

## Editorial

### In the name of God, and of Bush, and of the market

*In the name of God* is the heading chosen by some researchers from a Middle Eastern country for their posters in an international conference on chemistry which has recently been held in Paris. This powerful message preceded the results of the researchers' work on the morphology, molecular structure, as well as the physical, chemical and mechanical properties of advanced polymeric materials.

It was an unexpected statement, an unusual message, though certainly not an unprecedented one. It had nonetheless a striking effect in the context of a scientific conference attended by thousands of people from various ethnic and religious backgrounds.

*Restoring Scientific Integrity in Policy Making* is the title of the report produced by the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) in the USA. This report accuses the President of the United States, Mr George W. Bush, of undermining the integrity of science (as the title of the report goes) in its relations with politics, by either misrepresenting the positions of US scientific institutions (for instance, the position of the National Academy of Science on climate change) or even by trying to censor them (as was the case with the reports produced by the Environmental Protection Agency on the same issue).

Mr Bush has also received similar accusations by a group of 62 eminent scientists, including 20 Nobel Laureates and 19 recipients of the US National Medal of Science, as well as the scientific consultants of Presidents Eisenhower and Nixon.

In this case too, we are presented with an unexpected, though not unprecedented, action. The same accusation against Mr Bush has also been made in a recent editorial of *Scientific American*, eloquently entitled "Bush-League Lysenkoism", where the editor reminds readers the shadow cast by the case of Soviet biologist and agronomist Lysenko in order to criticise fiercely Mr Bush and his alleged attempt to manipulate relations between science and politics.

What do the few Middle Eastern chemists who praised God in Paris have in common with White House policy misrepresenting the positions freely adopted by the US scientific institutions? They have at least two things in common and both of them closely concern all those involved in science communication. The first thing in common is that, in both cases, religion and politics, which have traditionally been kept outside the virtual "Republic of Science" (albeit this has not always been easy), now force their way into it and distort its internal communication processes.

The second thing they have in common is the fact that this powerful interference of religion and politics in science does not regard (as it did in Galileo's times) fundamental questions on the *imago mundi*, the vision of the world. Instead, they concern much more concrete questions, such as the properties of new polymeric materials and the ever more rapid, human-induced climate change.

For the time being, the cases where religion and politics have interfered in the mechanisms of science communication seem to be isolated occurrences. However, the comparison of these two totally different cases is not only for argument's sake. If we look more carefully, we will see that there have been other recent cases (research on stem cells in the USA and in Italy, the teaching of evolutionary theory in schools in the USA and in Italy yet again) where politics and religion have jointly forced their way into science and/or unrestricted science communication.

Such interference, at a time when scientific activity is also under great stress because of its tense relations with the economy, is a warning sign. Perhaps it is still a weak sign, but it should be kept under control. The last thing we want to see is the "Republic of Science" slowly losing its autonomy until such autonomy is completely suppressed by the blend of pragmatism and authoritarianism that is perceived by some as the emerging ideology of globalisation.

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