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THEY SAID IT

Al Gore likes to present himself as a tribune of science, warning the world of imminent danger. But he is more like an Old Testament prophet, calling on us to bewail our wrongful conduct and to go and sin no more....

He starts off with the science. The world's climate, he reports, is getting warmer. This accurate report is, however, not set in historic context. World climate has grown warmer and cooler at various times in history. Climate change is not some unique historic event. It is the way the world works....

Gore and his followers seem to assume that the ideal climate was the one they got used to when they were growing up. When temperatures dropped in the 1970s, there were warnings of an impending ice age. When they rose in the 1990s, there were predictions of disastrous global warming. This is just another example of the solipsism of the baby boom generation, the pampered and much-praised age cohort that believes the world revolves around them and that all past history has become irrelevant.

We're told in effect that the climate of the late 1950s and early 1960s was, of all those that have ever existed, the best of all possible climates. Not by science. But as a matter of faith.

"Gore's Faith is Bad Science," Michael Barone, March 26, 2007.

REASON, SCIENCE, AND THE LEFT.

Regular readers know that we have spent the better part of the last decade-and-a-half describing the "clash of moral systems" in this country and in the Western world in general and using this clash to explain the foundations and ongoing nature of the so-called "culture wars." Put simply, this "clash" pits traditional, religious morality against post-modern, secular morality, with many of the differences between the right and the left on social and economic policy flowing from the differences between the moral codes.

What we have not done, or at least not done sufficiently, over this period is discuss the broader and farther reaching implications of the left's predilection for post-modern philosophy and the social and political constructs such philosophy suggests. This is a critical omission and one that we would be remiss not to correct. For while the implications of the post-modern moral structures are not at all difficult to discern and, moreover, are hardly hidden by the left, the implications of the broader, post-modern project is less readily apparent yet equally destructive to the social fabric and equally relevant to the wider-ranging discussion of politics and policy.

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Reason, Science, and the Left..

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This shortcoming on our part was driven home to us last week while watching the Democratic Party celebrate its policy proposals, and, in some cases, justify these proposals in the most galling and illogical terms.

What set us off specifically was the pre-convention discussion of abortion and its scientific and moral foundations that took place between NBC News anchor Tom Brokaw and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. The discussion went as follows:

Brokaw: . . . “If [Obama] were to come to you and say ‘help me out here, Madam Speaker, when does life begin,’ what would you tell him?”

Pelosi: “I would say that as an ardent practicing Catholic this is an issue that I have studied for a long time, and what I know is over the centuries the *doctors of the Church* have not been able to make that definition. And St. Augustine said three months. We don’t know. The point is it that it shouldn’t have an impact on a woman’s right to choose.” . . .

Brokaw: The Catholic Church, at the moment, feels very strongly it begins at the point of conception.

Pelosi: I understand that. I understand that. And this is like in 50 years or something like that. Again, over the history of the Church, this is an issue of controversy, but it is also true that God has given us, each of us, a free will and responsibility to answer for our actions . . . [emphasis added]

Our first reaction to the esteemed Speaker’s answer was, Really? This woman is 3rd in line to the presidency and she talks like she auditioning for a remake of the 1980s film “Valley Girl.” “Like, can you believe it?”

Beyond what it says about the Speaker’s grasp of the language, her citation of Augustine is both jarring and telling. We won’t dwell long on the moral aspects of Pelosi’s invocation of St. Augustine, for two reasons.

First, others, including more than a handful of Bishops, have done a far better job of explaining the errors in the Speaker’s view of Catholic teaching on the subject, noting among other things that Augustine was never the Bishop of Rome, meaning that his proclamations on matters of faith and morals do not carry the imprimatur of infallibility; that Augustine condemned abortion and abhorred its use, but simply did not believe it was the equivalent of murder, given his personal belief that the fetus is not vivified and thus not truly human until three months; and that it has ALWAYS been official CHURCH policy that life begins at conception, regardless of what some of the Church’s greatest individual thinkers may have believed.

The second reason not to dwell on the veracity of Pelosi’s claim is that it is, for our purposes today, irrelevant. It is hardly surprising that a “cafeteria Catholic” like Pelosi would get the morality wrong. What is surprising is that the morality is the least of it, since she cited Augustine not as an expert on ethics, but an expert on life and on fetal development. This is shocking to say the least.

Regular readers certainly know that we take a backseat to very few in our respect for St. Augustine or, for that matter, in our respect for his heir, St. Thomas Aquinas, who shared the former’s belief in vivification. But, unlike Pelosi, we both understand that the title “doctor of the Church” does not confer any medical erudition and are willing to accept that there may, possibly, have been some scientific advances in the study of fetal development in the 1,600 YEARS since Augustine made his assertions.

Is she serious? In the fifth century some dude with no medical training declared that life begins at three months and that’s fine by the Speaker of House? Do you suppose she knows that ultrasound technology was in Augustine’s time . . . well . . . rather crude?

If Pelosi were (God forbid) a Republican, we would hear no end about how dumb she is, about how poorly informed she is, and how unqualified she is. That doesn't mean that she's not stupid, ill informed, and unprepared; just that we won't hear a constant media refrain to that end. Of course, that's not really the point here either, since Pelosi's individual intellectual capabilities aren't really the issue. Pelosi's expression of her beliefs may have been ill conceived and the result of her individual dimwittedness, but it's her understanding of and approach to science that are telling. And they are hardly unique.

Indeed, such contempt for science and reason is one of the foundations – *nee the* foundation – of the post-modern movement that undergirds the ideology of the political left. The Speaker of the House's proclamations on abortion and the inception of life are demonstrative, not merely of her lack of scientific knowledge but of a broader contempt for science and reason as valid intellectual concepts.

It is important to remember, we believe, that although post-modernism has long and deep roots, many of which predate the Enlightenment and the concomitant revolutions in knowledge, politics, and philosophy, its essence is a direct response to and contradiction of the Enlightenment. Much of post-modernism harkens back to such influences as the religious heresies of the Dark Ages, and the ranting of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. But at its core, post-modernism is a denial of the supremacy of reason, the principle consequence of the Enlightenment. Post-modernism is undeniably the fruit of the counter-Enlightenment.

Philosophy professor and author Stephen Hicks explains:

Postmodernism rejects the entire Enlightenment project. It holds that the modernist premises of the Enlightenment were untenable from the beginning and that their cultural manifestations have now reached their nadir. While the modern world continues to speak of reason, freedom, and progress, its pathologies tell another

story. The postmodern critique of these pathologies is offered as the death knell of modernism: “the deepest strata of Western culture” have been exposed, Foucault argues, and are “once more stirring under our feet.” Accordingly, states Rorty, the post-modern task is to figure out what to do “now that both the age of Faith and the Enlightenment seem beyond recovery.”

Postmodernism rejects the Enlightenment project in the most fundamental way possible—by attacking its essential philosophical themes. Postmodernism rejects reason and the individualism that the entire Enlightenment world depends upon. And so it ends up attacking all of the consequences of the Enlightenment philosophy, from capitalism and liberal forms of government to science and technology.

Postmodernism's essentials are the opposite of modernism's. Instead of natural reality – anti-realism. Instead of experience and reason – linguistic social subjectivism. Instead of individual autonomy – various race, sex, and class group-isms. Instead of human interests as fundamentally harmonious and tending toward mutually-beneficial interaction – conflict and oppression. Instead of valuing individualism in values, markets, and politics – calls for communalism, solidarity, and egalitarian restraints. Instead of prizing the achievements of science and technology – suspicion tending toward outright hostility.

It is often alleged by conservatives that the great crusades of the modern left are “quasi-religious” in nature. The reason for this is because it is undoubtedly true. The postmodernism that informs modern liberalism began as a religious reaction to

the Enlightenment, as a means by which to make room for faith at the expense of reason. And today, the postmodernists and their political adherents insist constantly that reason be ignored, that science be discarded because it conflicts with articles of their faith. The German counter-Enlightenment of Immanuel Kant has found its heirs in the today's post-modern left.

Let's look, for example, at the question of evolution. The left loves to employ the language and the concepts of modernism to attack the right on the question of evolution. And there is no question that some on the right do, in fact, believe that existence and evolution are the products of an "intelligent design" (and an intelligent designer). And there is no question that some on the right take the argument one step too far and insist that this article of faith can and should be equated with science.

But the left's affinity for the trappings of modernism with regard to evolution is short-lived, to say the very least. While the left has no problem rejecting the role of God in the process of evolution, it likewise has no problem rejecting the role of science in outcomes and implications of evolution. Consider the following, written just this week by law professor (and physicist, philosopher, and second-generation intellectual giant) David Friedman (son of Milton and Rose):

People who say they are against teaching the theory of evolution are very likely to be Christian fundamentalists. But people who are against taking seriously the implications of evolution, strongly enough to want to attack those who disagree, including those who teach those implications, are quite likely to be on the left.

Consider the most striking case, the question of whether there are differences between men and women with regard to the distribution of intellectual abilities or behavioral patterns. That no such differences exist, or if that if they exist

they are insignificant, is a matter of faith for many on the left. The faith is so strongly held that when the president of Harvard, himself a prominent academic, merely raised the possibility that one reason why there were fewer women than men in certain fields might be such differences, he was ferociously attacked and eventually driven to resign.

Yet the claim that such differences must be insignificant is one that nobody who took the implications of evolution seriously could maintain. We are, after all, the product of selection for reproductive success. Males and females play quite different roles in reproduction. It would be a striking coincidence if the distribution of abilities and behavioral patterns that was optimal for one sex turned out to also be optimal for the other, rather like two entirely different math problems just happening to have the same answer.

The denial of male/female differences is the most striking example of left wing hostility to the implications of Darwinian evolution, but not the only one. The reasons to expect differences among racial groups as conventionally defined are weaker, since males of all races play the same role in reproduction, as do females of all races. But we know that members of such groups differ in the distribution of observable physical characteristics--that, after all, is the main way we recognize them. That is pretty strong evidence that their ancestors adapted to at least somewhat different environments.

There is no *a priori* reason to suppose that the optimal physical characteristics were different in those different environments but the optimal mental characteristics

were the same. And yet, when differing outcomes by racial groups are observed, it is assumed without discussion that they must be entirely due to differential treatment by race. That might turn out to be true, but there is no good reason to expect it. Here again, anyone who argues the opposite is likely to find himself the target of ferocious attacks, mainly from people on the left . . .

I think there is a pretty clear pattern. Almost everyone on the left believes that he believes in evolution. Yet I find it hard to think of any proposition popular on the left that is deduced from that belief.

This is not, we should add, merely some academic debate over the value of science and its appropriate application. It is the guiding philosophy of the left, a philosophy that argues that reason may be appropriately used in a quasi-modernist critique of “pre-modern” religious beliefs, but that reason is ultimately the enemy of the proper exploitation of power relationships in the name of activism.

Again, consider the example of global warming – or “climate change” as it is more daintily called these days. The advocates of the theories of man-made global warming exploit basic scientific principles and rudimentary scientific data to argue that the earth is out of balance, that man is responsible, and that Western man in particular has much for which to answer. But since science is unable and unwilling to support these conclusions conclusively, the debate is declared closed and the extrapolation of elementary scientific data and models cannot be completed without a staggering leap of faith. Reason and science cannot explain the reality of climate change, we are told, but that is their failing.

As Stephen Hicks notes, the origins of this quasi-religious closing off of reason from reality can be

found in the philosophy of Kant, the intellectual progenitor of post-modernism. For Kant, Hicks writes, “reality – real noumenal reality – is forever closed off to reason, and reason is limited to awareness and understanding of its own subjective products . . . Thus Kant . . . asserted that the most important fact about reason is that it is clueless about reality.”

The science and the skepticism employed by so-called Global Warming “deniers” is therefore self-serving, is limited to subjectivity, and has no bearing on reality. Deny all you want, in other words, reason and science carry no weight in this debate.

Similar examples are countless, though well beyond the scope of this essay. For our purposes today, it should suffice to say that the postmodern left is interested not in reason and science so much as it is in power relationships, identity politics, and the conscious reconstruction of society. And its ambitions reach far beyond the social and cultural issues that have traditionally been considered its confines.

Hicks writes: “Postmodernism . . . is a comprehensive philosophical and cultural movement. It identifies its target – modernism and its realization in the Enlightenment and its legacy – and mounts powerful arguments against all of the essential elements of modernism.”

Chief among these elements, of course, is reason and its corollary, science. The post-modern left will employ the language of modernism to deprecate what it views as pre-modernism, but it is hardly dedicated to science and reason as organizing principles of society. Indeed, it is dedicated to precisely the opposite. And the implications – from abortion policy to social and education policy to energy policy and beyond – are potentially staggering.

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