

NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE

MAY 9, 2012 4:00 A.M.

Guilt by Association

Let's stop conflating the creationist hoi polloi with skeptical climate scientists.

By Patrick J. Michaels

My friends on the left make much of the apparent correlation between creationism and skepticism about assured climate disaster. It is the “some–all fallacy” writ large. “Some” climate scientists who happen to believe in intelligent design, a variant of creationism, also question the high-sensitivity climate model. Therefore “all” who hypothesize that warming has been overblown must also question evolution; i.e., they are ignorant dolts.

Note to the Left on this one: No one — scientist or otherwise — has yet come up with the definitive explanation of the first life forms on earth. There is no conclusive bridge between self-replicating molecules capable of mutation (a definition of life) and the primordial, lifeless, dimly-lit planet Earth of some 3 billion years ago. So even the most erudite thinkers must resort to aliens, life-bearing comets, God — or, in my case, beats-the-heck-out-of-me.

My lefty friends are somewhat condescending towards skeptical climate scientists. Who hasn't heard of Chris Mooney's drivel that Republicans (in general), and those who think climate change isn't horrible (in particular), are mentally ill? I guess it's a good way to win an argument; after all, I think the people I disagree with are nuts, too.

The “some” of the fallacy is the University of Alabama's Roy Spencer, a climate physicist who argues (as do I) that the “sensitivity” of climate to dreaded carbon dioxide has been overestimated in computer models. Spencer also believes in intelligent design.

Spencer's chosen form of belief to explain the mystery of the first life on Earth is hardly germane to a rational discussion of his interpretation of climate findings.

There are plenty of productive and successful scientists who go to church — most of which preach that God created man. And there are plenty of good scientists who don't.

So far as I can tell, the percentage of climate skeptics who are also religious is about the same as among the entire population of climate scientists in general. Some apocalyptic warmists believe in God, too, you know. At the University of Virginia, where I spent 30 years in the Department of Environmental Sciences, most of my colleagues didn't attend church, but some did. There was little correlation between their religious beliefs and their scientific success. While the atmospheric scientists in that department were known for their skepticism about the upcoming climate disaster, none were churchgoers.

Away from academia, some creationists are successfully pushing state legislatures to dictate that their point of view, as well as global-warming skepticism, be a part of the public-school curriculum. These people are not just skeptics about climate change, but, rather, skeptics about science itself, because it is inconsistent with their belief system. Biblical literalists don't like the easy demonstration that the Earth is billions of years old — and that's merely the beginning of their complaints about science.

The lesson is that in the civilian world, people with strong beliefs try to manipulate science. But in the universe of scientific professionals, belief has little bearing on science. (This does *not* mean that there are no inherent biases in environmental science, but that's a separate topic.)

While literalists are uncomfortable with science, they (generally) will go to a physician for science-based treatment, and (most) will immunize their children. That's because they obtain gain — relief from pain, prevention of disease — from accepting modern medical science. Scientific skepticism is suspended when it can cost your life.

But things are different when a belief extracts no cost, which is the case with creationism. It doesn't get suspended. On the other hand, science should be

vigorously questioned if it indeed leads to massive societal costs, as must be the case if global warming is portrayed by scientists as a calamity.

It should not be forgotten that scientific history is littered with discredited theories that were once universally accepted as truth. I and others hypothesize that we will one day add to that list the dogmatic belief that global warming will spell the end of humanity as we know it. On that day, the river of criticism about the dangers of blind faith will flow in the other direction.

Let's stop conflating the creationist hoi polloi with skeptical climate scientists. The mystery about how life arose on earth is simply unrelated to global-warming science, no matter what those scientists might believe.

— *Patrick J. Michaels is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.*