

Faith, Science and the Persecution of Richard Sternberg

by Benjamin Wiker

A fellow Catholic is now being persecuted, in no small part, because of his religion. You haven't heard about it nor are you likely to precisely because it is just the kind of story the reigning media assiduously ignore. The powers-that-be are trying to round up scientist Richard Sternberg and hound him out of town (the town, in this instance being Washington, D.C.). All in the name of secularist ideology posing as science.

Before we turn to Sternberg's interesting case, we should recall the recent clarifying words about evolutionary theory by Cardinal Archbishop of Vienna Christoph Schonborn in his now-famous New York Times op-ed, "Finding Design in Nature." "The Catholic Church, while leaving to science many details about the history of life on earth, proclaims that by the light of reason the human intellect can readily and clearly discern purpose and design in the natural world, including the world of living things, Evolution in the sense of common ancestry might be true, but evolution in the neo-Darwinian sense, an unguided, unplanned process of random variation and natural selection is not. *Any system of thought that denies or seeks to explain away the overwhelming evidence for design in biology is ideology, not science*" (emphasis added).

Sternberg is being driven out of his job as a Research Associate at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History by ideologues. A little background: Rick Sternberg is extremely well qualified for his position. He has two Ph.D.s in evolutionary biology, one in molecular evolution and the other in systems theory and theoretical biology. He has published more than 30 very technical articles in respected biological journals.

Everyone was quite happy with his work, both as staff scientist with the National Center for Biotechnology Information and as a research associate at the Smithsonian. All was well until Sternberg, as managing editor of the Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington, allowed a technical paper critical of neo-Darwinism to be published: "*The Origin of Biological Information and the Higher Taxonomic Categories*," written by Steven Meyer.

Meyer's Ph.D. is in the history and philosophy of science from Cambridge University. He is an advocate of Intelligent Design. Instead of engaging Meyer's paper through argument, the powers-that-be simply dismissed it as religious tripe, and began attacking Sternberg with startlingly underhanded animus, doing anything they could to make his life miserable to indelibly soil his reputation and to drive him out of the Smithsonian. First Smithsonian officials tried to remove him directly, charging that as managing editor he had violated the publication process. But Sternberg followed the procedure perfectly. He discussed publication with a fellow scientist at the Smithsonian, and before publication he had the article peer-reviewed by three molecular and evolutionary biologists all with doctoral degrees. Unable to trump up any legitimate charges, Smithsonian officials went after him indirectly, creating an intolerable work environment, smearing him with false allegations, pressuring the National Center for Biotechnology Information to fire him, and worst of all, investigating his personal religious and political beliefs behind the scenes.

The interesting thing in regard to this last skullduggery of prying into his religion is that Sternberg is not an advocate of Intelligent Design, but of the structuralist approach to biology. But the assumption of those "digging for dirt" was that, if he believed in God, then his skull was obviously soft enough to admit Meyer's paper rather than reject it outright.

The U.S. Office of Special Counsel was called in to investigate. Its officials decided unambiguously in Sternberg's favor, although officials at the Smithsonian have now stoutly refused to cooperate with the investigation. Small wonder, given their less-than-admirable methods of trying to destroy Sternberg.

Reading the Special Council's report is an eye-opener. Before the Smithsonian stopped cooperating with the investigation, behind-the-scenes e-mail correspondence was gathered by investigators. It is clear from reading them that Smithsonian officials had little but contempt for religious believers: "After spending 4.5 years in the Bible Belt," said one, "I have learned how to carefully phrase things in order to avoid the least amount of negative repercussions for the kids. ... The most fun we had by far was when my son refused to say the Pledge of Allegiance because of the 'under dog' part." Charming. The e-mails reveal what is truly behind the "careful phrasing" of these scientist-administrators. They are secularist ideologues with a barely suppressed disdain for believers.

"It is clear that I was targeted for retaliation and harassment explicitly because I failed in an unstated requirement in my role as editor of a scientific journal," Sternberg contends. "I was supposed to be a gatekeeper turning away unpopular, controversial, or conceptually challenging explanations of puzzling natural phenomena. Instead I allowed a scientific article to be published critical of neo-Darwinism, and that was considered an unpardonable heresy."

Interesting, isn't it? Can you imagine a scientist of Sternberg's stature being persecuted because he allowed a paper to be published that concluded evolution occurs as "an unguided, unplanned process of random variation and natural selection" and that consequently all notions of a Creator God are entirely groundless? Of course not. That's orthodoxy. Or is it ideology masquerading as science? One thing is for certain. Sternberg is still being persecuted behind the scenes for daring to allow science to question science.

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Benjamin Wiker 's newest book is Architects of the Culture of Death (Ignatius, co-authored with Donald DeMarco).

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