

EDITORIAL

THE DISADVANTAGE OF COLLECTIVE IGNORANCE

World War II was a monstrous event. The most dominant figure was Adolf Hitler, who by persuasion and military power gained control of much of Western Europe. In persuading friend and foe of his worthy motives, Hitler had a powerful ally in his friend Dr. Joseph Goebbels, who became his Minister for Propaganda and Public Enlightenment.

Goebbels had a lavish lifestyle, including fancy homes which he could ill afford. However, one of his representatives explained to newsmen that the Minister was really an extremely modest man who put up with the inconveniences of such an opulent life because of the needs of his official position. Using his persuasive talents, Goebbels was effective in convincing France, England, and the United States that, regardless of appearances, Hitler's actual goal was to control Bolshevik expansion from the east. Goebbels' craftiness is reflected in one of his often-quoted statements: "We can do without butter, but, despite all our love of peace, not without arms. One cannot shoot with butter but with guns." His approach to conquering a country was to first establish a friendly neighborly relationship with the country. After this relationship was firmly established, a program of criticizing the policies and leaders of the country was begun. This was followed by threats of violence and of the need for the people to get rid of their leaders and to capitulate to his demands. The last stage was to allow deliberate confusion to grow, followed by invasion and taking control of the nation's radio stations.

Eventually, after many conquests, the tide of World War II started changing, and conditions went from bad to worse for Hitler. Many of his associates, perceiving unquestionable defeat, deserted him. Finally Hitler and his wife, whom he had just married the day before, along with Goebbels, his wife and their six children, all took their lives in an underground bunker in Berlin as the Russians were overtaking the city. Despite this tragic ending, the success of Hitler and Goebbels, which had lasted for a number of years, remains as one of the puzzling events of human history. How could

the stratagems that led to plunder and mass murder be justified and engender the loyalty that they did? A significant factor in that success was Goebbels' crafty promotional endeavors which took advantage of the pervasive ignorance of humanity.

On a less dramatic scale, but more insidious in its effects, a similar problem exists when experts on a given subject are instructing laypersons. Typical settings would be the public lecture hall, the classroom, the convention hall, or the church. There the lecturers or teachers are at an advantage over their audience, because they are much better prepared and know, or should know, much more than anyone else in the audience about the topic under discussion. Often the listeners have the same philosophical "flavor" as the speakers, because they have come to hear about a subject they are already interested in, or they want to have their worldview affirmed. In the classroom the instruction can reflect a particular political, nationalistic, or religious viewpoint. The type of books and journal articles emphasized can stimulate a particular bias that the innocent reader does not recognize. With the specialist-laymen arrangement, the eagerness of the laymen to learn and the enthusiasm of the specialist to promote a particular view can generate a not-so-healthy synergistic enthusiasm in which the expert takes advantage of the ignorance of the listener. In life we are too often at the mercy of the experts whose credentials may be impressive, but whose integrity, wisdom, and knowledge remain unevaluated by the listener.

A very heavy responsibility rests on the experts. They need to be especially careful not to misguide their more ignorant listeners. While all of us frequently exercise our right to believe or not believe the experts, our discernment may lose objectivity as we are exposed to continuous repetition of the same authoritative statement, or as public opinion wields its subtle influence on us.

The problem of ignorance can be particularly severe in the important task of trying to establish a correct basic philosophy or worldview. Concepts of our origin can dramatically affect our ideas of the meaning of reality. Whether we believe that we were created in the image of God, or that we evolved from simpler forms, can dramatically affect our value system, and those important questions about purpose, duty, and destiny. Likewise, the various views

intermediate between creation and evolution, such as theistic evolution or progressive creation, can imply a very different kind of God and ensuing worldviews.

Our worldview, or as some prefer to call it, our personal basic philosophy or religion, usually extends beyond simple facts as we address the more complex questions such as the meaning of existence and the ensuing implications about life beyond the grave. These deeper, complex and extremely important questions are easily influenced by the pronouncements of experts, and because of this they especially need to be sheltered from the pitfalls of collective ignorance. The fact that worldviews are complex and not as easily evaluated as simple facts makes them particularly susceptible to the innocence of collective ignorance. In this area we can easily be deceived.

It turns out that our collective ignorance has the collective disadvantage of mass delusion; whether it be the influence of Goebbels, the specialist of Madison Avenue, or a host of what we respectfully call experts. The solution is to be constantly on our guard lest advantage be taken of our ignorance, of which we all have an abundant supply.

Be independent.

Ariel A. Roth