

GOP and the Rise of Anti-Knowledge

Ben Carson's rise to the top of the Republican presidential field shows that many Republicans, especially Christian fundamentalists, have decoupled from the real world – and are proud of it. The more that GOP candidates embrace “anti-knowledge” the more popular they become, as Mike Lofgren explains.

By Mike Lofgren

In the realm of physics, the opposite of matter is not nothingness, but antimatter. In the realm of practical epistemology, the opposite of knowledge is not ignorance but anti-knowledge. This seldom recognized fact is one of the prime forces behind the decay of political and civic culture in America.

Some common-sense philosophers have observed this point over the years. “Genuine ignorance is . . . profitable because it is likely to be accompanied by humility, curiosity, and open mindedness; whereas ability to repeat catch-phrases, cant terms, familiar propositions, gives the conceit of learning and coats the mind with varnish waterproof to new ideas,” observed psychologist John Dewey.

Or, as humorist Josh Billings put it, “The trouble with people is not that they don't know, but that they know so much that ain't so.”

Fifty years ago, if a person did not know who the prime minister of Great Britain was, what the conflict in Vietnam was about, or the barest rudiments of how a nuclear reaction worked, he would shrug his shoulders and move on. And if he didn't bother to know those things, he was in all likelihood politically apathetic and confined his passionate arguing to topics like sports or the attributes of the opposite sex.

There were exceptions, like the Birchers' theory that fluoridation was a monstrous communist conspiracy, but they were mostly confined to the fringes. Certainly, political candidates with national aspirations steered clear of such balderdash.

At present, however, a person can be blissfully ignorant of how to locate Kenya on a map, but know to a metaphysical certitude that Barack Obama was born there, because he learned it from Fox News. Likewise, he can be unable to differentiate a species from a phylum but be confident from viewing the 700 Club that evolution is “politically correct” hokey and that the earth is 6,000 years old.

And he may never have read the Constitution and have no clue about the Commerce Clause, but believe with an angry righteousness that the Affordable Care Act is

unconstitutional.

This brings us inevitably to celebrity presidential candidate Ben Carson. The man is anti-knowledge incarnated, a walking compendium of every imbecility ever uttered during the last three decades. Obamacare is worse than chattel slavery. Women who have abortions are like slave owners. If Jews had firearms they could have stopped the Holocaust (author's note: they obtained at least some weapons during the Warsaw Ghetto rising, and no, it didn't). Victims of a mass shooting in Oregon enabled their own deaths by their behavior. And so on, ad nauseam.

It is highly revealing that, according to a *Bloomberg/Des Moines Register* poll of likely Republican caucus attendees, the stolid Iowa burghers liked Carson *all the more* for such moronic utterances. And sure enough, the *New York Times* tells us that Carson has pulled ahead of Donald Trump in a national poll of Republican voters. Apparently, Trump was just not crazy enough for their tastes.

Why the Ignorance?

Journalist Michael Tomasky has attempted to answer the question as to what Ben Carson's popularity tells us about the American people after making a detour into asking a question about the man himself: why is an accomplished neurosurgeon such a nincompoop in another field? "Because usually, if a man (or woman) is a good and knowledgeable and sure-footed doctor, or lawyer or department chair or any other position that could have been attained only through repeated displays of excellence and probity, then that person will also be a pretty solid human being across the board."

Well, not necessarily. English unfortunately doesn't have a precise word for the German "Fachidiot," a narrowly specialized person accomplished in his own field but a blithering idiot outside it. In any case, a surgeon is basically a skilled auto mechanic who is not bothered by the sight of blood and palpitating organs (and an owner of a high-dollar ride like a Porsche knows that a specialized mechanic commands labor rates roughly comparable to a doctor).

We need the surgeon's skills on pain of agonizing death, and reward him commensurately, but that does not make him a Voltaire. Still, it makes one wonder: if Carson the surgeon believes evolution is a hoax, where does he think the antibiotic-resistant bacteria that plague hospitals come from?

Tomasky expresses astonishment that Carson's jaw-dropping comments make him more popular among Republican voters, but he concludes without fully answering the question he posed. It is an important question: what has happened to the American people, or at least a significant portion of them?

Anti-knowledge is a subset of anti-intellectualism, and as Richard Hofstadter

has pointed out, anti-intellectualism has been a recurrent feature in American life, generally rising and receding in synchronism with fundamentalist revivalism.

The current wave, which now threatens to swamp our political culture, began in a similar fashion with the rise to prominence in the 1970s of fundamentalists like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. But to a far greater degree than previous outbreaks, fundamentalism has merged its personnel, its policies, its tactics and its fate with a major American political party, the Republicans.

An Infrastructure of Know-Nothing-ism

Buttressing this merger is a vast support structure of media, foundations, pressure groups and even a thriving cottage industry of fake historians and phony scientists. From Fox News to the Discovery Institute (which exists solely to “disprove” evolution), and from the Heritage Foundation (which propagandizes that tax cuts increase revenue despite massive empirical evidence to the contrary) to bogus “historians” like David Barton (who confected a fraudulent biography of a piously devout Thomas Jefferson that had to be withdrawn by the publisher), the anti-knowledge crowd has created an immense ecosystem of political disinformation.

Thanks to publishing houses like Regnery and the conservative boutique imprints of more respectable houses like Simon & Schuster (a division of CBS), America has been flooded with cut-and-paste rants by Michelle Malkin and Mark Levin, Parson Weems-style ghosted biographies allegedly by Bill O’Reilly, and the inimitable stream of consciousness hallucinating of Glenn Beck.

Whether retail customers actually buy all these screeds, or whether foundations and rich conservative donors buy them in bulk and give them out as door prizes at right-wing clambakes, anti-knowledge infects the political bloodstream in the United States.

Thanks to these overlapping and mutually reinforcing segments of the right-wing media-entertainment-“educational” complex, it is now possible for the true believer to sail on an ocean of political, historical, and scientific disinformation without ever sighting the dry land of empirical fact. This effect is fortified by the substantial overlap between conservative Republicans and fundamentalist Christians.

The latter group begins with the core belief that truth is revealed in a subjective process involving the will to believe (“faith”) rather than discovered by objectively corroborable means. Likewise, there is a baseline opposition to the prevailing secular culture, and adherents are frequently

warned by church authority figures against succumbing to the snares and temptations of “the world.” Consequently, they retreat into the echo chamber of their own counterculture: if they didn’t hear it on Fox News or from a televangelist, it never happened.

For these culture warriors, belief in demonstrably false propositions is no longer a stigma of ignorance, but a defiantly worn badge of political resistance.

We saw this mindset on display during the Republican debate in Boulder, Colorado, on Wednesday night. Even though it was moderated by Wall Street-friendly CNBC, which exists solely to talk up the stock market, the candidates were uniformly upset that the moderators would presume to ask difficult questions of people aspiring to be president. They were clearly outside their comfort zone of the Fox News studio.

The candidates drew cheers from the hard-core believers in the audience, however, by attacking the media, as if moderators Lawrence Kudlow and Rick Santelli, both notorious shells for Wall Street, were I.F. Stone and Noam Chomsky. Republican National Committee chairman Reince Priebus nearly had an aneurism over the candidates’ alleged harsh treatment.

State-Sponsored Stupidity

It is when these forces of anti-knowledge seize the power of government that the real damage gets done. Under Virginia’s Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli, the Virginia government harassed with subpoenas a University of Virginia professor whose academic views contradicted Cuccinelli’s political agenda.

Numerous states like Louisiana now mandate that public schools teach the wholly imaginary “controversy” about evolution. A school textbook in Texas, whose state school board has long been infested with reactionary kooks, referred to chattel slaves as “workers” (the implication was obvious: neo-Confederate elements in the South have been trying to minimize slavery for a century and a half, to the point of insinuating it had nothing to do with the Civil War).

This brings us back to Ben Carson. He now suggests that, rather than abolishing the Department of Education, a perennial Republican goal, the department should be used to investigate professors who say something he doesn’t agree with. The mechanism to bring these heretics to the government’s attention should be denunciations from students, a technique once in vogue in the old Soviet Union.

It is not surprising that Carson, himself a Seventh Day Adventist, should receive his core support from Republicans who identify as fundamentalists. Among the rest of the GOP pack, it is noteworthy that it is precisely those seeking

the fundamentalist vote, like Ted Cruz, Mike Huckabee and Rick Santorum, who are also notorious for making inflammatory and unhinged comments that sound like little more than deliberate trolling to those who haven't drunk the Kool-Aid (Donald Trump is sui generis).

In all probability, Carson will flame out like Herman Cain, Michele Bachmann and all the other former panjandrums of a theological movement conservatism that revels in anti-knowledge. But he will have left his mark, as they did, on a Republican Party that inexorably moves further to the right, and the eventual nominee will have to tailor his campaign to a base that gets ever more intransigent as each new messiah of the month promises to lead them into a New Jerusalem unmoored to a stubborn and profane thing called facts.

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Letting Scientific Knowledge into Religion

Ancient religions used myths to explain the mysteries of the universe to primitive people, making up stories that modern humans know to be imaginative but false. The problem, however, is that many people still anchor their world views in these old fables, as Rev. Howard Bess describes.

By the Rev. Howard Bess

The writers of the Bible material had a very primitive understanding of the world and the universe. They did not grasp that the world circled the sun and was spinning constantly. They had no understanding of a universe that was a part of a much larger galaxy that was only one of millions of galaxies.

Writers of Bible material observed the earth and the heavens and were understandably in awe. However, we now know that what they saw was completely beyond their understanding. These special writers had no idea at what they were looking. They came to conclusions about the God of all things based on primitive and incorrect understandings of nature.

Scientific research has pushed far ahead of ancient misunderstandings. Our present scientific knowledge of the expanses of space has left the earth a tiny dot that hosts humbled human beings, who at one time thought the “heavens and the earth” were a commentary about the God who created all things and who continues to have significant control over all things.

This “natural” theology took its place alongside “special” revelations that came through great prophets such as Moses, Abraham, Isaiah and finally Jesus, the common man’s rabbi from Nazareth. Science has brought us new understandings and conclusions about this planet on which we live and the universe that hosts our world.

Unfortunately, many Christians refuse to acknowledge this radical new kid in our intellectual neighborhood.

Does modern science have room for a personal God who loves and cares for us all? If so, are scientific discoveries a reliable commentary on the God of all things? In my ponderings about my Christian faith, I have not been able to sidestep these questions. I firmly believe science and Christian faith can walk hand in hand, though that requires science and Christian faith to listen to one another. I have made a commitment to listen to what scientists are saying.

Scientists have reached two tentative conclusions that impact our conversation. The first is that “nothing is fixed.” All things are in motion; all things are evolving, including human beings. Human beings are not the product of a single creative act by an all-powerful God, rather human beings are always becoming, always arriving. What human beings have become is the result of a long process, which is continuing.

The work of Charles Darwin on biological evolution forced a discussion in Christian theology that will not go away. Alfred North Whitehead took evolution into the world of philosophy. Charles Hartshorne moved the discussion to theology, writing: “Everything, including God, is ceaselessly changing in a dynamic process of creative advance that will never end.”

John Cobb Jr. took up the mantle of Hartshorne and taught for many years at the Claremont School of Theology, which has embraced the exploration of “process” theology more than any other Christian seminary. He forced the subject of process into the curriculum of almost every U.S. seminary. Christianity in an educated world cannot long avoid the scientific adventure with process.

The second conclusion of science is that there is no beginning and there will be no end. I was first faced with the folly of THE beginning by Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish existential theologian. To Kierkegaard a beginning was not relevant.

Only the moment was important. He mused, "Beware of the person who says he has found the beginning. He has not found the beginning. He got tired."

Scientists are now describing the outer limits of space in terms of millions of light years and still expanding at accelerating speeds. Thus, beginnings and endings are no longer relevant concepts. Yet, the Bible writings have a lot of materials about beginnings and endings, and Christian theology offers a widely accepted framework in linear time that has a beginning and an end.

Beyond God creating the heavens and earth in seven days, some Christian churches are filled with "end times" theology. This kind of thinking is terribly outdated and irrelevant in the light of modern science.

What kind of theology can relate to science that embraces life that is never static and always in process? How does theology relate to life that has no beginning and no ending? Science continues to have a great void that scientists can never fill.

What is the meaning of the enormous volumes of facts that are being gathered? The scientist has a desperate need to make sense of their discoveries, and my own Christianity has a desperate need for an honest environment in which to find the full and meaningful life.

When Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment he responded with two laws that are begging for embrace. Love God and love neighbor. I find no conflict with our faith's fundamentals and our search for understanding our living context. I suspect that science is in its infancy. Theology and faith need to be seen as an ongoing, every day joyful experience.

Life is fun and rich when we get religious people and scientists on the same dance floor.

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Rick Santorum's Nightmarish America

Rick Santorum, the latest Republican "flavor of the month" for president, exudes a boyish enthusiasm that many Americans find personally appealing. But his vision for America would combine a moralistic theocracy with free-market capitalism and perpetual war, a nightmarish scenario, says Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

Former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum is a Republican presidential candidate who is fast coming to the fore. He won the Republican caucuses in Iowa (albeit by only 34 votes) in early January and in February won contests in Colorado, Missouri and Minnesota. So, as the question goes, who is this guy?

Santorum is a self-styled "true conservative," right-wing, Christian fundamentalist of Catholic background. In 2005, Time Magazine called him "one of America's 25 most influential evangelicals." That is still certainly true today.

Santorum believes that religious values (at least his religious values) should play a large role in shaping government policies. For those not sure what this means, Santorum has a list of examples:

1. Santorum wants "a blanket ban on abortions." The fact that the U.S. had this very same prohibition up until 1973, and the result was black-market abortions that killed not only fetuses by also lots of pregnant women, seems to have escaped the former senator's attention.
2. Santorum wants a ban on gay marriages. He would likely bring back antiquated anti-sodomy laws as well. "If the Supreme Court says that you have the right to consensual [gay] sex within your home, then you have a right to bigamy, you have a right to polygamy, you have a right to incest, you have a right to adultery. You have a right to anything."

When Santorum gets on the subject of homosexuality, one can't help noting a tinge of hysteria, along with a generous helping of illogic and exaggeration. Santorum would probably try to ban other related activities, such as the use of contraceptives to prevent pregnancy. He certainly wants to get rid of Planned Parenthood.

What this adds up to is that when Santorum says religious values should play a greater role in government policy, he means that there should be lots of laws regulating your personal life, particularly your sex life. This is pretty typical of religious fundamentalists, particularly American Christian ones. They just can't leave other people's bedrooms alone.

The Economist

On the economic side of the ledger, Rick Santorum takes a slash-and-burn approach.

1. There should be a \$5 trillion cut in the federal budget (but defense spending would be held at present levels). In order to realize this, Santorum would do

away with, greatly reduce or freeze the Environmental Protection Agency, healthcare reform and Medicaid, subsidies for housing, food stamps, job training, energy and education. He would “reform” Medicare and Social Security in draconian fashion and pass a balanced budget amendment.

One might agree that the present U.S. federal deficit verges on the insane and still find Santorum’s cure equally crazy. For instance, just about holding exempt defense and “security” spending – when combined they make up 20 percent of the budget and are notorious for waste, redundancy and corruption – makes no sense.

2. According to Santorum, there should be an elimination of financial and other regulatory laws. This is true insanity. Regulation is the only thing that makes capitalism an enduring system. Eliminate it and you have financial crashes, dangerous sweatshop working conditions, falling wages and benefits, runaway corruption and theft and, ultimately, depression. That Santorum cannot understand this suggests that he has substituted a discredited free-market ideology for history.

3. Santorum says that as a nation Americans should “live within our means” and if we do so “future generations will have a brighter future unburdened by oppressive debt and high taxation.” These are fine slogans, but in practice they probably spell eventual revolution in the streets.

If you reduce the debt by slashing expenditures Santorum-style while refusing to increase taxes, you will eliminate almost all of society’s safety nets. That means increasing poverty and all its attendant miseries. You will also make infrastructure maintenance much more difficult.

Someone should tell Mr. Santorum that the U.S. population is not over-taxed. Out of 62 industrialized countries, the U.S. ranks 28th in terms of its income tax rates. It is, of course, possible to over-tax a people to ruination. It is also possible to under-tax a people to ruination to tax so low that you can’t assist the less fortunate or fix the pot holes and keep the bridges from collapsing.

If Santorum was to get his way the nation would not have his predicted “brighter future.” More likely it would be a future of more poor and more pot holes. That might well lead to disillusionment with the capitalist system among both the lower- and middle-classes. (Personally, I have no objection to such growing disillusionment. I would, however, like to minimize the suffering and violence that surely goes along with it.)

Foreign Policy

When it comes to foreign policy, Santorum is a warmonger plain and simple.

1. As to Iran, Santorum would “work with Israel to determine the proper military response needed” to put a end to that country’s nuclear weapons program. It seems not to matter to the former senator that every U.S. intelligence agency that has ever investigated this issue has determined that there is no evidence that Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapons program.

2. As to Syria, Santorum would go after the strongman (Bashar al-Assad) “covertly or otherwise.” Does that mean that Santorum act-alikes at the helm of other nations could use the same logic to go after a U.S. president?

3. As to Iraq, Santorum would “continue to stabilize Iraq” presumably by re-invading the country. This belies the fact that it was the American policy of draconian sanctions and ultimate invasion that destabilized Iraq in the first place.

4. As to Afghanistan, Santorum would set no time lines or limit resources “in the war effort.” Yet, if al-Qaeda is as weakened as Washington claims, there seems to be little point in more war. If a stable and competent Taliban government reappears in Afghanistan, it is unlikely to invite future attacks by providing a haven for terrorist organizations. On the other hand, this on-going war is almost certainly providing a breeding ground for more terrorists.

5. As to Islam, Santorum believes it is a religion that is “stuck in the seventh century.” With rare exception, such as Saudi Wahhabism, this is untrue. Actually, it is Rick Santorum who is stuck in the past. It is he who, like some political ecclesiastic, wants to regulate everyone else’s lives. If Mr. Santorum simply changed hats from Christian to Islamic he could be a Saudi cleric. Compared to people like him, most Muslims are much more tolerant and contemporary.

6. As to Israel, Santorum takes an uncritically approving position on the Zionist state. This makes sense when you realize that Israel is essentially a religious state a nation on the brink of becoming a theocracy, which is where Santorum presumably would like to steer the United States..

Rick Santorum is a religious ideologue. He wants to turn the U.S. into a “faith-based” Christian country through the imposition of those “family values” he personally has decided are God-given. He believes that America’s Founding Fathers would agree because they were, supposedly, men of faith just like him.

Quoting the Declaration of Independence to prove this point, Santorum reminds us that it says that people “are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.” From this he concludes that rights come from God and not from government. Government’s role is simply to implement and protect those divine

rights.

The truth is that the man who penned the Declaration, Thomas Jefferson, was nothing like Rick Santorum. He wasn't even a Christian. He was a Deist. Jefferson's phrasing was meant to impress a wider world in an age when religion was interpreted in a more literal fashion than it is in today's United States. Jefferson certainly did not mean for Americans to take the notion of God-given inalienable rights literally. After all, he was a slave-holder.

The number of Americans who respond positively to Rick Santorum's message is probably in the range of 20 percent. In terms of the Republican Party, they probably represent about one-third of the membership. Being ideologically driven, these people are motivated to vote. And, that is significant in a nation where voting turnout is traditionally low.

So, Rick Santorum is certainly representative of a politically active part of the U.S. population a dangerous, intolerant, noisy, in-your-face part. If we let him and his followers get their way, the result will be ever greater divisiveness and decline at home, and war abroad. That is a choice for the rest of us.

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Genesis Myth: God Doing Good

Many Christian fundamentalists impose a literal interpretation on Biblical myth, thus missing the larger moral messages and rejecting later scientific discoveries, a mistake most apparent in their reading of the Genesis creation story, as the Rev. Howard Bess explains.

By the Rev. Howard Bess

The important message of the Genesis 1 creation story has been lost in debates about how all things began. In some religious teachings, people have been led to believe that Genesis 1 is about God's creation of all things out of nothing, an interpretation that transforms this marvelous myth into an inaccurate history report.

To do so misunderstands where the story comes from and why. Genesis 1 touches on the critical topic of beginnings. The word genesis means beginnings and the very first words of Genesis 1 are “in the beginning.”

Understandably, many readers want the passage to answer the critical questions of when and how. But they never find an answer that is satisfactory to a modern inquiring mind and for good reason. The passage is written in the literary form of mythology, which should surprise no one because mythology is one of the earliest forms of communication.

Myths address questions of values and morals why, not when or how. They are not history and are not to be read to satisfy scientific inquiry. Myths are commentaries about life and are found in every civilization. They are simple to remember, and their roots predate written language.

The roots of the Genesis 1 creation story are easily traced. Abraham the foundation person of Judaism, Christianity and Islam was a native of Mesopotamia, the fertile valley between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, in modern-day Iraq. This area produced the earliest known mythologies of the Western world and is the birthplace of written language.

Judaism’s development never escaped the context of Mesopotamian/Babylonian mythology. Indeed, Israelite understandings were worked out against dominant Babylonian mythology, which included the story of the warrior God, Marduk, the civilization’s chief deity although Marduk was not without challenge, which came from Tiamat, the God of chaos.

Marduk fought Tiamat and appeared to be victorious. However, each year Tiamat reappeared to do battle again. The dominant theme in Babylonian mythology was what to do about chaos, not about how things began. In Babylonian thinking, the world was a given.

In the sixth century BCE, a small group of Israelites was forcibly taken to Babylon as slaves. In that context, they were confronted by Marduk, Tiamat and Babylonian mythology. What we read in Genesis 1 is a thoughtful theological response to that myth.

By the time of this Babylonian captivity, Israelites had become monotheistic, meaning their God was the one and only God, but their God, too, was confronted by chaos. In the Israelite myth, God finds a chaotic world without form, void, useless.

But the Genesis 1 creation myth sets aside the idea of a battle to the death between God and chaos. The Israelite God took a different course, the doing of good. Everything that the Israelite God formed and shaped is described as good,

including his final creative work, the forming of human beings, which is described as very good.

Thus, Genesis 1 carries an essential truth for Judaism, Christianity and Islam that those things in life that are useless and even destructive are not to be addressed in the field of battle, but by the doing of good. Centuries later, Jesus clearly taught that we are to overcome evil with good. Becoming a warrior in these great faith traditions is a denial of this essential truth.

Yet, in the Bible, we find two traditions, not one. One of those traditions embraces a warrior God, who is constantly ready to do battle with evil. The other tradition rejects the warrior approach, ignores chaos and pursues the doing of good. The Genesis 1 account was written in the second tradition.

Some Christian believers attempt somehow to embrace both traditions, but face the great dilemma: How can the command of Jesus to love our enemies be harmonized with killing our enemies?

What to do with chaos is another common theme among the great religions of the world. None of the major world religions deny that chaos is a reality of life. Chaos surrounds us all every day. The most common solution that is found is creating order, as God did in the Genesis story.

But it is all too easy to conclude that someone some nation or some combination of nations needs to bring order through violent means for the sake of humanity. Every war that has ever been fought has been seen by some as the only way to restore order.

So, wars are fought with the assumption that if life is well-ordered, then peace and happiness will result. However, wars never bring that desired result. They inevitably cause great destruction and leave behind further chaos.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, left us with sound advice: Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, as long as you can. According to the Genesis myth, chaos was God's opportunity to do good. It can be ours as well.

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