

Review: JAR2405

## AN EPITAPH FOR EXPERTISE

a book review of

*The Death of Expertise:*

*The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters*

by Tom Nichols

(Oxford University Press, 2017)

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We live in a world in which experts have left their mark. The automobiles we drive were designed by specialists with degrees in mechanical engineering. The doctors we visit have spent an extended period of time in medical school. Many of the articles you read in this magazine were written by men and women with doctoral degrees in theology or some other field. Experts are an indispensable part of our daily life.

In this light, it can be unnerving to discover that respect for experts is at an all-time low. In *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* (Oxford University Press, 2017), Tom Nichols, a professor of National Security Affairs at the Naval War College, laments what he believes is a current crisis of knowledge. According to Nichols, “experts” (whom he defines as “people who know considerably more on a subject than the rest of us”) are losing, at an alarming rate, the respect they formerly possessed. The result is an expert-free epistemology, which Nichols believes is leading to tragic consequences.

**An Old, Old Story.** Disrespect for experts is nothing new. As Nichols reminds us, “Intellectuals are always complaining about the denseness of their fellow citizens, and laypeople have always distrusted the pointy-heads and experts” (p. 15). Christian apologists need no better example than the amateurish work of Thomas Paine (1737–1809), whose book *Age of Reason* was filled with blunders that might be expected from someone who had no expertise in religion, such as Paine’s oft-repeated claim that the Council of Nicaea decided the New Testament canon.

Paine arrogantly declared that he had “produced a work that no Bible believer, though writing at his ease, and with a library of Church books about him, can refute”

(*Age of Reason*, preface to Part II). Such ribald ignorance, coupled with arrogant disdain for experts, is not new. What is new, according to Nichols, is the degree to which nonexperts are *defiantly* ignorant and openly hostile to experts, such that we now see an “aggressive replacement of expert views or established knowledge with the insistence that every opinion is as good as every other” (20).

**What Killed Expertise?** What has inspired the advent of an expert-free epistemology? Nichols suggests several factors at work, all of which will be familiar to the apologist.

The first factor is the human ego, which fosters attitudes that result in defensiveness in the presence of experts. As a result of this tendency, we fall into mental errors such as *confirmation bias*, the tendency to seek out information that confirms our beliefs while ignoring or minimizing information that conflicts with our beliefs (47). These tendencies are so strong that, in the face of contravening expertise, some will fall for the “Dunning effect” (43), which makes people think that they are more intelligent and informed than they really are.<sup>1</sup> A nonexpert may be so defensive about his views that he will hold on to any ridiculous yet comforting claim, regardless of the facts presented. This is represented by the popularity of conspiracy theories, which appeal to those who “have a hard time making sense of a complicated world and who have no patience for less dramatic explanations” (56). The runaway popularity of books by “9/11 truthers,” and of films such as *Zeitgeist*, speak to this tendency.<sup>2</sup>

A second factor is what Nichols calls the “commodification of education” (72). Where formerly college was seen as a way to become better educated and learn self-discipline, it is now sold as a product, and students are treated as customers or clients. As a result, college students are insulated and coddled, having an inordinate sense of entitlement. Nichols relates examples of students who told him that if they did not make an A in Nichols’s class, it was only because Nichols was a poor teacher (78). Meanwhile, there has been an epidemic of low-quality colleges that are little more than “glorified high schools” at the undergraduate level, while their doctoral programs are so bad that “they themselves [the college] would never hire their own graduates” (75). These colleges literally offer degrees that are not worth the paper they are printed on.

A third factor is the ease of spreading misinformation by way of modern communications media. Nichols fingers all the usual suspects in this regard, such as Wikipedia, but he notes that even normally reputable sources can spread erroneous claims. Among other examples, Nichols provides one of interest to the Christian apologist: *The New York Times*, one of the most widely read newspapers today, in 2013 mistakenly described Easter as a celebration of Jesus’ resurrection directly into heaven. (136).

**On the Same Level?** A final and arguably most important factor referenced by Nichols is that the Internet has acted as a great leveler that has fostered the illusion that experts and nonexperts are on equal footing. Nichols describes a “Google-fueled, Wikipedia-based, blog-sodden collapse of any division between professionals and laypeople, students and teachers, knowers and wonderers” (3). Easy access to facts allows Internet

surfers to “mimic intellectual accomplishment by indulging in an illusion of expertise provided by a limitless supply of facts” (106).

On the Internet, all users communicate using the same tools. The same Twitter service used by a high school student to broadcast their thoughts on global warming is also used by the current president of the United States to express his thoughts on the same subject. This equality of setting can lead nonexperts to assume that experts are no more respectable than anyone else. Nichols describes the experience of Dan Kaszeta, one of the world’s leading experts on chemical weapons. Kaszeta answered a general call on Twitter from a young college student who was having difficulty finding information on sarin, a toxic substance used in nerve gas. Rather than being grateful for Kaszeta’s offers of assistance, the student dismissed Kaszeta’s corrections of her errors regarding sarin and rewarded him with a stream of crackling vituperations. She was so insulted by Kaszeta’s attempts to correct her errors that she refused to so much as look up his name to confirm that Kaszeta was an expert on sarin (83–84).

The leveling of expertise can be found also in the world of apologetics. Mike Licona has a doctoral degree in New Testament studies, and he frequently debates other academics. Yet he was recently asked to debate Matt Dillahunty, an atheist and Internet personality with training in computer software design. The pull of the debate was that Dillahunty was a popular figure, and the debate was taking place in Dillahunty’s hometown of Austin, Texas.

The debate arranged between Licona and Dillahunty reflects a distressing trend toward intellectual leveling. It is only because Dillahunty is a popular figure that he was reckoned worthy to debate a scholar with a doctoral degree. Similarly, Nichols laments the influence of celebrities such as Gwyneth Paltrow and Jim Carrey who use their fame as a platform to dispense dangerous medical advice (116–17). This advice is accessible to millions of people worldwide who are all too ready to trust an actor who presents them with a quicker, simpler, and more pleasant answer than their physician.

To further complicate the picture, supporters of the expert-free epistemology will seek out and make much of instances in which experts were in error or changed their minds. For example, Nichols notes that experts at one time thought thalidomide was safe, until it was determined to be the cause of birth defects. As Nichols reminds us, however, while miscues by experts may get a lot of press, they are far from typical. “Experts being wrong on occasion about certain issues is not the same thing as experts being wrong consistently on everything” (23). Experts are still “more often right than wrong,” and those who appeal to isolated errors by a few experts as a reason to ignore *all* experts are merely creating a loophole to allow themselves to do and believe what they have already decided.

**Lessons for Apologists.** For Nichols, the great dangers of the expert-free epistemology lie in the political realm, or in conspiracy theories about vaccines. Nevertheless, Nichols’s central theme is critical for the practice of apologetics. The authority of experts lies at the heart of apologetics. The apologist inevitably must rely on the testimony of a wide variety of experts, be they archaeologists, New Testament scholars, or textual

critics. There are apologists such as Paul Copan who possess credentials that make them experts in a particular field. Expert authority is the gunpowder in the arsenal of the apologist.

What happens to apologetics if indeed Nichols has written the epitaph for expertise? Without the recognition of some kind of authority, apologetics becomes ineffectual. If we have a conversation partner who dismisses Paul Copan's PhD as a mere piece of paper, it will be no more effective to rely on Copan's excellent defenses of the biblical text than it would be to come to the conversation holding a brick that happens to be the same size as one of Copan's books. The death of expertise represents an epistemic disaster.

Is there any way to revive faith in expertise? Nichols offers several suggestions (205ff), which also may be applied to the practice of apologetics. First, the public must be taught to recognize the difference between failure and fraud. Some nonexperts assume that if an expert is in error, there must have been some sort of evil intent. Rather, it must be granted that though experts are more often correct than nonexperts in their fields, they will still make mistakes, and mistakes are integral to the development of expertise. Second, nonexperts need to become better educated about "issues that matter to them" and about the track records of the experts on which they rely. Third, the nonexpert needs to become more critical and learn to question experts' assumptions, while also maintaining a level of humility when evaluating what they say.

For the Christian apologist, advice like this is sound, but it is not new. The Bible has long contained similar counsel: "In humility, value others above yourselves" (Phil. 2:3 NIV). The question is not whether Nichols has told us something self-evidently true. The question is whether we will ever choose to heed this age-old counsel. — *James Patrick Holding*

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## NOTES

- 1 James Patrick Holding, "Running with the Dunning Effect," *Christian Research Journal* 32, 4 (2009); available at <http://www.equip.org/article/running-with-the-dunning-effect/>.
- 2 James Patrick Holding, "Confronting the Spirit of the Age," *Christian Research Journal* 32, 5 (2009); available at <http://www.equip.org/article/confronting-the-spirit-of-the-age/>.