



The Dangers of Neutrality in the Origins Debate

Jerry Bergman

One lesson learned through bitter experience in history is that the pursuit of knowledge in all fields, and especially science, requires the freedom to explore new ideas and areas of knowledge without hindrance from state or church authorities. The classic example is Lysenkoism which the Soviet government concluded was "the only truly scientific and materialistic theory of heredity constructed on the basis of dialectical materialism."¹ Lysenko marched "under the banner of reconstruction of biological science on the basis of Darwinism raised to the level of Marxism."² In the end Lysenkoism had disastrous consequences not only for agriculture, but for "the whole of biology" and for the "national economy" in the Soviet Union and several eastern block countries.³ This concern was drummed into us students in both my undergraduate and graduate training at Wayne State University in Detroit. For these reasons, a major professional concern of mine is academic freedom. This communication explains one more reason why over thirty years later I am still concerned about academic freedom.

Around 1976 I wrote a monograph on the creation-evolution controversy. After several revisions, including a review by several American Scientific Affiliation (ASA) members, the monograph was published in 1979 by the first publisher that I sent it to—Phi Delta Kappa, the education honor society⁴ located in Bloomington, Indiana. Titled *Teaching About the Creation/Evolution Controversy*,⁵ the publication was very successful; a recent Worldcat search⁶ located a copy in over six hundred libraries. Probably more than six hundred libraries in fact have copies because the 45-page monograph was published as part of a series called Fastbacks in which the monographs on a wide variety of educational topics are often not cataloged

separately. Part of the reason why so many copies are in libraries is because the Fastback series was well received; the publisher informed me that my monograph in particular was one of the best selling of the series. In the monograph, I tried to objectively review the origins controversy, providing both historical and scientific information. I did not advocate teaching creation in the monograph but, as the title says, focused on teaching *about* the controversy. This communication explores the personal repercussions that resulted from the publication of this monograph.

When I started writing the monograph, I was an agnostic and an evolutionist exploring this issue and, for this reason, had an interest in the topic. My personal position at this time was in flux, although by the time the monograph was published my doubts about both Christianity and orthodox Darwinism were beginning to solidify. Endeavoring to avoid an advocacy position for either side, I maintained the neutral tone of the original monograph during the final editing process. The reviews were very favorable to my approach, and this is one reason why Phi Delta Kappa wanted to publish my monograph.

Under the title "Bergman Scores with a Fastback," Iowa State University biochemist



Jerry Bergman

A major professional concern of mine is academic freedom.

Jerry Bergman, a fellow of ASA has been an active ASA member for over thirty years. He has found his involvement in ASA a very rewarding part of his career. Bergman has taught biology, genetics, chemistry, biochemistry, and anthropology for over thirty-five years. His nine degrees, including from the Medical University of Ohio, Wayne State University in Detroit, University of Toledo, and Bowling Green State University, all in the sciences. Many of his over 700 publications in twelve languages and twenty books and monographs deal with the creation/evolution controversy. He has taught at the Medical University of Ohio where he was a research associate in the department of experimental pathology, and at the University of Toledo and Bowling Green State University. He is now an adjunct professor at the Medical University of Ohio.



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Walter Hearn wrote in the *Newsletter of the American Scientific Affiliation*:

Jerry Bergman's latest publication is a winner. Entitled *Teaching About the Creation/Evolution Controversy*, it's a 45-page booklet in the "Fastback" series put out by the Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation. Phi Delta Kappa is a prestigious organization in educational circles. Something like 20,000 copies of each Fastback are printed initially, with copies sent to most educational journals for review.

We ... recommend it as a thoughtful discussion of the philosophical and educational aspects of the controversy. Jerry argues for teaching alternative concepts of origins, concluding: "The schools should be forums for debate and discussion of all topics. To exclude discussion of life's origins because they involve religious views does not do justice to the educational enterprise. Some feel that anything related to religion and politics should not be discussed because it arouses emotions and feelings and cannot always be discussed rationally. I would argue that these are the important matters of life and they should indeed be studied, discussed, and debated in the neutral forum of a classroom and under the guidance of a teacher who can remain objective."⁷

Professor Hearn later wrote that he

recognized Jerry Bergman as an ASA member (recently elected a Fellow) with one Ph.D. in educational research and psychology and almost another one in sociology. His activities have been reported in this Newsletter from time to time. We recommended his open minded booklet, *Teaching About the Creation/Evolution Controversy* ...⁸

Typical of the other favorable reviews was that of Dr. Walter Harrison, who wrote that the monograph was "interesting and informative, a nice piece of work."⁹

Conversely, the monograph was severely criticized by those who felt that I should have advocated their view of the controversy. I ended up with an inch-high pile of letters, mostly from people who condemned the monograph. Some even demanded that

Phi Delta Kappa withdraw my monograph from circulation in the Fastback series. Many letter writers were adamant in their condemnation, which included frequent name calling, a response which at that time, I had totally unanticipated from well-educated academics. Some letter writers even stated that they had once respected Phi Delta Kappa, but were going to end their relationship with this organization if this Fastback was not immediately withdrawn.

The strident tone expressed in many letters especially surprised me in view of the fact that a review of the entire set of correspondence reveals that not one person was able to, or even tried to, point out any errors of fact. The monograph is still available on the internet, albeit at inflated prices.

Some backhanded compliments were included in the demand to censor the monograph. Carl Rexroad, a paleontologist with the Indiana Geological Survey, wrote to the Fastback editor:

There is absolutely no point in passing my comments on to Jerry Bergman. He is a skilled writer who knew exactly what he was doing and how to do it. I do make the strongest recommendation that Phi Delta Kappa tighten its review and critical reading procedures and that it make itself more aware of national issues in the field of education. No further critical mistakes like publication of this Fastback can be allowed.¹⁰

He added that my Fastback

is an outstanding example of propaganda for a position absolutely without scientific merit and in my opinion without religious merit either. The paper is so carefully constructed that its subtlety makes it particularly vicious. It is unfortunate indeed that a legitimate educational organization published this paper, thereby lending credence to a position being pushed by hard core zealots and accepted by many Christian fundamentalists who are not sufficiently educated to understand the significance of the pseudo-choice offered.¹¹

These and other comments condemned a group of people neither defined by the respective authors nor mentioned by my

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Fastback. Petroleum geologist Dr. James Cunliffe wrote that he agreed with the Fastback from "a legal point of view" but added that "fundamentalist Christianity ... is made up of anxious, confused, and scientific ignorant Christians."¹² The monograph never once discussed fundamentalist Christianity or any other religious group, although one could infer from the monograph that I was a Christian.

Fastback editor Dr. Derek Burleson, in response to Cunliffe's letter, wrote that Phi Delta Kappa published the Fastback

because Bergman makes his case on strictly pedagogical grounds. Since we are in the business of education, we think it is a viewpoint that needs to be discussed and debated. Bergman is no creationist. He does believe that in areas of great controversy, the school has an obligation to provide a forum where competing ideas can be studied, analyzed, and the arguments balanced and weighed on both sides. American education has a long tradition of dealing with such controversy in the schools, whether the topic be birth control, communism, or abortion. It is on the basis of this tradition that we think Bergman's ideas deserve thoughtful consideration.¹³

I also wrote to Dr. Cunliffe, explaining that I am clearly not advocating "discussing Genesis in the classroom" but rather discussing only the "purely scientific" issues while eschewing the "topic of religion."¹⁴ Another critic, Garry DeYoung wrote:

Frankly, the title is just about as valid as would be one for a book titled *Teaching About the Round Earth/Flat Earth Controversy*. Most candidly, "creation" or "creationism" or any of that hokum has no place at all in educational circles and I suspect you have done yourself a great disservice by permitting yourself to be identified with those who would even dignify such revolting and sophistic views. Education in the sciences is difficult enough without having the Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation adding more confusion.¹⁵

Jack Carter, professor of biology at the Colorado College, who I suspect did not read the monograph very carefully, if at all, wrote:

It is really too bad that Phi Delta Kappa allowed such a poorly written statement on such a far reaching topic to be printed under their name ... It only serves to destroy the image of the organization among the scientific community. It also makes it much more difficult for those of us in science who are also members of Phi Delta Kappa to speak out to our friends in science on behalf of the organization. I find it difficult to believe a knowledgeable editorial board within Phi Delta Kappa would sacrifice the credibility of the

organization by permitting such a ludicrous statement to be published. You would think the editorial board would at least call on several competent scientists to read the article before they allow it to be published. And what frightens me even more in this situation is that school administrators, many of whom need all the help they can get in facing the fundamentalists and creationists in their communities, will interpret Bergman's position as a valid approach of the scientific community in dealing with this issue. The educational community will never know of the support and assistance they can get from the scientific community and organizations such as the National Association of Biology Teachers, the American Institute of Biological Sciences and National Science Teachers Association to keep such myths out of science classrooms.¹⁶

Some letters were openly insulting, such as the following from Dr. William V. Mayer, of the Biological Science Curriculum study:

I have read Fastback 134 and simply do not have the time to dissect its many errors and misrepresentations. The author is in no way either a qualified biologist or familiar enough with the theory of evolution to be considered a serious commentator on the situation. This Fastback should be distributed in missions and brought to your door by the fundamentalist analog of the religious group that distributes the "Watchtower."¹⁷

Mayer then demeaned Phi Delta Kappa as an organization, claiming that my Fastback

is not much more than a religious tract, and the fact that Phi Delta Kappa evidently considers it a serious piece of writing and a contribution to an understanding of an issue makes me recommend that the Fastback series either be discontinued or identified as propaganda rather than as unbiased information. I hope for your sake that there will not be too many references in the literature to this embarrassing publication, which can only indicate that whatever else Phi Delta Kappa stands for, its unfamiliarity with science, at least, is unlikely to provide helpful guidance on controversial topics.¹⁸

Mayer also condemned other anti-creation groups that did not do things the way he thought they should be done.¹⁹ I then wrote to Mayer noting that I was surprised at his response because, of those I talked to who actually read my Fastback,

mostly biology teachers, administrators and professional biologists, stated to me they agreed with most of the material presented, and the basic theme espoused. In addition, before it was published I had it reviewed by a number of biologists teaching at various colleges and universities. I simply do not



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*I was
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State
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when the
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The faculty
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to my Phi
Delta Kappa
monograph. ...
My peers
openly denied
my tenure
on the basis
of this and
similar
publications.*

know how to respond when I am confronted with an almost open attempt to censor ... Perhaps, if you would be so kind, you could mention the “many errors and misrepresentations” which you evidently found and the other dozen reviewers or so did not find.²⁰

I added that I wanted to correct any errors it contained because it was my intention to write a book on the controversy, using the monograph as the foundation for a larger and more fully documented work. This book project remains unfinished, and it is for this reason that I saved all of the correspondence relating to the monograph.

Repercussion from the Monograph

Some of my colleagues at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) where I was teaching at the time, likewise disagreed with the monograph. As a result, I experienced often irrational personal antagonism from academics that I formerly believed were scholarly and objective. Long and sometimes emotional conversations resulted in which I saw another, very nasty, side of my colleagues. As far as I knew, none of them had read the entire monograph, a fact that openly came out in court—not one testified who had read the whole monograph.²¹ This bitter experience revolutionized my previous ideas about the objectivity of academics, a view inculcated in me in my graduate training in the area of measurement and evaluation.

I was a candidate for tenure at BGSU when the monograph was published. The faculty openly objected to my Phi Delta Kappa monograph.²² Tyner, discussing the reasons for my subsequent loss of tenure, wrote “most often mentioned is a Fastback written for the Phi Delta Kappa educational organization titled ‘Teaching About the Creation/Evolution Controversy.’”²³ My peers openly denied my tenure on the basis of this and similar publications. BGSU Professor Gerald Rigby wrote that he was very concerned about my tenure case because it suggests the

relevancy of a religious-orthodoxy test for tenure at this University. Insofar as Dr. Bergman’s views on religious

matters, be they correct or incorrect, conventional or non-conventional ... were taken account of by those casting tenure votes ... the record speaks quite clearly to this point—such views were considered in the decision process ... [T]he Fastback, “Teaching About the Creation/Evolution Controversy,” which Dr. Bergman authored for Phi Delta Kappa, entered into the decision ... I have read this presentation ... while I, too, find myself supporting the “conventional wisdom” about evolution, this little booklet is a superbly done consideration of the issues involved. I can find no fault with Dr. Bergman’s analysis and presentation; it is excellently written (as are all his publications I have been privileged to read), soundly reasoned, and eminently fair in its approach. No one could legitimately cite this as support for ... adverse judgment on Dr. Bergman’s scholarship ... the University is a forum for exploration and exchange of ideas. Even the most unacceptable ought to have a fair hearing in a University, and the advocates of all views ought to ... receive the opportunity to explore, expound, and advocate their ideas.²⁴

Dr. Wallace DePue, then a full professor at BGSU, wrote that he was

shocked to learn that Dr. Jerry Bergman had been dismissed ... because of his religious beliefs, namely his espousal of creationism. It is clear to me from reviewing information and talking to individuals about the case that Dr. Bergman, in violation of the University Charter, articles 1, and .4C, was dismissed solely because of his religious beliefs ... The University Charter clearly guarantees academic freedom, so termination on the grounds of espousing creationism in one’s publications is surely a violation of this article.²⁵

A BGSU colleague, Dr. Gusweiler, testified in court that a mutual colleague, Dr. Jim Davidson,

showed me a pamphlet from Phi Delta Kappa that Dr. Bergman had written on creationism. ... He threw it on my desk and said this is what Jerry was

teaching. ... He was very adamant it [the pamphlet] was based on religious views and Jerry was teaching religion in the classroom.²⁶

It was clear from my conversations with Dr. Davidson that he had never read it.

The Monograph Goes to Court

The case commenced in the US district court in Toledo, Ohio, on March 12, 1985, and was heard in a one week trial. The court upheld my tenure denial, deferring to the judgment of my colleagues, citing their allegations about the "quality" of my publications, never noting which of my over two hundred publications, including around a dozen in the *American Scientific Affiliation Journal*, was a concern.²⁷ My publications included a textbook in the area that I taught²⁸ as well as articles in the following journals: *New Directions in Teaching*, *Quarterly Journal for the North Carolina Association for the Gifted and Talented*, *Journal of Scholarly Publishing*, *Sociological Analysis*, *Ohio Reading Teacher*, *The Creative Child and Adult Quarterly*, *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, *American Secondary Education*, *Journal of Gifted, Creative, and Talented*, *The Creative Child and Adult Quarterly*, *Suicidology and Life Threatening Behavior*, *Art Education*, *Clearing House*, *Journal of Family Therapy*, *Psychology: A Quarterly Journal of Human Behavior*, *The Guidance Clinic*, *Texas Secondary Education Research Journal*, *Journal of Educational Public Relations*, and *College Press Review*.

I have since learned that courts virtually always side with the university, particularly in tenure disputes. One study of seventy-eight important discrimination decisions found that the court sided with the university 88% of the time, and none of the cases where the professor prevailed involved religious issues.²⁹ Another selective study of discrimination in academia of women found the same thing, noting that "the burden of proof for plaintiffs is onerous."³⁰ One of the most extensive studies of tenure discrimination and the courts found that the "few religious discrimination suits affecting faculty members have arisen at private colleges and universities" and the rare case against a public college or university usually involves Jews or Muslims.³¹ Thus, little case law exists in the area of religion, partly because many aggrieved religious professors do not have the money or support to pursue litigation and many universities have enormous funds.³²

One reason why I am recounting this over twenty-year-old case is that the similar experience of others in many recent cases has motivated me to bring this problem to the attention of the academic community. I have completed an over 800-page manuscript on this problem that is due to be published soon. The manuscript documents over one hundred cases similar to my own, in which tenure was denied or other discrimination occurred based primarily on the religious views of the professor.

My experience has taught me that some attention should be given to the "other side of science" to help prepare researchers for the possibility that their conclusions, even in their line of research, may be unpopular and could result in derailing their career. This awareness may help researchers and professors become aware of the possible consequences that can result from expressing their privately held viewpoints, particularly as they may relate to certain unpopular conclusions in science.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

The letters that I have cited indicate only the opinions of those who took the initiative to write. As far as I can determine, the general response from most readers, judging by my interactions with them, was very positive. Therefore, it is difficult to judge how representative the general view of my monograph was from these letters, which is not a representative sample. It is significant that many of the letter writers who condemned my monograph were well-known scientists teaching at major universities.

For this reason I surmised that their feeling may be typical of well-known scientists, a speculation that has been confirmed by at least three academic studies. Ecklund and Scheitle found that only 7.8% of the natural science professors at major research institutions "have no doubt about God's existence" and the rest were atheists or agnostics of some type.³³ Greg Graffin's Ph.D. dissertation on the religious beliefs of leading biologists found, of the 271 scientists surveyed, 98.7% rejected the historical theistic belief in a personal creator God as taught by the Christian, Jewish, and Moslem religions.³⁴ The majority were openly atheists, and most of the rest were agnostics or new age spiritualists of some type.

My monograph experience was a very rude awakening to the intolerance of well-known scientists on the subject of origins. No one was able to point out a single erroneous factual claim in my monograph, even though I consistently asked for specifics in order to improve a planned revision of the monograph. They openly objected to its neutral tone, insisting that I had harmed the Darwinian position by not condemning its critics. Little concern existed for an objective discussion of the issues; instead the critics wanted me to advocate one side to ensure the indoctrination of students in one world view.

My Fastback publication was also an important lesson for me because it was my first indication that scientists, even well-known scientists from major universities, are at times irrational and have no qualms about book banning or censoring information that they disagree with. In this case, the censoring was of a viewpoint that I was endeavoring to convey to readers, namely that, regardless of which side of the origins controversy they were on,



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they should, and could, understand the key issues. Critics were especially vehement about my citing a number of creation sources which they felt readers may review and influence them toward the creation position. These references were, in fact, added only at the suggestion of my editor. Since this experience I have wisely avoided discussing the whole issue with Darwinists colleagues connected with my employment even though this is a subject that I relish discussing especially with those who can challenge my thinking. My BGSU experience also ended my career in education. I had to start over, earning five more graduate degrees in the life science area to begin a new career. ★

Notes

- ¹W. Gajewski, "Lysenkoism in Poland," *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 65, no. 4 (1990): 425.
- ²N. Roll-Hansen, *The Lysenko Effect: The Politics of Science* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2005), 218–20.
- ³S. M. Gershenson, "Difficult Years in Soviet Genetics," *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 65, no. 4 (1990): 447.
- ⁴Phi Delta Kappa is the premier membership professional association for all educators dedicated to improving education. They achieve this goal by several means including by the publication of monographs and journals, sponsoring professional meetings, and working at the local and national level in the interests of educators. It boasts serving more than one-half million members since it was founded in 1906.
- ⁵Published as a Fastback, number 134 (Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundations, October 1979), 45 pp.
- ⁶A library internet site that includes the book catalogs of most academic libraries in the world.
- ⁷W. Hearn, "Bergman Scores with a Fastback," *Newsletter of the American Scientific Affiliation* 21, no. 6 (December 1979/January 1980): 2–3.
- ⁸W. Hearn, "Bergman Sues over Dismissal," *Newsletter of the American Scientific Affiliation* 26, no. 1 (February/March 1984): 4–5.
- ⁹W. Harrison, personal letter to Jerry Bergman, January 11, 1980.
- ¹⁰C. Rexroad, personal letter to Derek L. Burleson, editor, Special Publications, Phi Delta Kappa, November 12, 1979, p. 2.
- ¹¹*Ibid.*, 1.
- ¹²J. Cunliffe, letter to the Fastback Editor, Phi Delta Kappa, April 5, 1980.
- ¹³D. Burleson, letter to Dr. James Cunliffe, April 22, 1980.
- ¹⁴Letter from Jerry Bergman to Dr. Cunliffe, April 28, 1980.
- ¹⁵G. DeYoung, Minnesota Institute of Philosophy, Hull, Iowa, letter to Jerry Bergman, November 25, 1979.
- ¹⁶J. Carter, Professor of Biology, The Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado, letter to Phi Delta Kappa, January 28, 1980, p. 1.

¹⁷W. V. Mayer, Letter to Derek L. Burleson, Editor, Phi Delta Kappa Fastback Series, April 4, 1980.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁹H. Park, "The Politics of Anti-Creationism: The Committees of Correspondence," *Journal of the History of Biology* 33 (2000): 349–70.

²⁰Personal letter to William V. Mayer, April 14, 1980.

²¹The monograph was "exhibit C" number 19189 in U.S. district court case number C80-390, that involved the monograph.

²²See trial transcript, US district case number C80-390, 293.

²³M. A. Tyner, "Bergman: The Professor Who Lost His Job," *Liberty* 80, no. 1 (1985): 5.

²⁴Affidavit of Dr. Rigby, October 24, 1983.

²⁵Affidavit of Dr. Wallace DePue, September 16, 1983.

²⁶Deposition of Judith Ann Gusweiler, taken in Toledo, Ohio, October 18, 1982, case number C80-390, 330, 334.

²⁷I now have twenty-one publications in the ASA journal.

²⁸J. Bergman, *Understanding Educational Measurement and Evaluation* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).

²⁹R. Amacher and R. Meiners, *Faculty Towers: Tenure and the Structure of Higher Education* (Oakland, CA: The Independent Institute, 2004).

³⁰*Tenure Denied: Cases of Sexual Discrimination in Academia* (Washington, DC: AAUW Educational Foundation, 2004): 54.

³¹T. Leap, *Tenure, Discrimination, and the Courts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 29.

³²See G. LaNoue and B. Lee, *Academics in Court: The Consequences of Faculty Litigation* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1990).

³³E. Ecklund and C. Scheitle, "Religion among Academic Scientists: Distinctions, Disciplines, and Demographics," *Social Problems* 54, no. 2 (2007): 296.

³⁴G. Gregory, "Monoism, Atheism, and the Naturalist Worldview: Perspectives from Evolutionary Biology," (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 2003).

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