

The Evangelical Rejection of Reason

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THE Republican presidential field has become a showcase of evangelical anti-intellectualism. Herman Cain, Rick Perry and Michele Bachmann deny that climate change is real and caused by humans. Mr. Perry and Mrs. Bachmann dismiss evolution as an unproven theory. The two candidates who espouse the greatest support for science, Mitt Romney and Jon M. Huntsman Jr., happen to be Mormons, a faith regarded with mistrust by many Christians.

The rejection of science seems to be part of a politically monolithic red-state fundamentalism, textbook evidence of an unyielding ignorance on the part of the religious. As one fundamentalist slogan puts it, “The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it.” But evangelical Christianity need not be defined by the simplistic theology, cultural isolationism and stubborn anti-intellectualism that most of the Republican candidates have embraced.

Like other evangelicals, we accept the centrality of faith in Jesus Christ and look to the Bible as our sacred book, though we find it hard to recognize our religious tradition in the mainstream evangelical conversation. Evangelicalism at its best seeks a biblically grounded expression of Christianity that is intellectually engaged, humble and forward-looking. In contrast, fundamentalism is literalistic, overconfident and reactionary.

Fundamentalism appeals to evangelicals who have become convinced that their country has been overrun by a vast secular conspiracy; denial is the simplest and most attractive response to change. They have been scarred by the elimination of prayer in schools; the removal of nativity scenes from public places; the increasing legitimacy of abortion and homosexuality; the persistence of pornography and drug abuse; and acceptance of other religions and of atheism.

In response, many evangelicals created what amounts to a “parallel culture,” nurtured by church, Sunday school, summer camps and colleges, as well as publishing houses, broadcasting networks, music festivals and counseling groups. Among evangelical leaders, Ken Ham, David Barton and James C. Dobson have been particularly effective orchestrators — and beneficiaries — of this subculture.

Mr. Ham built his organization, Answers in Genesis, on the premise that biblical truth trumps all other knowledge. His Creation Museum, in Petersburg, Ky., contrasts “God’s Word,” timeless and eternal, with the fleeting notions of “human reason.” This is how he knows that the earth is 10,000 years old, that humans and dinosaurs lived together, and that women are subordinate to men. Evangelicals who disagree, like Francis S. Collins, the director of the National Institutes of Health, are excoriated on the group’s Web site. (In a recent blog post, Mr. Ham called us “wolves” in sheep’s clothing, masquerading as Christians while secretly trying to destroy faith in the Bible.)

Mr. Barton heads an organization called WallBuilders, dedicated to the proposition that the founders were evangelicals who intended America to be a Christian nation. He has emerged as a highly influential Republican leader, a favorite of Mr. Perry, Mrs. Bachmann and members of the Tea Party. Though his education consists of a B.A. in religious education from Oral Roberts University and his scholarly blunders have drawn criticism from evangelical historians like John Fea, Mr. Barton has seen his version of history reflected in everything from the Republican Party platform to the social science curriculum in Texas.

Mr. Dobson, through his group Focus on the Family, has insisted for decades that homosexuality is a choice and that gay people could “pray away” their unnatural and sinful orientation. A defender of spanking children and of traditional roles for the sexes, he has accused the American Psychological Association, which in 2000 disavowed reparative therapy to “cure” homosexuality, of caving in to gay pressure.

Charismatic leaders like these project a winsome personal testimony as brothers in Christ. Their audiences number in the tens of millions. They pepper their presentations with so many Bible verses that their messages appear to be straight out of Scripture; to many, they seem like prophets, anointed by God.

But in fact their rejection of knowledge amounts to what the evangelical historian Mark A. Noll, in his 1994 book, “The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind,” described as an “intellectual disaster.” He called on evangelicals to repent for their neglect of the mind, decrying the abandonment of the intellectual heritage of the Protestant Reformation. “The scandal of the evangelical mind,” he wrote, “is that there is not much of an evangelical mind.”

There are signs of change. Within the evangelical world, tensions have emerged between those who deny secular knowledge, and those who have kept up with it and integrated it with their faith. Almost all evangelical colleges employ faculty members with degrees from major research universities — a conduit for knowledge from the larger world. We find

students arriving on campus tired of the culture-war approach to faith in which they were raised, and more interested in promoting social justice than opposing gay marriage.

Scholars like Dr. Collins and Mr. Noll, and publications like Books & Culture, Sojourners and The Christian Century, offer an alternative to the self-anointed leaders. They recognize that the Bible does not condemn evolution and says next to nothing about gay marriage. They understand that Christian theology can incorporate Darwin's insights and flourish in a pluralistic society.

Americans have always trusted in God, and even today atheism is little more than a quiet voice on the margins. Faith, working calmly in the lives of Americans from George Washington to Barack Obama, has motivated some of America's finest moments. But when the faith of so many Americans becomes an occasion to embrace discredited, ridiculous and even dangerous ideas, we must not be afraid to speak out, even if it means criticizing fellow Christians.

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