

Learning without Questioning in America: The Sunday School Syndrome.

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

“Clinging to one’s opinion is the best proof of stupidity.”—Michel de Montaigne

Readin’, writin’, and ‘rithmetic don’t occasion much questioning. But subjects like history are another matter! Learning history, or anything else for that matter, can be likened to learning Bible verses if questioning is excluded from the process. This kind of learning without questioning is carried over to our colleges and universities where the problem becomes really severe.

Subjects are taught as if they were comprised of revealed truths. Hardly anyone ever questions them because questioning them is discouraged. So we end up with people who graduate with degrees under their arms who are no wiser than they were on the days they matriculated as freshmen. No new idea ever enters their heads. In this society, people who are learned are not educated. They are little different from hurdy gurdy monkeys, but we elect them to office. Such is the legacy of the Sunday School Syndrome. It yields the stubbornness of what are essentially stillborn minds. No amount of information conveyed can ever make a stupid person smart! So nothing fundamental will ever change until intellectual development rather than the conveyance of information becomes the principal goal of learning.

Every teacher who has tried to teach students an unconventional truth has met an obstinate student, the student to whom the conventional truth he matriculated with is the conventional truth he graduates with. Everyone who has tried to teach Ted Cruz knows what I’m talking about. Some claim that the hardest minds to change are religious. I don’t know how to amass any evidence for that but I suspect that there’s a kernel of truth in the claim. Such minds are hard to change because of the way they develop.

In many homes in America’s Bible Belt, children are nurtured in constrained intellectual environments. The only recognized book is the Bible, and children are told from early ages on that it contains the revealed word of God himself which not only is never questioned but is never even questionable. These children go or are taken to church three or more times a week where they are enrolled in Bible school and hear stories, often as outrageous as the parting of the Red Sea, that are never questionable. No one ever asks, or is even ever allowed to ask, How can that be true?

Much of early childhood education lends itself to this type of learning. Readin’, writin’, and ‘rithmetic don’t occasion much questioning. But history, for instance, is another matter! Mostly it is learned by rote. No one questions whether anyone was massacred in the Boston

Massacre. The Sons of Liberty are never considered to have been a terrorist organization. Lincoln's sincerity in the Gettysburg Address is rarely questioned. Knowing that Lincoln delivered the address on Thursday, November 19, 1863 and being able to recite it mean nothing. Knowing if Lincoln was sincere when he included the phrase "government of the people, by the people, for the people" or if that phrase was a mere rhetorical flourish makes a world of difference. Learning history can be likened to learning Bible verses if questioning is excluded from the process.

Why have there been several wars after the War to End all Wars was won? No one ever asks. When books that raise questions are found in school libraries, they are often unceremoniously removed. Nothing even remotely like "a search for truth" ever takes place. School is Bible school all over again only without the Bible (whose absence is often lamented).

This kind of learning without questioning is carried over to our colleges and universities where the problem becomes really severe. Questionable courses like economics, for instance, are taught like Bible verses except the verses are now referred to as models. Subjects are taught as if they were comprised of revealed truths. Hardly anyone ever questions them because questioning them is discouraged. So we end up with people who graduate with degrees under their arms who are no wiser than they were on the days they matriculated as freshmen. They can be likened to cans being filled with trash. No new idea ever enters their heads. In this society, people who are learned are not educated. They are little different from hurdy gurdy monkeys, but we elect them to office. No new idea has entered the halls of Congress in more than a hundred years; yet we wonder why nothing essential has changed. What fools we be!

Conventional wisdom is not wise. If it were, human beings would be solving problems rather than perpetuating them. People used to say the proof is in the pudding; if the pudding tastes three hundred years old, it is!

No subject is itself unworthy of study, but how it's taught matters. Different subjects need to be taught differently. Learning is more than the conveyance of information. Penmanship cannot be taught like reading. Reading cannot be taught like multiplication. Multiplication cannot be taught like literature. Literature cannot be taught like chemistry. Some subjects are taught to provide students with techniques; students learn how to do things; other subjects are taught to develop minds. Americans, perhaps people elsewhere too, have never understood this and don't understand it today. Some people in Ancient Athens developed excellent minds; few today have minds that match them. These Athenians did not study a core curriculum or take standardized tests. Neither did Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Wagner, Madam Curie, Newton, Harvey, Einstein, and numerous others. Some "reformers" ought to have learned something from that! The "reformers" themselves did not study a core curriculum or take standardized tests. Why don't they ask themselves, How did we possibly learn anything without having done so? But no, questioning is not an American intellectual trait.

Even subjects like geometry can be questioned. If no mathematician had ever questioned Euclid's geometry, non-Euclidean geometry would never have been discovered.

The Europeans who settled America were not interested in developing anyone's mind. They had the good fortune of having come to America knowing everything. They wanted their children to learn what and only what they, themselves, already knew. Many still hold that

view today. For instance, the Republican Party of Texas in 2012 included in its Platform the following paragraph:

Knowledge-Based Education

We oppose the teaching of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) (values clarification), critical thinking skills and similar programs that are simply a relabeling of Outcome-Based Education (OBE) (mastery learning) which focus on behavior modification and have the purpose of challenging the student's fixed beliefs and undermining parental authority.

So the colonists established school systems overseen by local people, that is, themselves. They did not then, and many do not now, want anyone telling them what their children need to know. Teach about man-made global warming? Not in our schools. Teach about evolution? Not in our schools. Teach about racial equality? Not in our schools. Teach the Decalogue? Yeah! You bet! So we're back to Bible school! When the Puritans established Harvard College, they did so not to develop minds but only to create a place where preachers could be theologically trained. No search for scientific truth there! What about now?

Politicians are often criticized for being "out of touch with reality." How "out of touch" they are is easily shown.

"Calling education a pillar of restoring the new economy, President Obama [called](#) for a recommitment to educating scientists and engineers, people 'who are building and making things we can export to other countries.'"

America never had such a commitment.

Oh, yes! When the Russians put Sputnik into orbit, Americans "reformed" the educational system and science became all the rage. Like the rest of America's frequent rages, it didn't last. When Americans tried to tell students that science was fun, telling them that scientific work was often boring and monotonous was omitted, but students learned that for themselves in short order. Science was never as chic as being a rock star or star athlete. Hopefuls have never been attracted to science in numbers like those attracted to American Idol. In America, science is a flop. Five minutes of fame isn't.

So how "out of touch" are America's politicians? Look at the President's recommendation carefully. He has forgotten that Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and Mark Zuckerberg are not scientists, engineers, or even college graduates. Had Steve Jobs been minimally scientific, he would likely be alive today. Has the President forgotten that the products these entrepreneurs helped bring to the market are mostly made in Asia and imported to America? Doesn't the President know that scientists don't build products; factory workers do? Doesn't the President know that his view of the economy is 19th Century Sophomoric rather than 21st Century Undergraduate? How far "out of touch" can one be? Well, pretty far if you are an American. Reality can't be encapsulated in pithy bible-like verses.

Perhaps the President really believes that the scientists working at CERN are building stuff to sell to the Prince of Denmark to be used to kill the Emir of Kuwait. I don't know! The foreign-trained scientists who discovered how to build an atomic bomb for America did not then become manufacturers who built and exported bombs to the rest of the world. American politicians did that! Meteorologists don't design, build, and manufacture

weathervanes to sell to the rest of the world. What about archaeologists, astronomers, paleontologists, and volcanologists? Ah, yes, volcanologists! What products do they build and make to export to the rest of the world, Mr. President? What products, indeed? If this were not so stupid, it would be laughable! Indeed, America will not need more scientists and engineers until it begins to listen to those it already has like, for instance, its climatologists.

Most Americans, including Congressmen, the scions of business, and university professors do not understand science. Science, indeed all genuine knowledge, is characterized by the existence of irrefutable evidence; its claims can be shown to be true. If, in the search for evidence, proof is found that the claims are false, they are abandoned. People with unscientific minds fail to do one or the other of these two things. In fact, false claims that are not abandoned are associated with some jargon. Zombie claims are never abandoned by their stubborn adherents regardless of the strength of the evidence that refutes them. Cockroach claims are abandoned and then retrieved, often in an altered form. The result is the same—ignorance never dies. As Adlai Stevenson said, “Ignorance is stubborn!”

Take, for example, the claim of economists that supply and demand is a law. As evidence for it, they cite merchants and companies that raise prices when the supply is diminished or the demand is increased, as for instance, oil companies. The evidence they cite is true, but countervailing evidence can easily be found. Exxon-Mobil does often raise its prices when supply falls, but when the line of cars at gas pumps gets long, filling station operators do not usually run outside and raise the prices set in the pumps. So although supply and demand may be an often used business practice, it is not a scientific law. Many economic models are subject to the same criticism. Economics is not science; it is full of cockroach claims.

But this characteristic of science is not restricted to factual claims. It applies to policies too. When a policy that has a specific outcome as its goal can be shown not to work or even to be unworkable, scientific minds abandon it. Not political ones. In fact, political ideologies are founded on zombie ideas. A list of such policies is easily constructed: The war on drugs, the legal system, and American foreign policy top the list. They should have been abandoned decades ago if not sooner. But they have not!

You see, America is a credal nation as are most others. People are not merely irrational, they are anti-rational and anti-scientific. So what irony lurks in the minds of the President and those like him when they believe that this anti-scientific nation, without changing its ways, will be saved from its follies by scientists whom no one pays any attention to? What could be more absurd?

Such is the legacy of the Sunday School Syndrome. It yields the stubbornness of what are essentially stillborn minds. No amount of information conveyed can ever make a stupid person smart! So nothing fundamental will ever change until intellectual development rather than the conveyance of information becomes the principal goal of learning.

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