

Testimony

A Letter to Modern Sceptics – Scientific or Otherwise

by Charles Bayer

Dear modern sceptic,

In a few months my wife and I will conclude our five-year sojourn in this lucky country. While here we have often been asked about the differences between Australian and US culture. Since it takes more than half a decade to understand any culture, let alone compare it to another one, we have only a few tentative answers. While we have noted some significant differences, there are also striking similarities. Both Australia and the US are increasingly dominated by a secular ethos. The church no longer, if it ever did in Australia, provides the philosophic rationale by which we understand and interpret the world around us. Both cultures are increasingly dominated by a post-modern, scientific, market-driven perspective.

Even so, my sceptical friend, while religion rarely gets the credit, in many ways Australia has managed to incorporate into its social fabric much of the essence of Christian faith to which the US tends to give only lip service. Consider how Australia has cared for its most fragile, the elderly, the children and the infirm. Never does one confront here the poverty and human degradation to be found in the slums of every American city, not to mention the even more economically deprived countryside. If I had to live on the economic and social margins, I would be far better off to reside in Australia than in the US. The treatment of the original Australians is the notable exception to this benevolent perspective.

Nevertheless, how people are treated by their society is at heart a religious, not just a scientific, matter. No place is more scientifically advanced than America, but few developed nations are more devoid of a value system which makes a decent existence possible for everyone.

On both sides of the Pacific there is the growing notion that God, however that reality may be defined, has less and less relevance, and that technology, cum science, is the fundamental substructure whose rules determine the shape and meaning of culture. I grant that technology is revolutionising the way we all live – mostly for the better. Yet while we may believe we have invented something, all we have done is rearrange what has been a secret in the heart of the natural world for a long time. Even while we must rid ourselves of the religious superstition which sees God as just a super smart human being, I like to muse about God's reaction every time one of these secrets of science is unearthed. I can almost hear God say, "It's about time they got that one!"

There is a tendency by the sophisticated on both sides of the Pacific to put aside religion and religious institutions by assuming that they are made up of moss-backed, superstitious, intellectual Neanderthals who wouldn't recognise a scientific advance or a new idea if it hit them in the face. If I took the worst science has to offer and used it to ridicule all scientific investigation and progress, you could rightfully call me to account. But that is exactly what many do to religion. Of course religion has had its share of the intellectual inert. And it is true that pious people and their institutions have often been hesitant to accept new discoveries in the physical as well as the intellectual and ideological world. Narrow-headed, exclusivistic people have been the curse of religion, just as they have been the curse of every other major human discipline. Intellectually and spiritually ossified churchmen and women have been responsible for some of the most withered thinking in western history. Not only Galileo and his hero Copernicus were put down, but so were many others. Consider the Inquisition, the Crusades, the Salem witch trials, slavery and segregation in the American south, apartheid in South Africa, the support offered Hitler by the German national church, the failure of the Christian West to confront episodic pogroms against the Jews, the treatment of Aboriginal populations by good "Christian" Europeans, the labelling of homosexuals as divinely cursed—on and on. I know more examples of this disgraceful business than most of the secular critics I encounter because I probably know more church history than they do.

And yet, my sceptical friend, consider all those things you believe to be of social value: medicine; research; libraries; hostels for the infirm; schools, colleges, and universities; the end of slavery, segregation and apartheid; the promotion of the rights of children, labour and women; making the world safe for those with different life styles and sexual orientations; the quest for world peace—on and on and on. Everyone of these advances in the humanisation of a society otherwise dedicated to the law of tooth and fang has been bred, defended, staffed, paid for, promoted and bled over by people who have lived out of a deep religious commitment. Pull religious people, their institutions, their money, their educational ventures out of these movements and see what kind of world you have left. Leave our most sophisticated scientific advances in the hands of a secular society and you get a world where the largest, fastest growing group is the very poor.

Few people I have met would want to live in a society without the moral and ethical sensitivities which lie at the heart of the world's great religious faiths. What is more, from the Renaissance on, it has been the church's universities which have provided the backbone for most solid scientific investigation and progress. At its best even the stuffy, hide-bound obsolete church has understood that science is an ally, not an enemy. From genetics and astronomy to the healing arts, the church and its institutions have bought and paid for most of the Western world's profound humanising structures.

Superstition, of course, is a cousin of religion. Religious people have and still often do hold foolish points of view. It is embarrassing to see some of our cousins still arguing for a six day creation, still looking for Noah's ark, still resisting evolution, still claiming as supernatural miracles those things we now realise have perfectly reasonable scientific causes. But you won't find those sorts in seminaries, religious universities and enlightened modern churches any more than you would find alchemists, soothsayers and astrologers in responsible scientific laboratories.

When a state Premier once referred to Christians as "yesterday's people", he may only have epitomised a mindset which assumes that a casino, for instance, can really fund a decent society. If you want to deal with superstition, just peddle the notion that we will all get something for nothing, that most of us will be enriched, and that society can be lured into prosperity by a major gambling entertainment complex.

Knowledge and faith are not antithetical. Faith without knowledge is superstition. Knowledge without faith is hubris. The hydrogen weapon, chemical and biological warfare, smart bombs, and the national greed which has given birth to most of our modern horrors were all thought up in scientific laboratories and secular institutions, not in theological colleges or local churches. At the end of the day, just who is superstitious?

Write God off if you will, and put your faith in a pile of silicon chips. I'll still bet on the maker of the silicon – and the human mind that discovered what to do with it.

Sincerely,
Charles Bayer