

Comment

## The new Manichaeans

Gregory A Petsko

Address: Rosenstiel Basic Medical Sciences Research Center, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA 02454-9110, USA.

Email: [petsko@brandeis.edu](mailto:petsko@brandeis.edu)

Published: 29 May 2008

*Genome Biology* 2008, **9**:105 (doi:10.1186/gb-2008-9-5-105)

The electronic version of this article is the complete one and can be found online at <http://genomebiology.com/2008/9/5/105>

© 2008 BioMed Central Ltd

I'm writing this on Memorial Day, a holiday in the US to commemorate those who gave their lives in defense of this country. Not far from where I'm sitting, in a town on the edge of Boston, there is a square named after a young man from that town who went to fight in the Vietnam War and never came home. The area around the square is mostly populated by immigrants now - from Vietnam. That simple fact says more than any churchyard sermon on the ultimate futility of war.

Of course, that war is stupid doesn't in any way diminish the courage and nobility of the young men and women who fight, and sometimes die, in it. But it does mean that those who use war as a metaphor should be aware of its inherent irony, and have a special obligation to get their facts straight.

George Bush did neither the other day when he made the following remark, which was calculated to be a criticism of Barack Obama, who has advocated opening a dialogue with nations like Iran and North Korea:

"Some seem to believe that we should negotiate with the terrorists and radicals... We have heard this foolish delusion before. As Nazi tanks crossed into Poland in 1939, an American senator declared: 'Lord, if I could only have talked to Hitler, all this might have been avoided'."

Now let's forget for a moment that this show of courageous defiance was uttered by a man who never fought in a war, but has shown no compunction about starting them, and sending other people to fight and die in them. Let's also forget that his administration is currently negotiating with North Korea, a country he himself has called part of the 'axis of evil'. Hypocrisy notwithstanding, the remark was factually incorrect: President Bush was equating negotiation with appeasement, but they are simply not the same. It may have been effective, however, because it invoked the specter of Naziism and Adolf Hitler, which are generally considered among the greatest evils mankind has ever known.

Comparing your opponent, or their position, to something connected with the embodiment of evil is a popular - and frequently successful - debating tactic. All you have to do to end the discussion in your favor is to accuse someone who criticizes Israel of being an anti-Semite, or to argue that those favoring socialism are no better than Stalin, or to say that someone who wants to talk to Iran would have favored appeasing Hitler. Or to say that someone who doesn't believe in God, or who advocates policies that go against what you think is God's word, is in league with the Devil.

The later is exactly the argument that some religious fundamentalists make about scientists, especially those who advocate embryonic stem cell research, or try to teach evolution in the public schools, or do any one of a number of things that seemingly contradict a literal interpretation of the Bible (or, for that matter, the Koran). Such tactics not only put science on the defensive, they are almost impossible to answer without changing the debate to a theological one. I wonder, though, if the God-fearing people who use these tactics realize that they are actually following in the footsteps of a famous group of heretics.

The idea that the world can be divided into two opposing, and opposite sides is called dualism. It has perhaps its ultimate expression in a religion that thrived between the third and seventh centuries, but was still practiced sporadically in the sixteenth century. It was called Manichaeism, after its founding prophet Mani, who was martyred in Persia around AD 277. Manichaeism had a complex theology but its fundamental principle was the existence of, and eternal conflict between, absolute good and absolute evil. Manichaeism was considered a heresy by all the major religions of the time, including Christianity, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Islam; despite this, at one point it was among the most popular religions in the world, spreading from the Middle East as far as China and Britain.

Augustine of Hippo, the famous Catholic philosopher, was actually a Manichaean for nine years before his conversion to Christianity in AD 387. A lot of what we know about Manichaean beliefs comes from his description of them in several of his most famous writings, including a number of treatises specifically directed against Manichaean teachings. The core of his philosophical argument was that absolute evil does not exist, because evil is not a thing in itself. Augustine argued that all things are inherently good in nature, and that what we call evil is merely the absence of goodness.

No doubt he would be appalled to learn that there is still a strong Manichaean streak in many modern religions today - especially in their fundamentalist forms. When the religious right calls scientists agents of evil or claims that those who believe in evolution are in league with the Devil, they are adopting an essentially Manichaean world view. To see things in black and white without realizing that there can be shades of gray, or that not everything is part of a moral dichotomy, is what philosophers call the Manichaean fallacy.

The danger of Manichaean thinking is that it can lead to terrible conclusions. If you believe that you are on the side of absolute good, and that your opponent is on the side of absolute evil, then it is a small step to conclude that any action you take against them is morally justifiable. Manichaeism is the philosophical underpinning behind the most reprehensible idea I know of: that the end justifies the means. That little notion has been responsible for more human misery than just about any other premise. Once you've demonized the opposition, you can take their land, their property, their freedom, even their lives and still believe you're a good person. How can you not be, when you're on the side of absolute good? This principle explains the detention, and torture, of suspected terrorists, because the term 'terrorist' has taken on a Manichaean connotation equal to that of 'Nazi' or 'devil-worshiper'. The President of the United States clearly has a Manichaean world view, and it is likely that Tony Blair did, too. That puts them in interesting company, as the Mullahs who run Iran certainly do, and Osama bin Laden obviously does.

Manichaean dualism also strikes me as intellectually lazy. If you make blanket condemnations, you don't have to do the hard work of trying to understand your opponent's arguments, or of making the difficult distinction between those who are truly malicious and others who are merely misguided. You also never question the actions, and intentions, of your own side.

If I were an evil person, this kind of laziness would offer me a great place to hide. When your enemies are quick to condemn your entire nation, or religion, it's not likely they will go after you or any other individual villain. Moreover, you can probably count on your own countrymen to shield

you, no matter what you've done, since they are, after all, being lumped in with you. Collective guilt is a huge mistake; it makes it much less likely that the actual people responsible for atrocities will be called to account. Besides, collective guilt is just another manifestation of the Manichaean fallacy. Nations and religions and ethnic groups are not evil; only individuals are.

But the greatest danger of Manichaean thinking is that it begets more of the same. If your enemies appear to hate and vilify you, then you are more likely to feel the same way about them. And I am afraid this may be happening right now, to us.

I'm sure that great evolutionary biologists like Richard Dawkins have far more experience contending with creationists and fundamentalists than I do, so I suppose I ought to listen to them when they say that we shouldn't debate with those who oppose the teaching of evolution or who argue that a creationist view deserves equal place in science education, because doing so gives our enemies a platform and an air of credibility. But every time I hear such an argument, the ghost of the Manichaeans haunts me. Refusing to talk with your opponents sounds like George Bush refusing to talk to the Iranians; if it isn't Manichaeism, it's the first step on a very slippery slope that leads there. And it's also lazy: it makes no distinction between those who will never be convinced - either because they believe without thinking, or are using fundamentalism cynically for political purposes - and those who could be convinced that what they believe and what we as scientists know to be true can peacefully coexist. It also feeds the Manichaean fervor of the fundamentalists, who can then argue that, if we aren't agents of evil, why are we refusing to meet them on even terms?

If you think I'm reading too much into Dawkins' objection, his most recent book, *The God Delusion*, makes me pretty sure I am not. The book takes a very intolerant tone, scorning not just religion but its believers. Calling religion "nonsense" may be commendable candor, but I don't think it serves science well, especially today, to drift towards a Manichaean view of religion. I think many people who adhere to religious beliefs have done horrible things in the name of the God they profess to worship, but I also think many others have done much good for the same reasons. To lump both groups together is to forgo any possibility of a dialog, or maybe even an alliance. And it is just such an alliance that the great biologist Edward O. Wilson proposes in his latest book, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*. In it, he suggests that people of faith may in fact be the natural allies of biologists when it comes to matters of ecosystem conservation, climate protection, and the preservation of endangered species. His arguments are well reasoned, impassioned, and wonderfully anti-Manichaean: he looks for connections

between people the way he often has between fields of inquiry; he is inclusionary rather than divisive. Whether you agree with him or not, his approach is uplifting.

Science is under siege today as it has never been before in my lifetime. Genomics is partly responsible, since the vast knowledge this branch of biology has provided forms the basis for many of the things that cause religious believers the most unease. As a consequence, we often appear to be surrounded by calls for the banning of this and the restriction of that. But if we let our defensiveness lead us to dualism, adopting an 'us-versus-them' viewpoint where 'they' are a nebulous group that is the object of our blanket condemnation, then we are doing exactly what we profess to disdain. If we demonize the opposition, substitute scorn for understanding, ridicule for dialog, and disregard individual differences in the name of some purity of approach, it doesn't matter how much we console ourselves with the thought that we are, after all, on the right side. There is one thing the failure of Manichaeism in all its guises should teach us: you are what you do.