

Book Review of "Paranoid Science: The Christian Right's War on Reality" by Antony Alumkal.
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In his book *Paranoid Science*, Antony Alumkal aims to document the strategies and arguments that conservative evangelical Christians use to reject mainstream science. As he says in the introduction, the book's "basic premise is that science is under attack by the Christian right, whose leaders appeal to paranoid conspiracy theories by claiming that many scientists peddle misinformation and conceal their actions from the public" (xi). One of the recurring themes of the book is the way the Christian Right alternates between two contradictory rhetorical stances. On the one hand, they often say their claims are backed by "pure science," drawing conclusions from the evidence that could be made by any objective researcher. On the other hand, conservatives embrace the "religious crusade" frame, using apocalyptic and paranoid language to motivate their followers to support them in resisting secular science as a sinister conspiracy to undermine basic Christian beliefs.

A basic tension also runs through *Paranoid Science*, which likewise can be analyzed in terms of rhetorical frames. Most of the book can be characterized by the "scholarly analysis" frame, by which I mean Alumkal gives a comprehensive account of each issue. As a Professor of Sociology of Religion at the Illiff School of Theology in Denver, he integrates theological argument, social analysis, and scientific data into the book, giving a multi-level perspective on the issues at stake. The first chapter describes the intelligent design movement, focusing on scholars associated with the Discovery Institute. In chapter 2, Alumkal reviews a number of different evangelical groups dedicated to removing same-sex attraction through psychiatric or spiritual means. The third chapter presents arguments by the religious right against embryonic stem cell research, cloning, euthanasia and other bioethical issues. Finally, the fourth chapter describes conservative religious objections to environmentalism. In general, I found these four chapters to be carefully researched and comprehensively presented.

The second frame might be called the "political polemic" frame, where Alumkal moves beyond neutral academic analysis to ridicule the Christian right. Conservative Christians are not just making poor arguments, they are, as the subtitle of the book says, "waging war on reality," in a manner "similar to what the Bush administration tried to do in the realm of policy" (15). Evangelicals, we are told, "have little tolerance for uncertainty and unambiguity...they prefer to believe that they possess the certain and clear truth revealed by God" (117). Instead of comparing the Intelligent design advocate Philip Johnson to Gandalf, as some of his followers have, Alumkal says they should compare him to Don Quixote (55). It is "laughable," writes Alumkal to think that George Bush was a "defender of the dignity of human life" (148).

I think this second frame negatively affects the book in two ways. First, it shrinks its potential audience, making it attractive to those who already disagree strongly with the Christian right. Though admittedly ridicule can be a satisfying coping strategy in times of political disillusionment, it will only reinforce the sense of mistrust that evangelicals have towards academics. Second, in Alumkal's desire to show the foolishness of the Christian right, his arguments can miss. For example, in the conclusion he presents the views of the evangelical

mega-church pastor Rick Warren, who argues in a chapter of his book, *The Purpose Driven Life* (HarperCollins, 2011), that God controls everything in the universe (194). Warren puts in the epigraph of his chapter a quote from Albert Einstein that says, “God doesn’t play dice.” In response, Alumkal quotes from the physicist Brian Greene that Einstein was wrong, and then ridicules Warren by saying he is “pretending that a scientific falsehood is a scientific fact in order to support his religious belief”(196). For Alumkal, Warren exemplifies the Christian right’s disturbing ability to create a “false reality,” and he refers to Warren’s book as “The Purpose-Drive Life of Unreality” (194). Alumkal’s criticism, however, is misplaced. Warren’s argument for divine providence nowhere in that chapter depends upon Einstein’s views. Moreover, Einstein was only wrong in his objections to quantum theory (which was the context for the “God does not play dice” quote, as Brian Greene makes clear), but he has not been proven wrong with respect to determinism in general. There are several ways of interpreting quantum mechanics deterministically, which is why Carl Hoefer, in the entry on causal determinism in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* says: “quantum mechanics is one of the best prospects for a genuinely deterministic theory in modern times!” Whatever their overall merit, Warren’s theological beliefs are not falsified by modern science, and thus do not represent an “attack on reality.”

Despite the negatives, however, I found *Paranoid Science* to be a profitable read which I would recommend to those who want to better understand science skepticism in evangelical Christianity. If one wants to actually help solve the problem of science skepticism among the Christian right—a concern which motivated Amukal to write the book—then I would look elsewhere.