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All Things Examined - Regis Nicoll

VICTIMS OF SCIENCE ORTHODOXY

By Regis Nicoll

9/28/2007

From Galileo to Robert J. Marks

"It's simply unconscionable that a major university would so trample a scientist's right to freedom of scientific inquiry." (Casey Luskin, attorney)

WEDDED TO SCIENCE

It has been said that anyone who weds himself to the science of the age will soon find himself a widower. There is no better example of that maxim than the 17th-century clash between Galileo and the Roman Curia.

Contrary to popular folklore, the conflict was not over the Catholic Church's commitment to biblical authority as much as it was over its commitment to conventional science—a authority that had held sway for nearly two thousand years.

In Galileo's day, the scientific establishment was thoroughly Aristotelian. Even the Church, through the influence of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, had endorsed Aristotle's natural philosophy, which included geocentrism: the earth-centered principle that Ptolemy later developed into an astronomical model.

The Church was so tethered to Greek science that *it* became the lens through which Scripture was interpreted, rather than the other way around. Ultimately, Galileo's promotion of heliocentrism was heterodox not from a biblical standpoint, but from a scientific one.

For his offense, Galileo was sentenced to a short prison stay followed by house arrest until he died of natural causes in his own villa. Although the papal ban on heliocentrism was lifted in 1741, the Galileo affair has haunted the Church up to the present.

To its critics, the Church is the black-hatted figure darkening the saloon door between man and enlightened thinking; and Galileo, the plucky hero who pushed through the door before being gunned down by the shadowy villain. The showdown has become something of a folk tale among those who view religion as a mortal threat to free inquiry.

Yet, after four hundred years of that legacy, the Church, once again, allowed revelation to be the hand-maiden of science. It began little more than a half century ago.

THE EXEGETICAL TRUMP

In the 1950 encyclical, *Humani Generis*, Pius XII suggested that the *idea* that the human body derives from "pre-existent and living matter" is not at odds with church teaching. (All the same, it is an *idea* clearly at odds with the declaration, "the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground.")

In 1996 John Paul II added pontifical heft to evolution, stating, "Today, almost half a century after the publication of the encyclical, new knowledge has led to the recognition of the theory of evolution as more than a hypothesis." (As I recall, 20 centuries of "consensus science" convinced the Medievalists that "aether" was "more than a hypothesis.")

JPII went on to say, "It is indeed remarkable that this theory has been progressively accepted by researchers, following a series of discoveries in various fields of knowledge. The convergence, neither sought nor fabricated, of the results of work that was conducted independently is in itself a significant argument in favor of this theory." (However, the admission by Ian Tattersall of the American Museum of Natural History that "the [evolutionary] patterns we perceive are as likely to result from our unconscious mindsets as from the evidence itself," should give one pause about those "series of discoveries.")

Perhaps the strongest papal endorsement came from Benedict XVI, [earlier this year](#): "Creationism and evolutionism [are] presented as if they were mutually exclusive alternatives: those who believe in the Creator cannot consider evolution and those who affirm evolution must exclude God. This juxtaposition is an absurdity, because there are many scientific proofs supporting evolution as a reality."

While none of the vicars clarified what they meant by "evolution," their statements have been paraded to suggest that even the Vatican has come around to the genius of Darwin. And, to a certain extent, it has.

In an attempt to reconcile the Author of Scripture with the author of *On the Origin of Species*, the Magisterium allows (even endorses) theistic evolution: a compromise between Darwinism and Creationism which holds that life developed by an evolutionary process, either guided or front-loaded by God.

Elsewhere, in lieu of compromise, institutions are treating science as an exegetical trump--if scripture and science conflict, science wins. Lamentably, this attitude is infusing Christian schools, where the desire for academic "respectability" has led to *thought policing* and academic suppression.

A MODERN "GALILEO"

Baylor University is the world's largest institute of higher learning in the Baptist tradition. Chartered in 1845, Baylor has a strong [Christian mission](#) that states:

"[T]he University derives its understanding of God, humanity, and nature from many sources: the person and work of Jesus Christ, the biblical record, and Christian history and tradition . . ."

"Baylor encourages all of its students to cultivate their capacity to think critically, to assess information from a Christian perspective . . ."

"[Baylor is] advancing the frontiers of knowledge while cultivating a Christian world-view . . ."

Which make some of the university's recent actions all the more astounding.

In 2001, Baylor shut down the Michael Polanyi Center and removed Dr. William Dembski as its director. At issue was the center's focus on intelligent design, which opponents pejoratively called "Creationism-102" to debunk its place in legitimate science.

Contrary to its critics, ID is a research program to discover, scientifically, whether the design in nature, universally acknowledged in the scientific community, is actual or merely apparent. ID does not deny the validity of Darwinian processes—only that naturalistic mechanisms alone are unable to account for the complexity of biological life.

That would seem appropriate for an institution committed to critical thinking and "cultivating a Christian world-view." But not for 27 faculty members who were less concerned with that than with respectability among their secular peers.

After succumbing to the groupthink of the critics, the administration dissolved the Polanyi Center, prohibited Dembski from teaching and exiled him to work from his home. After four years of "house arrest" as an associate professor, Dembski left the university in 2005.

In its breach of academic freedom, Baylor lost sight of the fundamental axiom of scientific achievement: Great discoveries are not made when the status quo is accepted, but when it is challenged. Had Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Faraday, Pasteur, Einstein, Heisenberg and Salk settled for "consensus science" and academic respect, the technical and medical advances of the last 300 years never would have been imagined.

Also forgotten were the centuries of scar tissue borne by its Roman forbear. Unfortunately, William Dembski is not the only victim of amnesia at that institute "in the Baptist tradition."

CONTINUING THE TRADITION

Early last year, Baylor denied tenure to Frank Beckwith—a scholar who is recognized as a world-class philosopher with a prodigious publication record and high teaching marks. Although Beckwith's conservative Christianity and outspoken pro-life stance were irritants to his liberal colleagues, his main transgression was his defense of ID as a constitutionally permitted curriculum in public schools.

Although Baylor reversed its decision following a six-month appeal process with pressure from the media and even one ID opponent, the undaunted thought police soon rounded up another academic contrarian.

Dr. Robert J. Marks is a distinguished professor of engineering at Baylor who chairs several national and international committees, has authored over 300 technical papers and three books, and has received numerous awards in the field of computational intelligence.

This past June Dr. Marks launched a website on the Baylor server called "[Evolutionary Informatics Lab](#)." The purpose of the lab was to distinguish "the respective roles of internally generated and externally applied information in the performance of evolutionary systems."

Although not an ID site, per se, Evolutionary Informatics was ID-friendly containing quotes by Michael Polanyi and links to publications of ID researchers like William Dembski. That was enough for a group of anonymous complainers to pressure the administration into purging the site from the Baylor system.

In sad irony, the science building where Dr. Marks works bears the words of Paul, "By Him all things are made; in Him all things are held together."

NO INTELLIGENCE ALLOWED

If incidents of academic suppression were unique to Baylor, that would be bad enough; but the troubling truth is that there are similar stories at Christian schools around the country. As Casey Luskin of the Discovery Institute explains, "In the academic world, if you question evolution, you come under attack. There's been a pattern of discrimination against ID all over the nation in the past couple years."

It seems that the one commandment enforced by secular and Christian schools alike is: "Thou shalt put no other gods before Darwin." That imperative may become more apparent in the months to come.

A few days ago a film crew arrived on the Baylor campus to interview the administration about the Marks affair. The crew was shooting *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*, a documentary starring Ben Stein about the academic shunning of investigators who question the orthodoxy of Darwinism.

The movie, whose trailer can be [viewed here](#), will be released nationwide on the annual celebration of Darwin's birthday, Feb. 12, 2008. Stay tuned.

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