

Neil deGrasse Tyson v. the Right: *Cosmos*, Christians and the Battle for American Science

Sean McElwee | June 23, 2014

The religious right has been [freaking out](#) about Neil deGrasse Tyson's *Cosmos* for what feels like an eternity. And, while the theological complaints seem laughable for their rancor and predictability, it's time we thought harder about what they represent, because the Christian right's *Cosmos* agita actually indicates a far deeper problem in religious conservatism -- the selective acceptance of [Enlightenment values](#). Religious conservatives have selectively adopted the legacy of liberal Enlightenment, from free speech to science, and jettisoned it when it does not suit their narrow ideological aims.

There is a nasty tendency for those arguing for their case to adopt a stance of enlightened empiricism on one issue to devolve into empirical nihilism on another. There is also the habit of shifting from a high praise of liberal values on one issue to utter contempt on another. Of course, our various liberal values will come into conflict frequently and must be weighed, but we must be disturbed at how quickly some, particularly on the religious right, are willing to twist these traditions for their own gain.

The odd conflict of science and religion has come to define modern religious fundamentalism. While most religious people happily accept scientific theories about gravity, claims about the age of Earth are subject to a strange scrutiny by those who believe that the literary creation narratives in the Bible describe actual events.

The scientific consensus about global warming must be untrue, because, as Dr. Innes writes in [Left, Right and Christ](#), the world is "not a glass ornament that we might accidentally destroy... we are not capable of destroying it, whether by nuclear weapons or carbon emissions." Young earth creationism is the ultimate attempt to both accept modern science, but also to deny it. Fundamentalists like [Ken Ham](#) argue that the world and laws we currently observe simply bear no resemblance to the past.

In truth, we cannot get fundamentalism without the scientific revolution. Fundamentalism does not exist independently, but rather defines itself in relationship to post-Enlightenment values. It is the odd melding of science and religion that creates fundamentalism -- the belief that the Bible is ultimately

both a scientific and religious text. Fundamentalists, like the conspiracy theorists they resemble, will build up reams of evidence creating the case for something that can be disproven with a simple logical proposition. Few thinkers have built such an impressive edifice of logic and evidence upon such a thin foundation of speculation.

Dinesh D'Souza, for instance, has taken to using science as proof of religion -- he argues, rather absurdly, that the Bible's explanation of the origins of the universe predates modern science. In his speech at Intelligence Squared, [he claims](#):

When the discovery of the big bang came -- this, by the way, was at a time when most scientists believed the universe was eternal, the steady state universe was the prevailing doctrine of American and Western science -- so it came as a shock that the universe had a beginning. Why? Because, in a way, it wasn't just that matter had a beginning, but space and time also had a beginning. In other words, this was something that the ancient Hebrews had said thousands of years ago and without conducting a single scientific experiment. By the way, this is not the same as other cosmologies. Other ancient cosmologies posited the universe being fashioned by a kind of carpenter god who made it out of some preexisting stuff, but the ancient Hebrews said, 'No, first there was nothing, and then there was a universe.'

But this rhetorical flourish is a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of the creation narrative, and religion in general. Religion, ultimately, aims at truths deeper than science and trying to apply religious reasoning to the natural world is absurd. Augustine warned as much, telling Christians in "De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim" to avoid, "talking nonsense on these topics."

More worryingly, the idea that a rather tenuous reading of a literary work holds the same weight as centuries of scientific evidence is more than a little absurd. D'Souza is trying to selectively apply science, but without its foundation -- empirical, testable, repeatable propositions.

We see here the fundamentalist flaw: A mass of rhetoric, reason and evidence built on the utterly insane proposition that the Old Testament is meant to be a scientific account of the origins of the universe.

The reason any somewhat knowledgeable Christian is frustrated by these debates is that they simply pit one fundamentalist against another. One tries to use science to disprove religion, the other to prove it -- both apparently unaware that belief is something that cannot be "proven." That's the entire point! Too often, religious excursions into science resemble the thinking of the suicidal people described by Anne Sexton, "They ask only what tool, they never ask why build?" Fundamentalism at its core is the misunderstanding of the proper relationship between science and religion -- one practiced [just as frequently by atheists](#) as Christians.

Another form of this trend is the co-option of liberal values. The religious right cannot generally be found decrying freedom of speech or freedom of religion, instead they make a selective application of these values -- much the way they'll talk science when you question nuclear power but deny a consensus about evolution or global warming on entirely spurious grounds.

One recent example of this illiberalism was the quickness with which Catholics decried [a "Black Mass" at Harvard](#). The "Black Mass" is merely a satanic parody of the Catholic mass -- which, while it may be

offensive to some Catholics, is totally harmless in practice. Of course, the idea of Catholics demanding special privileges is not rare, but to be expected; one wonders if Satanist [child abusers](#) could claim that their church would deal with the matter internally.

Liberal values are not weighed in a vacuum, but this weighing appears to be something many religious conservatives are incapable of doing. During the Black Mass controversy, Father James Martin [appeared](#) on MSNBC and said,

I think to put it in perspective, we could say, how would we feel if they said, 'we're going to do a little cultural thing, we're going to do something that's anti-Semitic, or racist, or homophobic, just as a cultural experiment, we're going to set up the reenactment of a lynching...

Father Martin claims to put the event in perspective, and then does the opposite, equating the merely offensive with an act of white supremacy.

Lynchings were intimately tied to white supremacy in the post-Civil War South -- their intention was to establish white hegemony and create a permanent underclass. Lynchings, the Ku Klux Klan and the burning of crosses were either overtly violent or symbolically violent. The reenactment of a lynching would not be acceptable at a liberal university because it would amount to the direct threat of violence to minorities on campus. It would be aimed at suppressing their rights to expression.

One wonders how Father Martin has lived his entire life in the United States and is still capable of making such an odious comparison. The distinction between the merely offensive and what amounts to [group libel](#) or defamation is [hard to make](#), but the Supreme Court has [endorsed the idea](#) that some speech may be more than just offensive, and can therefore be regulated. As Clarence Thomas noted in his correct dissent in *Virginia v. Black*, "just as one cannot burn down someone's house to make a political point and then seek refuge in the First Amendment, those who hate cannot terrorize and intimidate to make their point." Father Martin seems to miss this distinction and believes that he should be protected from ever being criticized or offended.

Hobby Lobby provides another example of the selective use of the liberal tradition. One might find it ironic that Catholics aim to carve out an exception for themselves from laws of general applicability when denying other religions that privilege. But sadly, religious majorities have a long history of understanding the First Amendment diametrically wrong, as a protection of powerful religions rather than weak ones. It is the latter the Founders knew would need special protection (see: *Church of Lukumi Babalu Aye v. City of Hialeah*), not the former.

To both of these claims -- that many on the religious right have entirely abandoned the post-WWI liberal consensus of scientific inquiry and Enlightenment values -- there are those who would like to say the same about the left. The Economist is quick to point to GMOs as the left's version of anti-scientific inquiry. Such claims are [entirely overblown](#). More recently, there have been claims that the left is showing the same illiberal tendencies as the right, [most notably](#) Michelle Goldberg of the Nation. She argues we are "entering a new era of political correctness," which she calls "left-wing anti-liberalism."

While she cites some rather damning movements, they are all fringe movements that have produced pixels but will not bring about change. As [Marx once wrote](#) of Communism, "In order to supersede the idea of private property, the idea of communism is enough. In order to supersede private property as it

actually exists, real communist activity is necessary." We might note that the idea of illiberalism is something liberalism must countenance, even though it must be prevented from ever being existent.

And here the threat from the right is far stronger: We have seen free speech, freedom of association, freedom of religion and rights of due process come under scrutiny at all levels. Workers are being denied even the semblance of control over their labor and women over their bodies. Money is making a mockery of democracy.

What we see is an asymmetric illiberalism. The religious right and some portions of the conservative movement have hijacked Enlightenment values for selective use. A truly deep (almost dogmatic) commitment to free speech, say, that practiced by the ACLU, which will defend the right of neo-Nazis to protest, is not what we find in many conservative circles. Instead, we see an embrace of empiricism when it is good and a rejection when it is bad. We see an embrace of religious freedom for me, but not for thee. Harry Emerson Fosdick preached in 1922:

The present world situation smells to heaven! And now, in the presence of colossal problems, which must be solved in Christ's name and for Christ's sake, the Fundamentalists propose to drive out from the Christian churches all the consecrated souls who do not agree with their theory of inspiration. What immeasurable folly!

Well, they are not going to do it; certainly not in this vicinity. I do not even know in this congregation whether anybody has been tempted to be a Fundamentalist. Never in this church have I caught one accent of intolerance. God keep us always so and ever increasing areas of the Christian fellowship; intellectually hospitable, open-minded, liberty-loving, fair, tolerant, not with the tolerance of indifference, as though we did not care about the faith, but because always our major emphasis is upon the weightier matters of the law.

His words are still more important today. We live in an increasingly connected and multicultural world, and yet many major religions refuse to recognize marginal ones. We also live in a world threatened by global warming, and yet some Christians deny it, even though it has long been a tenet of religion to live in harmony with nature.