*Some Comments on De Cruz’ ‘The Relationship Between Science and Christianity: Understanding the Conflict Thesis in Lay Christians’*

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Deborah De Cruz’ interesting and insightful essay concerns Christians’ attitude towards science. She holds that lay Christians see a conflict between their religion and science, though the general non-lay attitude is that there is no such conflict. Moreover, the lack of scientific literacy amongst Christian lay people ‘constitutes a violation of their epistemic rights’ (p. 13). The essay raises a number of important questions. In what follows I will comment briefly on three of them.

*Christian Lay Attitudes* When she is being careful, De Cruz is clear that the attitude she describes pertains to Christians in the US, and specifically to (white) US evangelical Christians. And I think that she is absolutely right in this matter, as witnessed by the large creationist movement in the US—though it must be said that the attitude is a curiously one-eyed one: I know of no significant criticism by evangelicals of the science which informs the weaponry that many buy, the pharamceutical drugs that many of them take, the phones that most of them use, the space technology that allows these to function, and so on.

However, De Cruz’ words often suggest a more general claim about Christians. (For example, merely consider her title.) She does warn that the attitude she is discussing may not generalize to other Christians, but I think this point needs to be underlined. Evangelical Christians number about 630 *million*, about 100 million of which live in the US. There are some 2.4 *billion* Christians in the world, the largest single group of which comprises Catholics, of which there are about 1.2 billion. I am not a Christian, but I have many friends who are Christians—in Europe, Asia, and Australasia, and some of them are evangelicals. However, I know none who have the attitude described by De Cruz. Indeed, they regard creationism as a somewhat batty view. I realise that this evidence is entirely impressionistic, and hard empirical data, which I have neither the time nor the skills to investigate, may tell a different story. However, for better or for worse, this is my sense of the matter.

*Non-Lay Attitudes.*

I have no real knowledge of the academic literature on which De Cruz draws here, and I take her word that matters are as she says. However, even if contemporary non-lay people see no conflict between Christianity and science, the Christian Church has a long history of antagonism to science.

Perhaps this is not so much in the findings of science contradicting the *Bible*. After all, there is much in the *Bible* that virtually no Christians have believed for hundreds of years—for example that one should not eat pork or shellfish (Leviticus 11: 7-8, Deuteronomy 14: 8, Leviticus 9-12); that rebellious sons should be stoned to death (Deuteronomy 21: 18-21); similarly, a man *and* a betrothed virgin he rapes (Deuteronomy 22: 23-24). Of course, if those who wrote the *Bible* were divinely inspired, one cannot say that these things were simple mistakes: some story must be told about why they were fine at the time, but are no longer so now. More relevantly here, as De Cruz notes, most contemporary Christian theologians are more than comfortable with the idea that certain passages in the *Bible* are not literally true, but should be interpreted metaphorically (that the world was created in six days, and that everyone is descended from one man and the product of his rib, etc).

However, as De Cruz again notes, the Church has a long history of resisting scientific advances, especially about the place of humankind in the cosmos. In the European Middle Ages, humankind was held to be at the centre of the cosmos, both literally and metaphorically. The literal view was destroyed by the Copernican Revolution which showed that the Earth was not the centre of the cosmos. Indeed, the cosmos had no centre, being infinite in all directions. The Church responded by showing Galileo the thumb-screws. A couple of hundred years later the Darwinian revolution knocked humankind out of its metaphorical central place. Biologically, there was nothing special about the human race: it was just one of many species of animal, all produced by the same biological process—which, for all we know, has occurred in countless places throughout the cosmos. Darwin and Huxley were vehemently attacked, and their views rejected, by many Christians in positions of religious power. The echo of this attack is still to be heard amongst evangelical Christians in the US.

The Church cannot therefore claim innocence in anti-scientific views. Though most Christian churches now accept these scientific advances, I think it is fair to say that they came to this position unwillingly. The empirical success of science, and the technology which it made possible, ultimately made reasoned resistance unsustainable.

*Epistemic Rights*

Let us turn finally to the claim that the lack of scientific literacy amongst Christian lay people constitutes a violation of their epistemic rights. Again, I think this is very much a claim about evangelical Christians in the US. In most countries, scientific literacy is part of a general education.

Where such scientific illiteracy does obtain, should one account this a ‘violation of epistemic rights’? The notion of a moral right is a vexed one. What, exactly, is it in virtue of which such a right exists? The answer, unlike that in the case of a legal right, is far from clear. And one might well wonder whether there are specifically *epistemic* rights. Do you have a right to know something simply because I know to be true? However, these issues are too big to go into here. And it can certainly be agreed that ignorance is not a good thing—whether this be about science or anything else. Moreover, it is undoubtedly the case that, absent some very specific conditions, generating ignorance by lying or deceit is morally culpable.

But assume that some story about epistemic rights is correct. Evangelical Christians in the US are having these rights violated. A more pointed question in this case is who it is that is doing the violating. The nearest De Cruz gives us to an answer is that ‘the religious right, in concert with conservative politicians, have promoted an anti-science discourse’ (p. 13). That, I am sure, is true. But the odd thing about this is that these people are themselves Christians (at least, given the US, I assume that most of the politicians in question are Christians). Hence, it would seem that one bunch of Christians is violating the rights of another bunch. So this seems like a Christian own-goal. Even more strangely, you cannot violate your own rights, so it makes no sense to suppose that the violators are violating themselves. What is one to say about their debased situation?

I leave this for De Cruz to answer. Perhaps a more pressing question is this. Since violation is presumably not a good thing, what is to be done about this? The obvious answer is to stop the anti-science promotion. But how to do this? The answer may depend on why it is that the people concerned engage in the behaviour. Are they doing this deliberately and cynically, or are they themselves benighted? Probably some are one and some are the other. In the first case one must take the possibility of gain—either financial or political or both—out of the action; though how one might best go about doing this is far from clear. The second case is tougher in many ways, for the people in question now largely have control of the education system in those places where this is happening. So we face the old conundrum of how one educates the educators.

I have no magic solution to these problems, and I doubt that anyone else has. However, I take this to be the most important issue exposed by De Cruz’ essay.