

Public Domain

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Ignorance and Want, Part 1

“This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased.”
– the Second Spirit to Scrooge in Charles Dickens’ *“A Christmas Carol”*

A recent poll revealed how religious persons were rather ignorant about their own faith and the religions of others. The study by the independent *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* asked 3,412 Americans 32 questions about the Bible and other world religions, historical figures, and constitutional principles. Ironically, atheists and agnostics, as a group, were consistently the most knowledgeable about worldwide religious beliefs, traditions, and histories. Whether that knowledge was itself responsible for their rejection of god-centered beliefs, or their freedom from narrow sectarian exceptionalism allowed for a more objective openness that could look at the variety of belief-systems without blinkered prejudices, I leave to the pollsters to determine. Back in 2007, *Newsweek*’s “What You Need to Know” poll found barely half of Americans were correctly able to state that Judaism was older than both Christianity and Islam; another 41% weren’t sure.)

This might be taken as nothing more than one of those sporadic reminders of how, as Bill Maher notes, we are “stuck on stupid.” Every time Jay Leno takes his “jaywalking” camera to the streets to reveal how incredibly obtuse some fellow citizens are, WE can bask in smug superiority because WE can identify a portrait of Vice President Joe Biden while the archetypal Valley Girl or Slacker goes blank, or opines, “He co-stars in a sitcom, right?” (which might not be so far off the truth, after all). When various polls reveal that at least 20% of Americans believe the earth was created in six days less than 6000 years ago, or the sun goes around the earth, or President Obama is a Muslim (only 47% correctly identified him as a Christian), we who know better can only sigh in despair.

Only 39% of Americans accept the vast evidence of evolution. (Only 50% of the last round of eight Republican candidates for president refused to throw Darwin under the bus. Most current Teabagger candidates for Senate trumpet their anti-science, anti-evidence biases; whether they are sincere or merely pandering to the ignorant 61% is unknown.) According to a recent *Gallup* poll, at least 68% of Americans believe in the devil. 41% believed Saddam Hussein was involved in 9/11; as of 2006, 50% believed he had WMDs, even though none were ever found after seven years of searching. (As to how many believed that Saddam WAS Satan, I have no figures, though several followers of Nostradamus, as well as some televangelists, had suggested that Saddam might have been an – or *the* – antichrist.) Yet 63% of young Americans can’t find Iraq on a map; 90% can’t find Afghanistan, even if the map is limited to Asia; more than a third of Americans of any age can’t identify the continent the Amazon River flows through.

(For more depressing poll numbers, check out this 2008 article at <http://www.alternet.org/story/90161/>)

When it comes to our own government and constitution, things aren’t much better. Only 25% of Americans can name more than one of the five freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment – freedom of speech, religion, press, assembly, and petition for redress of grievances; just 1 in 1,000 could name all five. But more than half of Americans can name at least two members of the fictional Simpson cartoon family, according to the same *McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum* survey; 22 percent

could name all five Simpsons. In a 2006 *Zogby* poll, more than 75% of Americans could name at least two of the seven dwarfs (Disney’s version), while not quite 25% could name two justices of the Supreme Court’s nine. According to *Zogby*, 75% of Americans can identify Larry, Moe, and Curly as the Three Stooges; only 40% can correctly identify executive, legislative, and judicial as the three branches of the US federal government. In a 2008 *First Amendment Center* poll, 33% of Americans believed that the constitutional right to freedom of religion was never meant to apply to groups most folks think are extreme or fringe, a 10 percent increase from 2000. In 2007, 40% told the *FAC* that teachers should be allowed to lead prayers in public schools, in spite of numerous Supreme Court First Amendment decisions affirming that was unconstitutional.

Ignorance may lie dormant, just under the surface of discourse and policies; indeed, being a negative, until something challenges it, or shines a light on it, it could even pass for wisdom. Or as Mark Twain said (others attribute the quote to Lincoln, or to Samuel Johnson): “Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt.”

All that is needed to embolden and empower Ignorance is a trigger... and that trigger is often *Want* – economic, social, or psychological deprivation. Remove the security of reliable income or savings, the comfort and protection of a cohesive, stable community or ethnic/religious identity, or confidence in a better tomorrow (or even *any* tomorrow), and all that simmering, festering, toxic non-Truth may seek an outlet, and, too often, a convenient, specific target. False beliefs about convenient scapegoats make it easier to blame them, persecute them, attack them... eliminate them.

Want unleashes Ignorance; Ignorance breeds Fear; Fear fuels Hate; Hate ignites Violence. Ugly times of Want give birth to ugly thoughts, words, and actions. The 20th century is littered with the spawn of ugly times.

Did the Jews betray the German war effort in WWI and cause the crippling hyperinflation and depression that followed? Enough Germans believed it, so it was possible to ride that Want and Hate into a tide of anti-Semitism that led to the death of millions. Did the Armenians side with the Turks’ enemies, justifying a genocidal response? Was famine the cause or result of Soviet collectivization, in which at least a million kulaks (relatively affluent peasants) and perhaps 10 million Ukrainians died in the 1930s, methodically or by neglect?

And on through the bloody 20th century. When “social engineering” and agricultural reform led to famine, the Khmer Rouge killed two million or more in 1970s Cambodia, mostly targeting “intellectuals” and specific ethnic or religious “enemies.” Impoverished and neglected peasants in 1980s Peru gave support to the brutal and violent Shining Path Maoists. Roughly 100,000 were killed, and nearly two million displaced, in Bosnia during the 1990s, with “ethnic cleansing” against specific religious factions; unleashed ethnic fears and hates also tore through Croatia, Slovenia, Kosovo, and Serbia, killing many more.

In part 2, I will use the Rwandan Genocide of 1994 to show how economic hardship (Want) exacerbated and ignited the tribal/ethnic rivalries (Ignorance) that led to nearly one million deaths during 100 days of murder. Then, I will bring together that cautionary tale and the above examples of current American ignorance, to show how the current rash of Islamophobia – from threats of Quran burning and protests over a non-mosque at non-Ground Zero, to more local examples of Ulster County legislators and Sidney town officials in Delaware County going over to the Dark Side – is the result of Want and Ignorance, and why we should call it what it is, and stand against it before it’s too late and it unleashes a national and global firestorm.