

## Reflections on the Death of Richard Bilkszto

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In 2015, Rachel Dolezal, a White chapter president of NAACP, was vilified for identifying as Black. Some men choose to identify as women, and some women choose to identify as men. You will be vilified if you deny that they literally are what they identify as. Discuss. (Richard Dawkins, Twitter, 2021)

Richard Dawkins who is a humanist and evolutionary biologist was vilified on social media for posing this challenging question. The American Humanist Association went so far as to revoke the Humanist of the Year award they gave him in 1996. In a subsequent article a co-author and I (Robertson & Tasca, 2022) predicted:

Dawkins will be just fine. But those who aren't humanist legends are much more cancellable. Perceived challenges to woke orthodoxy have resulted in social isolation, career opportunities drying up, campus lectures cancelled, and firings (Applebaum, 2021). There are even professors - liberal professors - who are legitimately scared of their students (Schlosser, 2015). Still other victims of the woke attack machine, most tragically, have killed themselves (Hartocollis, 2020). It's impossible to suspect that all this carnage is an accident. The carnage is the point; it's meant to scare us into compliance. (pp. 24, 25)

This article is about the July 13, 2023 suicide of one such non-legend. Richard Bilkszto refused to be scared into compliance when confronted by statements he knew to be false. He had been a school principal in both Canada and the United States, and he had been a lifelong activist against racism and bigotry. He had retired from education in 2019 but the Toronto District School Board asked him to return as a contract principal to assist with a faltering adult education project. He was thanked by his employer for saving the project and offered an extension, but when a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) trainer at a mandatory staff training session asserted that Canada was a much more racist country than the United States, Bilkszto politely stated that the record of Canada's public schools, progressive tax system and health care system suggested otherwise.

If the DEI instructor was a humanist we would expect that she would have either acknowledged Bilkszto's data or countered it with data of her own. Instead, Kike Ojo-Thompson called him a white supremacist and told those in attendance, "Your job in this work, as white people, is to believe" (Subramanya & Blaff, 2023, para. 35). Bilkszto was silenced due to his race. The executive superintendent of education for his school board thanked Ojo-Thomson for modeling the way to combat anti-black racism. In the next of the series of four DEI sessions Ojo-Thompson told Bilkszto and 200 of his colleagues, "One of the ways that white supremacy is upheld, protected, reproduced, upkept, defended is through resistance... I'm so lucky that we got perfect evidence, a wonderful example of resistance that you all got to bear witness to, so we're going to talk about it, because, I mean, it doesn't get better than this." (Subramanya & Blaff, 2023, para. 42). During this session other attendees were encouraged to criticize Bilkszto's "whiteness." No one dared defend him. The day after this session Bilkszto filed for sick leave.

Bilkszto filed a complaint with school officials. In August 2021 the Ontario Workplace Safety and Insurance Board awarded him seven weeks of lost pay for workplace harassment. But this did not end the matter. When informed that he would not receive any more contracts he began a lawsuit for damages.

The law suit cited Ojo-Thompson's "defamatory statements" and the unwillingness of The Toronto District School Board to stand up for him. It said Bilkszto had suffered "embarrassment, scandal, ridicule, contempt, and severe emotional distress." In response to the law suit the school board made a statement of claim against the DEI training company, the KOJO Institute, for "breach of contract" in creating the conditions that led to Bilkszto's distress (Sarkonak, 2023). Despite the strength of his legal case Bilkszto continued to experience social media harassment and distress. His friend, Michael Teper, explained:

It was not only his job that was taken away from him, but his reputation, because those very people were assassinating his character. They claimed he was a white supremacist, that he was a racist. They knew nothing about him. They knew nothing about what he stood for or what he believed. (Subramanya & Blaff, 2023, para 15)

We do not know how the social media campaign targeting Bilkszto was organized, but the New Enlightenment Project uncovered the Woke instructions to their followers when organizing a counter-demonstration in Ottawa, Canada, earlier this year. Nowhere in the instructions was there any mention of the arguments of their opposition. Woke followers were only told they were demonstrating against "fascists" and "Nazis" when, in fact, they were demonstrating against people who did not want biological males in girl's washrooms in school. Further, the Woke were instructed to not engage in conversations with other people but were given a list of slogans they should shout. If a reporter or other individual were to attempt to

engage them in conversation they were to shout the slogans louder. Our observers at the event report that these counter-demonstrators followed the script they were given.

Like the Puritans during the “Great Awakenings” of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the only thing these modern Woke need to know about victims of their mobbings is that they are sinners. The Great Awakening of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has changed the meaning of the word “racism” to “sin.” As we have seen, Dawkins and Bilkszto were not guilty of racism by any meaningful definition of the word, but they were guilty of challenging the words of those the Woke believe to be holy. In ordinary language, they sinned against the religion.

At the beginning of this century, Steven Pinker (2003) noted that a proto or quasi-religion had formed that accepts on faith three myths: the blank slate, the ghost in the machine and the noble savage. The blank slate myth holds that we are totally the product of culture and can be molded through the use of words as is found in the practice of political correctness. The ghost in the machine myth holds that we are born with some essence that defines us – gender or race – as the Woke so divine. The noble savage myth romanticizes aboriginal people but ultimately leads to the belief that modern civilization is evil and should be destroyed so that mankind can return to a “state of nature” as found in tribal societies. Since Pinker (2018) demonstrated that we live longer, are better educated, experience less sexism, slavery, malnutrition, child mortality and xenophobia than at any other time in human history, he has run afoul of Woke dogma. They did not challenge his data but accused him of being a Nazi and a sympathizer of pedophilia. He was also accused of being a racist because he cited black authors in his work thus appropriating their thoughts. Like Dawkins, Pinker may be “uncancelable.” but as the example of Bilkszto demonstrates, their effect on ordinary people can be devastating.

In 2022 I engaged in a lengthy exchange with a Woke sympathizer on a humanist social media discussion group. She repeated the common trope that to be Woke is to simply be “awake” to racism. She saw herself as a “good Woke” who was against cancelling speakers, arranging to have people fired for expressing unwoke ideas, mobbing people on social media, or enforcing political correctness. I asked her why these good Woke failed to defend Steven Pinker when a petition was raised to have him cancelled as a distinguished fellow of the Linguistic Society of America. She replied that the good Woke were probably afraid of being called “right wing” by the not so good Woke. I believe this attitude is what ultimately killed Richard Bilkszto.

If Bilkszto really was a white supremacist, calling him one would not affect his social standing. His friends would still talk to him. Further, the slings thrown at this hypothetical white supremacist would merely be part of a larger war in which he participates. But Bilkszto found himself alone. His employer and colleagues deserted him. His solid legal case was not sufficient to protect his psyche.

Applebaum (2021) explained, “the first thing that happens once you have been accused of breaking a social code, when you find yourself at the center of a social-media storm because of something you said or purportedly said. The phone stops ringing. People stop talking to you. You become toxic.” She said most of the victims of the Woke, whom she calls “The New Puritans,” were liberals.

Humanists, liberals and socialists are most vulnerable to the slurs the Woke use exactly because we have traditionally opposed racism, fascism, sexism and all forms of bigotry. As a result, when people are accused of these things we tend to cast a wary eye in their direction. When we ourselves are accused we tend to assume we have been misinterpreted and we may apologize for our choice of words. The Woke view all apologies as an admission of guilt with the

result that they press with even more vigor. Humanists tend to give people who proclaim themselves to be anti-racist sympathy, and this can lead to impotence when observing a vicious attack like the one launched against Richard Bilkszto.

We need to uphold the humanist valuing of science, reason and compassion. Facts are not racist but interpretations that ignore facts often are. The silencing of Bilkszto because of his race was itself a racist act. Humanist compassion dictates that we spring to the defense of the Richard Bilksztos of the world.

It may be that Wokism has evolved into a puritanical fundamentalist religion since Pinker made his initial observations two decades ago. I have offered an alternative explanation. Using Dawkins' (1976, 1982) concept of the meme and taking the self as a mental analogue to the body, I have shown how evolved cultural units can act as mind viruses (Robertson, 2017) and how Woke identitarianism fits such a definition (Robertson, 2021). But whether it is a religion or virus, the antidote is to be found by valuing and teaching of science, reason and compassion. Richard Bilkszto needed the support of those who share this understanding.

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