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Articles

Health & Science

SERVANTS OF A TWISTED GOD

By Tom Gilson
7/13/2007

When Knowledge Becomes Divine

Recently in the influential journal *Science*, Matthew C. Nisbet and Chris Mooney bemoaned scientists' difficulties with influencing public policy. They recommended that scientists back off from their technical language, and recast their communications in "frames"—alternative ways of viewing information—such as "public accountability," "public morality," and "economic development." They proposed that "scientists should strategically avoid emphasizing the technical details of science when trying to defend it."

Nisbet followed that with an [interview on NPR](#), in which he suggested:

You start recasting the issue in ways that are still true to the science but, in fact, actually you're not talking about the science. . . . the first thing is to activate interest, to activate concern, so that people can start paying attention to the science – to remain true to the science but recast it in a light that connects to their backgrounds.

Nisbet and Mooney are saying that scientists should assume a mantle of authority in areas of economics and morality, and "not [talk] about the science." They should have paid more attention in history class.

Science has won a strong place of authority in all our minds, and it has done so through its objective independence. We trust scientists because they have reality as their constant checkpoint, to guard against personal interest, ambition, and deceit. Despite recent scandals, as in the case of Korean stem-cell researcher Hwang Woo-suk's [faked data](#), the public still views science—or at least wants to view it—as being conducted by disinterested researchers who will follow the evidence where it leads.

This view is naive in the short run, for individual scientists are as human as anyone, and as prone to errors of reason, ego, and judgment. Over long periods of time, though, it's probably not far from the truth. Science has an inbuilt immunizing factor against Lord Acton's warning about power and corruption. It must, in the end, humble itself before reality.

But Nisbet and Mooney would have scientists' short-term opinions rule public policy. The most obvious problem this raises is that, a few years from now, recently arisen theories like human-caused global warming may well be forgotten, replaced by new understandings. Scientific controversy on that topic is strong enough that the possibility is at least believable, if not likely. The same could happen in just about any field of science.

But there's a deeper problem. Nisbet's and Mooney's advice can only lead to science undermining its own platform to speak. Something very similar



has happened before.

Consider the position of science and scientists in Western culture. Put bluntly, science is our god of knowledge, and scientists are its only priests. If a belief is not scientific (says the prevailing view), then it is not really *knowledge*. There are obvious philosophical problems like this, of course—not to mention the offense it presents to the true God and his revelation to us.

Consider the statement, “There is no reliable knowledge except for what we can determine scientifically.” The truth of that very statement cannot be determined scientifically. This view of knowledge, often called *scientism*, defeats itself at the starting block with its own initial premise. Be that as it may, to a great extent we still live as if scientific knowledge were the only kind that counts.

The *Washington Post* demonstrated this, almost comically, with an article titled, “[If It Feels Good to Be Good, It Might Be Only Natural](#).” Neuroscience researchers noted that when people undergoing brain scans think about doing good things, pleasure centers in the brain “lit up.” That is, they proved through brain imaging that it feels good to do good. This led to speculation that all of moral philosophy needs be re-thought, now that we have this stunning information:

The research enterprise has been viewed with interest by philosophers and theologians, but already some worry that it raises troubling questions. Reducing morality and immorality to brain chemistry—rather than free will—might diminish the importance of personal responsibility. Even more important, some wonder whether the very idea of morality is somehow degraded if it turns out to be just another evolutionary tool that nature uses to help species survive and propagate.

But wait just a moment. Didn’t we already know that people feel good about doing good? Well, yes, but we didn’t know it “scientifically.” We didn’t have the brain scans before. Sure, we could talk about how it felt good to do good, but we couldn’t photograph the feeling, we couldn’t count it up or perform objective statistical analyses on it. (Traditional psychological techniques for such research really don’t stack up against the hard science of brain pictures.) Now we have the goods. Now we finally *know* it feels good to do good. We know it at last because we have it in scientific form. Isn’t that just a bit ridiculous, though?

Yet if scientists are still our priests of the god of knowledge, priests ought to be pure and chaste. Their purpose is to speak for their god, to represent him (or it) disinterestedly and accurately. When priests seek other goals—especially power—their authority soon dissolves.

Church historians widely agree that Christianity’s integrity and authenticity took a serious blow when the Emperor Constantine, in A.D. 313, made it the approved state religion. Religious leaders began to align themselves with temporal powers, perhaps first to advise, but later, tragically, for the purpose of wielding power themselves. It devolved so badly that at one point in the 11th century, there were three disputing claimants to the title “Pope” who all excommunicated each other. They had become priests of personal power, servants of a twisted god.

Christendom still reels from this. Rodney Stark, in [One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism](#) makes a strong case that Christianity’s relative weakness in Europe, compared to America and the southern hemisphere, is due to churches’ alignment with the state.

But religion no longer advises government from any position of authority. Scientists do. Nisbet’s and Mooney’s recommendation amounts to advice that they maximize their temporal power, setting their data and evidence in the background. But this move will destroy their integrity and authority as surely as it did that of the priests of the middle ages.

Blogger [MikeGene](#) wrote on this topic:

The public [does not just] dismiss science because it is still uncertain. Growing chunks of the public view science as partisanship. In other words, science is beginning to lose its authority in the public domain as more and more people come to view the scientific community cynically. And this is the serious problem with Nisbet's solution.

Nisbet and Mooney would have scientists do more of this: to present persuasive arguments rather than pure science. They want scientists to spend less energy on telling the public the full truth, and more on being politically effective. They are encouraging scientists to follow the fatal path that too many clergy took in the past: to become priests of power, servants of a twisted god.

The public will lose its religion over this.

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