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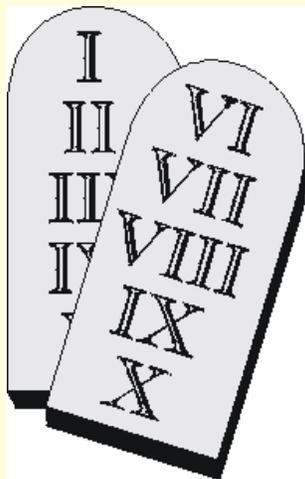
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DATA OR DOGMA: What Should Be the Basis for Educational Policy, and Who Should Decide?

by Michael R. Honig

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I think it was Thomas Jefferson, when talking of the need for public schools, who said: "An educated electorate is a prerequisite for a democracy." This is something with which I can think we can all agree, but the question seems to remain: Who decides what constitutes an educated person, and who decides what that education should include?

Well, as a prerequisite, let's establish a couple of definitions as summarized from several dictionaries:

Data: Facts or figures from which conclusions can be inferred.

Dogma: A point of view or alleged authoritative tenet put forth without adequate factual foundation.

So, we come back to the title question: What Should Be the Basis for Educational Policy, and Who Should Decide It? Should the content of curricula be determined by facts or by what feels good or right? In short, should our children's lessons be based on data or dogma?

As examples, let's look at four specific questions:

- Will posting the Ten Commandments in schools really improve behavior?
- Where would (or should) religion-based ideas like Creationism fit in, if at all?
- What role should religion play in educational curricula, and in what ways should it be included, if at all?

- What kind of history should be taught in our schools? How do we feel about 'feel good' history in our curricula, and what is its impact over the long term?

In the first case:

Will posting the Ten Commandments in schools really improve behavior?

Some say yes, arguing that it's the withdrawal of religion from schools that has resulted in the decline of morals in this country. The dogma might presuppose two things – that the Ten Commandments will impact behavior, even in the absence (since it is prohibited) of any actual instruction about them, and that the Ten Commandments, when encountered elsewhere, have less impact than when they are encountered by students in schools.

The only other alternative argument for displaying the Ten Commandments in schools is that if they're not displayed there, students will encounter them nowhere else. I think this would speak poorly of the instruction which educational bureaucrats expect children to encounter about morality at home, or in church or synagogue or mosque.

The data, to my knowledge, is that there is no empirical evidence that displaying the Ten Commandments in school (assuming it was Constitutional to do so) would affect student behavior in any meaningful way. Evidence further suggests that there are a great many places where children can encounter and be instructed about the Ten Commandments, without their incorporation into the school environment.

In the second case:

Where would (or should) religion-based ideas like Creationism fit in, if at all?

Supporters of teaching Creationism in schools try to obfuscate their religious objectives by renaming it "Scientific Creationism." This is an oxymoron, and it shows a fundamental misunderstanding by Creationist fundamentalists of exactly what "science" is, and how scientists are trained to think..

Supporters of Scientific Creationism argue that "Evolution" is only a theory, and therefore should have no greater standing than Scientific Creationism when biology is taught. This argument is disingenuous at best, and specious at worst.

Science is the asking of questions, with an open mind as to what the answers might be. A true scientist may have his or her own theories about what results an experiment might demonstrate, but they will (or should!) nonetheless be willing to let the facts speak for themselves, even at the possible expense of a pet theory. The pseudo-science called Scientific Creationism, on the other hand, is the certainty of what the answers are, and trying to find data that supports them.

True scientists MUST recognize inconsistencies between what facts they predict, and what facts present themselves. If they do not, then they are being dogmatists rather than scientists.

If we use the analogies of quiz shows, so-called Scientific Creationism is *Jeopardy*, where you have the answer and now merely find the correct question, whereas true science is more like *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*, except that all the answers include the possibility of "none of the above."

Scientific Creationism is really a religiously based intellectual exercise that seeks proofs for a theologically centered, Judeo-Christian view of how the Universe began. It is not truly a scientific inquiry that dispassionately seeks facts which then lead to conclusions. Thus, it belongs in a comparative religion class, not a science class.

For example, how does "Scientific Creationism" stack up against the Hindu notion of how the Universe began, or, for that matter, the ancient Greek myths or even Native American ideas of where all things began? Without objective facts to back them up, aren't they all just dogmatic mythologies?

This brings us to the third question:

What role should religion play in educational curricula, and in what ways should it be included, if at all?

Personally, I don't believe religion has a place in schools as part of their intellectual and philosophical indoctrination of students, but religion must be taught about in schools, since it's a prime mover, actor and player in history and civilization from the distant, even prehistoric past into our present day, and into the foreseeable future.

For that matter, there's no escaping the importance of *dogma* (intellectual as well as religious) in the shaping of secular history and the secular world. It's not just a component or shaper of religion.

Today, we have expunged religion from our textbooks so thoroughly that some make no mention of why the Puritans came to America.

Whether you're a believer or not, there's no escaping the importance of religion and dogma in the shaping of history and the world as we know it today. It's ridiculous to keep the fact of religion out of schools, but the question then is, how to include it?

And that segues us nicely into the fourth question, and the issue of historical dogma.

What kind of history should be taught in our schools? How do we feel about 'feel good' history in our curricula, and what is its impact over the long term?

As an example, when children are taught about the War of 1812, they are usually told of the British burning of Washington, DC, in September of 1813. But how many know or are taught that it was at least partly in retaliation for American burning five months earlier of Canada's then-capital of York (later called Toronto)? Not many, I find. This is an example of the perpetuation and insidiousness of self-serving historical dogma.

Why should we even ask these questions? Why should we care if our children are taught that Creationism is comparable to Evolution as a theory, or that the British burned Washington in 1813 without learning the full context of the attack?

We need to ask these questions because we need to learn the complete picture; because we need to learn to see the many sides to every story; because in a world of over six billion people, getting our needs met usually means altering, in some small way, the behavior of someone else — whether it's getting people to value free speech, the protection of the environment, tolerance of different cultural or lifestyle choices, or taking all of their antibiotic prescription.

In order to get these needs met, we need to learn to trust data — and our own analysis of that data — over dogma, so that our interactions are aided by our ability to rationally analyze their arguments, and their ability to rationally analyze ours.

I would argue for an education of inclusion rather than exclusion of facts. For example, some might argue that making a point of including women or various ethnic or religious groups in history (sometimes even developing within a curriculum whole units of minority contributions to history and civilization) is simply a fashionable response to 'political correctness,' but to exclude or minimize the impacts of groups or individuals because of their religion, ethnicity or gender is comparable to the concept of "New Think" put forward in Orwell's *1984*. The notion of "history being written by the winners" is probably true, but it's not useful. Rather, it invites the repetition of historical mistakes through "institutional forgetting."

Because "An educated electorate is a prerequisite for a democracy" — because while science fiction is fun, we need to teach the difference between science and fiction — because while religion may bring comfort and strength to some, its tenets shouldn't be confused with secular fact — and because while feel-good history might make us feel better about ourselves and our country, it prevents us from understanding why the rest of the world feels the way it does, and dealing effectively and constructively with that reality.

Dogma has an undeniable appeal for many. It leaves things settled, beyond dispute, infallible. It offers a sense of security and predictability. But it also permits or gives rise to narrow-mindedness, wrong-headedness and tunnel vision. It creates needless obstacles to true knowledge and understanding.

Our educational system must teach data and facts. Offering possible interpretations of facts in the course of teaching them is reasonable, but facts and data must be taught in context. In education as well as relationships, a lie by omission is still a lie.

So how do we decide what's taught, and how?

Some things lend themselves more readily to clear answers: Math, chemistry, and physics are three examples. It's mainly at the abstract and esoteric levels — the cutting edges of knowledge and theory — where these subjects become gray. Problems arise most often in interpretive areas of study, such as archaeology, paleontology, cosmology and history, where much is often inferred from little. Here, fact can be hard to pin down, and analysis and interpretation become slippery slopes.

There will always be conflicting perspectives of history, for example, ranging from the jingoistically patriotic "My country is never wrong" to the morbidly self-flagellistic "My country is always exploitive and oppressive."

What are we to do? Some ideas:

Establish a rigorous institutional framework, made up of a mixture of federal, state and local bodies. Set goals directed toward the greatest possible objectivity, reinforced by peer review. Use multilevel review to effect an averaging of biases, thus reducing extremes. Use the process to prevent one faction or ideology from having excessive influence.

This may be a situation where the pull and tug of committees is ultimately a productive thing.

Systematically attempt to acknowledge and analyze biases, and by thus recognizing them make them easier to subtract.

Use the scientific process for curricula decisions. Establish what is fact, what is theory and what is speculation, and present each as what it is.

These are only general ideas. The devil, as always, would be in the details, but if critical thinking skills are taught — if the ability to evaluate disparate bits of information and reach reasonable conclusions is part of each child's education — facts will usually speak for themselves, and further reduce the possibility of intellectual bias creeping into what's taught. People can then make their own decisions about what is reality — based upon the facts.

It may not always be intellectually comfortable, but it will lead to a better understanding of the world we live in, the people with whom we share it, and a far greater appreciation of all that has preceded us and all that will follow — and it will make us stronger as a people and as a nation.

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The "Gas Pump Needle-Stick" Internet Hoax

Urban Legend Debunkers and CDC to the Rescue as E-mail Scare Hits the Information Superhighway

By Daniel R. Barnett

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Just as summer came into bloom and gasoline prices started skyrocketing, some Americans who have gone on-line have started receiving word that

gasoline pumps have found a new way to stick it to consumers. I received an e-mail warning that was being distributed to employees of a school district somewhere in North Texas. Here's the complete text of the warning I received:

*****DANGEROUS PRANK:*****

Please read and forward to anyone you know who drives.

My name is Captain Abraham Sands of the Jacksonville, Florida Police Department. I have been asked by state and local authorities to write this email in order to get the word out to car drivers of a very dangerous prank that is occurring in numerous states.

Some person or persons have been affixing hypodermic needles to the underside of gas pump handles. These needles appear to be infected with HIV positive blood. In the Jacksonville area alone there have been 17 cases of people being stuck by these needles over the past five months.

We have verified reports of at least 12 others in various states around the country. It is believed that these may be copycat incidents due to someone reading about the crimes or seeing them reported on the television. At this point no one has been arrested and catching the perpetrator(s) has become our top priority.

Shockingly, of the 17 people who where stuck, eight have tested HIV positive and because of the nature of the disease, the others could test positive in a couple years.

Evidently the consumers go to fill their car with gas, and when picking up the pump handle get stuck with the infected needle. IT IS IMPERATIVE TO CAREFULLY CHECK THE HANDLE of the gas pump each time you use one. LOOK AT EVERY SURFACE YOUR HAND MAY TOUCH, INCLUDING UNDER THE HANDLE.

If you do find a needle affixed to one, immediately contact your local police department so they can collect the evidence.

*****PLEASE HELP US BY MAINTAINING A VIGILANCE AND BY FORWARDING THIS EMAIL TO ANYONE YOU KNOW WHO DRIVES. THE MORE PEOPLE WHO KNOW OF THIS THE BETTER PROTECTED WE CAN ALL BE.

Naturally, this report of someone sticking HIV-contaminated needles on gas pumps sounds awful, especially if innocent lives were being endangered as a result of this callous act. But then I got to thinking about this warning. I asked myself, "Why is Captain Sands distributing an e-mail about needle traps? Hasn't he informed the newspapers and the television networks about this crisis?"

I tried to find the Jacksonville Police Department on the Web so I could get more information about this horrible prank, but it turns out that the city of Jacksonville, Florida, is served by the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office rather than a Police Department. And if there is a Captain Abraham Sands who works there, I have yet to find him. He certainly doesn't appear to be the spokesperson for the Sheriff's Office. The warning about booby-trapped gas pumps was starting to look rather dubious.

It turns out that a few folks on the Internet already knew about Captain Sands' warning – and they've already debunked it.

Web sites such as The AFU & Urban Legends Archive, the Urban Legends Reference Pages, and the Urban Legends Resource Centre (based in Australia) have already published reports on the "Gas Pump Needle-Stick" e-mail. Apparently, it is nothing more than a cruel joke. And those 17 people who have already been stuck by the needles? Apparently, they never existed. According to Barbara Mikkelson of the Urban Legends Reference Pages:

No news stories out of Florida confirm the e-mail's claim that 17 people have so far been injured by these attacks. Furthermore, the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta have made no statement about any such incidents being reported to them and maintain they are not aware of any cases where HIV has been transmitted by a needle-stick injury outside of a health care setting.

Apparently, this farce is the latest in a list of similar urban legends that deal with being pricked by tainted needles left as booby traps on movie theater seats, in telephone coin-return slots, and elsewhere. In a report dated June 19, 2000, the CDC commented on various reports that the CDC confirmed that the needles carried HIV:

Some reports have falsely indicated that CDC "confirmed" the presence of HIV in the needles. CDC has not tested such needles nor has CDC confirmed the presence or absence of HIV in any sample related to these rumors. The majority of these reports and warnings appear to have no foundation in fact.

There's a lot of hype over needle-sticks, but is there any fire to justify the smoke? A little, but not much — I managed to find only two cases. The CDC had this to offer in its June 19 report:

CDC recently was informed of one incident in Virginia of a needle stick from a small-gauge needle (believed to be an insulin needle) in a coin return slot of a pay phone. The incident was investigated by the local police department. Several days later, after a report of this police action appeared in a local newspaper, a needle was found in a vending machine but did not cause a needle-stick injury.

In addition, I remember seeing an episode of COPS a year or two ago in which a police officer (in Texas, if I remember correctly) accidentally pricked himself on a used needle stuffed into the jeans pocket of a drug addict he was searching. He took immediate precautions to cleanse the wound to lessen the chance of infection; a blood test administered later gave the officer a clean bill of health. Bear in mind that neither of these needle-sticks happened anywhere near Florida, let alone Jacksonville.

The CDC report went on to state that inappropriately discarded needles are occasionally found in public places, often discarded by diabetics or drug addicts. While such needles, if they penetrate the skin, can transmit blood and blood-borne pathogens such as HIV and hepatitis, the CDC noted that "the

risk of transmission from discarded needles is extremely low." Still, anyone who is accidentally pricked by a discarded needle is advised by the CDC to "contact their physician or go to an emergency room as soon as possible."

As for the individual responsible for starting this particular e-mail chain I found myself on, I contacted her and informed her that the warning appeared to be a hoax. She seemed relieved, so I'm hoping she'll inform everyone on the chain. I have no idea who sent the original "Captain Sands" e-mail that started this mess, but if you find yourself receiving the "Gas Pump Needle-Stick" warning or a similar hoax in e-mail, I advise you to take similar action to stop it cold unless someone can provide you with convincing evidence to back the claim.

Law enforcement officials across the United States are already preoccupied with chasing bank robbers, investigating murders, searching for missing persons, and otherwise trying to keep their communities safe. The last thing they need to concern themselves with is a flood of inquiries dealing with urban legends and media scams; that goes double for nervous motorists. Now, if some idiot does start spiking gas pumps (or anything else) with poisoned needles, I definitely want to know about it – but through a reputable source. As for the warning from "Captain Abraham Sands," I think it's high time for this hoax to run out of gas.

Internet Resources Concerning "Needle-Stick" Urban Legends:

Mikkelson, Barbara. "Gas Trick Upset." *Urban Legends Reference Pages*; June 19, 2000. <http://www.snopes.com/horrors/mayhem/gaspump.htm>

Mikkelson, David P; Mikkelson, Barbara. "Slots of Fun." *Urban Legends Reference Pages*; March 25, 1999. <http://www.snopes.com/horrors/mayhem/payphone.htm>

"Pump Fake." *The AFU & Urban Legends Archive*. <http://www.urbanlegends.com/ulz/pumpneedles.html>

"Hypodermic Hysteria." *The AFU & Urban Legends Archive*. <http://www.urbanlegends.com/ulz/needles.html>

"Are these stories true?" *CDC-NCHSTP-Divisions of HIV/AIDS Prevention*; June 19, 2000. <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/pubs/faq/faq5a.htm>

"The Needle and the Damage Done." *Urban Legends Research Centre*; September 26, 1999. <http://www.ulrc.Com.au/html/report.asp?CaseFile=ULRR0017&Page=1&View=Request&Collection=Angst>

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Web news

by **John Blanton**

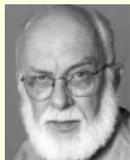
[The Web is probably the least reliable source of information. But it's free.]

Alternative science



Richard Milton (from the Alternative Science Web site)

Richard Milton (richard.milton@virgin.net) operates the *Alternative Science* Web site at <http://www.alternativescience.com/>. More recently he has been taking James Randi to task for, of all things, making his skeptical challenge too challenging.



James Randi (from the James Randi Web site at <http://www.randi.org>)

Through the James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF), Randi offers a million dollar prize *to be awarded to any individual or individuals who provide evidence under proper observing conditions of any psychic, supernatural, or occult power or event*. Milton has spoken out on the issue of such challenges/prizes, and he relayed some of his sentiments by e-mail:

I haven't made a blanket statement about such challenges — I only knew of Randi's challenge and was speaking specifically about his rules, which I believe do have those defects for the reasons I give on the site (mainly that Randi has prejudiced any trial by making it clear he is unwilling to accept any 'paranormal' effects as real.)

...

Having interviewed quite a few people who feel they have been treated unfairly by individuals calling themselves 'skeptics' (and having been treated unfairly myself) I'd say the most important thing about the rules is that they must reassure any challenger that he/she is not simply being set up as a patsy, so that the people offering the prize can say "I told you so — there's no such thing". That, obviously, requires some care and sensitivity.

We discussed the NTS paranormal challenge, and I assured Mr. Milton that our own challenge and certainly Randi's are not meant as traps to catch and ridicule hapless dupes. We expect to receive challenges by people claiming to be able to do the impossible.

A new, hot item at Milton's site is titled "Too hot to handle":

In April 1993, the defence magazine *Jane's International Defence Review* announced the discovery by a British amateur inventor, Maurice Ward, of a thin plastic coating able to withstand temperatures of 2,700 degrees Centigrade

The reason why it was a defence magazine who first published news of This revolutionary invention is that the coating is so resistant to heat that it can make tanks, ships and aircraft impervious to the effects of nuclear weapons at quite close range — and hence is of great interest to the military mind.

A little later that year the whole nation had an opportunity to see for themselves the effectiveness of Maurice Ward's new paint on BBC Television when it was featured on "Tomorrow's World". Presenter Michael Rodd showed viewers an ordinary chicken's egg that had been painted with the new coating. The paint was so thin it was not visible. Rodd then dramatically donned welder's visor and gauntlets, lit up an oxyacetylene torch, and played the flame directly onto the egg for several minutes.

When he removed the flame, and cracked the egg on the table top, viewers were able to see that the coating was so heat resistant that the egg was still raw and had not even begun to cook.

This invention, a simple paint that can render anything impervious to very high temperatures, has been the holy grail of chemical research for more than fifty years.

Teams of scientists in the world's greatest industrial and defence laboratories have poured billions of pounds and hundreds of man-years into the search for such a substance — a quest which made Ward's discovery even more extraordinary.

Ward's invention is remarkable enough, but the story of how he came to make it, and the resistance he encountered in getting anyone to believe him, is even more remarkable.

I think I may have seen this movie before. It's a fine old British film called *The Man in the White Suit*. In the movie, the hero, a lowly lab gofer, invents a textile that is practically indestructible. Naturally, the folks from Manchester and Leeds are not amused and successfully suppress the invention. Apparently Mr. Ward has been more fortunate.

Milton's site touches on many of the key alternative science issues, including cold fusion, NBC's *Mysterious Origins of Man*, Forest Mimms, Jacques Benveniste, evolution, ESP, psychokinesis, and bio-energy. We have previously covered many of these topics in *The Skeptic* and *The North Texas Skeptic*. Past issues are in a searchable database on our Web site at ntskeptics.org.

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Amazon books on the NTS Web site

Although the NTS is a non-profit organization, we do have income. A new source of income is our Web site at ntskeptics.org. We have added links to book sales through Amazon.com to our site, and we encourage members and others to use the site when making book purchases over the Internet.

Whenever you link to Amazon through one of our links, the URL that is sent to Amazon contains our special code and the NTS gets a commission on the sale. We hope this will be a continuing source of income for the NTS, allowing us to use our expanded bank account to take on additional projects.

This commercial venture is a departure from our traditional stance of not endorsing products or accepting advertising in our newsletter. Although it is possible to purchase any Amazon book through our site, we will continue to feature only books of special interest to our members.

Our book section currently features many of the notable titles relating to skeptical issues. We have sections by James Randi, Martin Gardner, Stephen Jay Gould, Kendrick Frazier, Phillip J. Klass, and Richard Dawkins. We have a special section of books related to the creation/evolution controversy, and we have a section of famous books by creationists. We also have a section on books by pseudoscience writer Rupert Sheldrake.

Many of the books by pseudoscience writers are already in our NTS library and are available for reading by members. However, if you want to purchase your own copy we encourage you to do it through the NTS Web site.

We will update the book section periodically to keep it current and fresh. Check it out and make suggestions for additions.

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Skeptical ink

By Prasad Golla and John Blanton

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