoric for performance; a successful business person runs for office and is soon ensconced in Washington as a U. S. Senator and assumes that his first obligation is to the lobbyists knocking on his door; an actor/entertainer is elected President of The United States of America, as happened twice. We can all readily think of numerous instances of someone being “promoted to their level of incompetency.” (And, we may even have enacted it the scenario, ourselves. “The good old days,” for many people, were the days when they were doing something they both loved and were good at, instead of the days after they had been dragged, pushed, or kicked “upstairs.”)

Peter and Hull came up with strategies to deal with the widespread malady: Peter’s Prophylactics, Peter’s Palliatives, Placebos, and Prescriptions, all worthy of consideration, but here’s the first: “A prophylactic, in a hierarchiological sense, is defined as a preventive measure applied before The Final Placement Syndrome appears.” It’s that ounce of prevention that is worth a pound of cure. Note: Peter’s words, near the end of the book, are not offered in jest:

“Man has moved up the therapeutic hierarchy, through magic, voodoo, faith-healing to modern, orthodox medicine and surgery. He is now very near to fabricating human beings out of spare parts, natural and synthetic. This step would promote him from healer to creator. But ...what need has man to accept that ...useless, potentially dangerous promotion? ...Faced with the possibility of promotion to the level of Total Life Incompetence –say, through atmospheric pollution, nuclear war, global starvation or invasion of Martian bacteria—we would be well advised to use Peter’s Prophylactics.” [The authors then offer a long list of life-enhancing Prescriptions.] “...We might, for instance, develop safe, comfortable, efficient rapid-transit systems for our major cities. They would cost less than moonships and serve more people. ...You will agree that man cannot achieve his greatest fulfillment through seeking quantity for quantity’s sake; he will achieve it through improving the quality of life ...in place of mindless promotion to oblivion.”

Perhaps the oldest known written language is that of the civilization of Sumar, of some 6,000 years ago, from the Tigris Euphrates River area of the Middle East. There, in the form of a clay

tablet, a Sumarian letter from a father to his son was discovered. Scholars have translated it to read: "Night and day you waste in pleasure. You have accumulated much wealth; you have expanded far and wide, have become fat, big, broad, powerful and puffed up. But ...you looked not to your humanity." It could have been written yesterday. At their best, religion, science, education, and politics are all about enhancing what is meant by "our humanity." We, too, as citizens of the modern world, "have expanded far and wide." Aided by the scientific method, we have extended our powerful reach by knowing how to take advantage of the laws of nature to create complex technology, but our power has so often been employed in outright abuse of the natural world. Humanity's exploding population is no longer living off the interest, but is quickly eating into the principal of earth's resources, and with no end in sight. How is that befitting of our title, *Homo sapiens*, Man, the wise? In fact, what is that but ignorance of the most short-sighted kind? Are we not called to be more involved, connected, gracious, appreciative, and sympathetically *engaged* with the Whole? The Irish poet William Butler Yeats thought so; at least, that is how I read this verse from *Among School Children*:

O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom, or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

We have used advanced technology to send rockets and astronauts to the moon and landed a probe and a rover on the planet Mars. But the same technology that sent our gleaming communications satellites into orbits high above earth has produced atomic warheads and programmed the coordinates of distant cities of millions of people as their targets. We have built soaring skyscrapers and fleets of airliners and submarines, all symbolic of our power, but we have yet to extend full respect and fundamental equality to all our citizens. Thus, in the deep things of heart and soul, we are not entirely "the land of the free and the home of the brave," nor "one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." Not yet. There are many divisions among nations around the world, but also here at home, within America.

Sam Levenson, born in 1911, was part of a large immigrant family that lived in Harlem, New York City. He would go on to be the author of several books, all very well-received, and he appeared frequently on television, including *The Ed Sullivan Show* (twenty-one times), and was often on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson. Levenson said that his parents came to this country by invitation of a lady called Miss Liberty. They had received a postcard with the words, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." He said that it was signed by someone named Emma Lazarus, and that the name sounded familiar, "perhaps some second cousin on my mother's side," so his parents packed up and headed for America. Sam Levenson was a humorist, and there's plenty of humor in his book, *Everything But Money*. In the concluding section, however, he was not out for laughs:

"Do not look upon the conquest of space as the beginning of the Messianic era. Like Grandma, who cleaned the apartment before she moved, before you leave this earth and move into outer space, take a hand in cleaning up some of the dirty spaces down here –the spaces between nations, religions, races. While all eyes are turned to the heavens in admiration of manmade celestial bodies, be sure to remember the manmade miseries; the two fifths of the human race

that goes to bed hungry every night, the fifty percent that cannot read or write, the bombings of homes and places of worship. Either our ethics keep up with our physics, or we shall all be cremated equal.”

In the familiar but ever appropriate words of the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, “God grant us Grace to accept with Serenity the things that cannot be changed, Courage to change the things we can, *and the Wisdom* to know the difference.”



Kenneth H. Olson

July 2021