The PhD Degree and Biblical Fundamentalism

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Is it appropriate to award a PhD degree in a natural science to a fundamentalist candidate who is committed to believing that explanations of scientifically gathered data must be made in agreement with a literal interpretation of the Bible? A specific example of this problem can be seen in my review of the book Astronomy and the Bible by Donald B. DeYoung, SJ March/ April 2007, p. 69, 71.

Historically, some very good science has been done by people of diverse religious beliefs with various degrees of commitment to the inerrancy of holy scriptures (e.g., Kepler, Newton, Galileo). Today, however, science deals with the material universe and naturalistic explanations thereof. Supernatural phenomena and explanations are considered outside the realm of science. Secular universities and peer-reviewed journals are unlikely to accept a PhD candidate’s dissertation if it involves supernatural interpretations. A candidate may believe whatever she or he wishes about a supernatural world; as long as these beliefs are not used to explain or interpret scientifically gathered data.

Would it not be appropriate for a thesis committee to at least ask a PhD candidate to define her or his “philosophy” of science? Or has our experience with McCarthyism made us so sensitized that such a question would be akin to asking about a person’s age, health problems, financial status, sexual preference, or political affiliation? What is wrong with asking the question “What do you believe to be the most productive way to learn about the material universe, and what is the rationale for your belief?” If the candidate believes that science is not that “way,” then why is he or she pursuing an advanced degree and career in science? Would it not be hypocritical for a candidate to believe that the interpretation of data from scientific research should conform to the Bible (or other sacred documents) while striving to gain a degree in a field of study that has proscribed supernatural and religious input? What should a thesis committee, charged with passing judgment on the qualifications of candidates for a PhD degree in science, do with those whose commitments to science lie in philosophies that are antagonistic to the advancement and teaching of science? Should they do anything at all? How would financial aid sponsors for such candidates feel if they learned about the acceptance of their scholarships by a candidate whose philosophy is contrary to the interests of science? Is it right that a fundamentalist student takes one of the very limited enrollment positions in a PhD program, thereby depriving another serious student who is committed to advancing science by working entirely within its methodology, a chance to prove him- or herself? Of course, a candidate could lie about his or her personal convictions to deceive the people charged with screening applicants for a PhD program. Some candidates may consider that the end result justifies the means. Unfortunately, there seems to be little that can be done to circumvent this possibility. Nor is it possible to prevent a person who earned a PhD without fundamentalist beliefs from later changing his or her philosophical view regarding science.

Educational institutions sponsored by religious groups understandably might prefer to employ teachers with fundamentalist beliefs, especially if they have obtained a PhD in a natural science from a secular university, because of the prestige...

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that would accrue to the hiring school. Furthermore, if such a teacher authors one or more “science” books espousing his or her religious beliefs, his or her PhD degree would likely enhance the sales and acceptance of these publications by potential readers. Many publishing houses are devoted to sponsoring and promulgating such works. The influence such authors could have among the general public might potentially spread far beyond the classrooms in which they teach.

What about a fundamentalist PhD that enters the secular academic world and becomes privileged to teach science classes? Will the teacher be allowed to abuse her or his academic freedom of speech by philosophizing about unscientific ways of explaining the physical universe in science classes? Where in the pipeline from a candidate’s entry into the PhD program to her or his graduation and teaching appointment, in a public-supported school, is there any oversight or regulation? If basic philosophies do not matter, what does the academic title PhD represent? I fear that as long as educational systems continue to avoid addressing these concerns, students being taught “science” by fundamentalist teachers are at risk of (among other things) being confused about the boundaries of science and the methods whereby scientific knowledge is gained. Let freedom ring, but let it ring in the right places.