ROBERT F. KENNEDY JR... QUACKERY AND CONSPIRACY... UNCONVENTIONAL IDEAS AND A SCIENTIFIC APPROACH

To Debate or Not to Debate – That Is a Question of Principle and Method

by Bob Avakian

For many people, this requires facing seemingly inconvenient but actually liberating truths—and "moving out of one's comfort zone." Does it have to be said that this is not a legitimate reason or justification for a failure, or refusal, to seriously engage the new communism? Falling back on "flat earth" negative verdicts about communism, without serious engagement, particularly of the new communism, will not make such verdicts valid. It will not eliminate, but will contribute to perpetuating, the great harm done by such invalid verdicts. It will not erase the reality that, on the one hand, under the domination of this system of capitalism-imperialism—with its enforcement of horrific relations of exploitation and oppression, its accelerating destruction of the environment and its heightening danger of nuclear war—humanity is being dragged toward real disaster; and, on the other hand, that the new communism represents the only way out of this madness, toward a world and a future worthy of human beings and giving expression to humanity's highest aspirations.

Who Is Bob Avakian

Bob Avakian (BA) is completely different than the endless stream of bourgeois politicians who are put forward as "leaders," whose goal is to maintain one variation or another of this system of capitalism-imperialism. BA is a revolutionary who bases himself on the scientific understanding that the capitalist-imperialist system must be overthrown and replaced with a radically new and better system aimed at overcoming all forms of oppression and exploitation. He has written the blueprint to achieve this in the *Constitution for the New Socialist Republic in North America*. BA insists that the revolution's goal must not be revenge, but the emancipation of humanity all over the world.

people, as a result of such engagement and debate? Once again, the answer is yes.

In light of this, there can be no valid reason for anyone who claims to care about the state of the world and the future of humanity to refuse to engage with what we have to say about communism and its further development with the new communism. Any decent, thinking person, who is in a position to have at least a basic sense of what is going on in this country, and the world as a whole, should be able to recognize that things are presently heading in an extremely negative direction, and the question is objectively posed in very sharp and increasingly urgent terms: Is there a positive alternative to this? In these circumstances, when those of us who are the advocates of the new communism are firmly convinced that the only *real* positive alternative is what is represented by this new communism—and we are prepared to make the case for this with facts, evidence and scientifically grounded arguments—to refuse to seriously engage this is itself especially harmful and unconscionable.

Perhaps, along with the influence of the widely propagated *disinformation* about communism, one of the reasons why some people refuse engagement on this subject is because they know that they don't actually have any substantial knowledge about communism and they lack a sound basis for their negative judgment about it. And some seem to have at least an inchoate sense (and fear) that such engagement will force them to give up what seem to be comforting prejudices—that serious engagement about communism will demonstrate precisely that the widely held, "everybody knows" judgment that communism has been a horror will be shown to be a vicious slander fundamentally out of keeping with reality; and that the new communism, in its indictment of this system of capitalism-imperialism and its vision, both sweeping and concrete, for a radically different and better world, represents something profoundly positive, something truly emancipating, that needs to be actively and urgently taken up and applied in the world.

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Recently there has been a debate among various political commentators and others about whether people should debate Robert F. Kennedy Jr about vaccines. Kennedy is someone who has put forward a number of clearly disproved and irrational claims about a number of things, including the supposed harmful effects not only of COVID vaccines but other vaccines which have long been used to prevent (or mitigate) serious and even potentially deadly diseases.

For this reason, along with the fact that Kennedy has declared himself an opponent of Joe Biden for the Democratic Party nomination for president in the 2024 election, Kennedy has been embraced by Republican fascists and by other advocates of lunatic conspiracy theories. They have tried to promote the idea that Kennedy's claims about vaccines are a legitimate subject for debate (in particular they have attempted, unsuccessfully, to goad Peter Hotez, a pediatric doctor and vaccine expert, into debating Kennedy, whose "theories" about vaccines Hotez has refuted). After all, they insist, no harm and only good can come from the direct confrontation of opposing views about important questions, like vaccines.

Others have insisted that nothing positive can come from such a debate, because Kennedy's arguments are not based on and do not facilitate rational discourse, but proceed by systematically distorting reality to deny long-established and well-proven fact—and that debating Kennedy would only give an undeserved air of "legitimacy" to his lunatic arguments.

Whether, or not, to debate someone whose ideas run counter to what is held to be well-established truth is not a simple question with a "one size fits all" answer. In this case, those who argue that no good, and only real harm, can come from such a debate with Kennedy are correct. To help illustrate why this is the case, it is useful to recall the experience of Stephen Jay Gould, a prominent paleontologist and evolutionary biologist, in debating Christian fundamentalists about evolution, several decades ago.

After a number of these debates, Gould took the firm position that he would no longer engage in such debates, for the basic reason that it was not possible to have a principled and rational confrontation of opposing positions: the Christian fundamentalists he debated were not interested in arriving at an objective, scientific, evidence-based understanding of reality. Their purpose and goal was to promote anti-scientific religious fanaticism, and they argued accordingly. Every time Gould presented facts and evidence to show that natural evolution has in fact taken place, and continues to take place—and specifically that human beings themselves are one outcome of this evolutionary process—his Christian fundamentalist opponents would counter this with arguments that were not based on, and could not be engaged with, rational scientific methods. Along with dogmatic assertions of "Biblical truth," they would continually spew forth claims wildly at odds with reality, with the result that Gould found himself having to repeatedly "chase after" and refute misleading anti-scientific claims, which distracted from and undermined a focus on a serious, scientific approach to the question.

For example, Christian fundamentalists claimed then—and still claim—that "gaps" in the fossil record somehow "prove" that natural evolution could not be what has led to the emergence of different

Ignorance and Prejudice Is NOT a Valid Basis for Determining Truth

In contrast to that experience in the 1960s, today those of us who are advocates of the new communism have far too often been frustrated in our attempts to get people to seriously engage what we have to say about this—including more than a few people who, in other contexts, will insist on a rational, evidence-based scientific approach, but refuse to apply this approach to the question of communism. Instead, a common response (or lack of response) is to dismiss this as a serious question and fall back on the evasion that "everybody knows" that communism has been a disaster—that this is a "settled question," and not one worth engaging or debating.

In answer to this, I will return to—and apply to the question of communism and the need for people to seriously engage the new communism—the criteria I spoke to above for determining whether it is worthwhile and important to engage and enter into debate about a particular subject. First of all, is the question of communism, and its historical experience, significant? The answer to that is, irrefutably, YES: The communist movement and the socialist societies it brought into being represent, without question, one of the most significant experiences of the last 175 years or so, since Marx (together with Engels) proclaimed the "Communist Manifesto." Are those of us who are advocates of the new communism willing and prepared to engage in discourse and debate about this question on the basis of marshaling facts and evidence and evaluating facts and evidence by testing them against reality through rational, logical reasoning? Yes—our practice, over years and decades, shows that this is the approach that we insist on applying—and we are determined and eager to continue applying this method and approach! Finally, is there a reasonable expectation that the truth about communism and its historical experience, and the means for arriving at the truth about this, will be brought to light more clearly, for greater numbers of

by whether the relevant parties have generally applied this method and approach in the past. (Of course, people may disagree about, and will have to make their own judgments about, whether these criteria are, or will be, met in any particular circumstance, and therefore whether it is correct and worthwhile to devote time and effort to serious engagement; but such judgment itself should proceed in accordance with these basic criteria, honestly applied.)

In this regard, I can cite some of my own experience from back in the time of the Vietnam war. As someone who came to oppose that war beginning in early 1965, after serious investigation into the causes, character and course of that war, and in particular the role of the U.S. in the war, I engaged in countless informal arguments with people, including soldiers and veterans of the U.S. military, who were upholding what was in fact an immoral, genocidal war of aggression that the U.S. was waging in Vietnam, with terrible consequences for the Vietnamese people (including 2 million Vietnamese civilians killed by the U.S. in the course of that war); and I took part in numerous formal debates with right-wing students and others who supported that war. In those times, when the culture was more conducive to rational argument (as opposed to the baseless and often lunatic "opinions" that are continually spewed forth on social media, and by other means, today), as an overall phenomenon even the advocates of the U.S. role in the Vietnam war felt obliged to defend their position by attempting to marshal evidence and engage in rational discourse—as ill-founded and wrong-headed as their position was shown to be. For this reason, I felt then and continue to feel that, in an overall sense and as a general rule, it was worthwhile and productive to engage in argument and debate with such people—not so much with the objective of winning them over but to bring out the truth to a larger audience of people (both the audience for formal debates but also crowds that would frequently be drawn to hear, and at times to join in, the informal arguments in those days).

species, and that therefore these species must have been "created by God."

When this has been repeatedly refuted, including by showing how previously existing "gaps" in the fossil record have been "filled" by the discovery of new fossils that demonstrated the links between species, the Christian fundamentalists would then claim that, with this new discovery, "new" gaps had appeared in the fossil record!

As pointed out by Ardea Skybreak in her substantial and lively explanation of the theory of evolution and refutation of the anti-scientific claims of Biblical "creationism" (*The Science of Evolution and the Myth of Creationism—Knowing What's Real And Why It Matters*), these religious fundamentalist creationists "don't apply a genuinely scientific method, nor do they have any legitimate scientific evidence that could possibly support their viewpoint (they mainly make up absurd claims based on nothing, such as the idea that the order of the fossils in different rock layers represents the order in which different animals drowned during the Biblical Flood!)."

All this is what led Gould—after a number of sincere attempts to engage these Christian fundamentalists in honest, principled debate—to rightly conclude that no such rational debate could take place, and that these religious fanatics were not interested in, nor capable of, such debate. *Instead, Gould devoted considerable effort to promoting and broadly popularizing the evidence-based truth about evolution, and the scientific method that leads to this understanding*. And that is what should be done in the face of other anti-scientific distortions of reality—especially those that are being widely promoted—such as the lunacy being spouted by Robert F. Kennedy Jr about vaccines (and other questions).

A Complication: Not All "Well Known Truth" Is Actually True

It should not be hard to see that a principled, rational, scientific evidence-based debate is impossible with creationists. And the

same applies to the "pseudo-scientific"—actually **anti**-scientific—arguments and approach of someone like Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

However, as a matter of principle and method, it is important to emphasize that just because something is outside the framework of, and posed against, "accepted truth" does not in itself make that something wrong. "What everybody knows" is not always true, and relying on "what everybody knows" is not a correct basis for determining what is actually true. At an earlier point in human history, "everybody" (or almost everybody) "knew"—firmly believed—what is broadly known now to be anti-scientific *un*truth: that the world is flat, and that "the sun goes around the earth." Many other examples could be cited to illustrate the point that what is commonly held to be true may actually be untrue. It is the scientific method, and not "common wisdom," that is the basis and means for arriving at the truth about phenomena in society as well as nature (and where science has, in the short run, got something wrong, it is still the *scientific method* that provides the means for recognizing and correcting the error).

It should come as no surprise—since I am a communist, and in fact someone who has brought forward a further development of scientific communist theory, the new communism—that one of the most glaring examples of faulty reasoning and invalid conclusion, which I feel is important to dispute, is the widely held notion (what "everybody knows") that communist revolution and the socialist states it has brought into being have been "a totalitarian nightmare." *This is no more true than Robert F. Kennedy Jr's claims about vaccines*. While there have been real problems and errors—some of them serious, even grievous—in the historical experience of communism, the fact, the scientifically established truth, is that this experience as a whole has been mainly, even overwhelmingly, positive. The new communism upholds this principally positive experience while making substantive, scientifically based criticism of its real, but overall secondary, negative side (the new communism is a continuation of, but also represents a qualitative leap beyond, and in some important ways a break with, communist theory as it had been previously developed).

The Criteria for When Debate Should Be Conducted and How It Should Be Carried Out

My purpose here is not to engage in refutation of the slanders against communism which have been widely and incessantly propagated by the media and other dominant institutions of the system of capitalism-imperialism that rules in this country, and the crude distortions spewed forth by people speaking out of gross ignorance and those anti-communist political functionaries engaging in deliberate and systematic distortion. For anyone genuinely interested in approaching this with an open mind, and a rational scientific method, there is thorough, evidence-based, refutation of this anti-communist slander—and extensive discussion of the actual history and historical accomplishments of communism, as well as presentation of the principles, methods, and objectives of the new communism—in works of mine, and others, available at the website revcom.us.

What is a matter of fundamental principle and importance, which I do feel needs to be addressed here, is what approach should be adopted in determining whether, or not, to seriously engage—including through debate when called for—controversial questions in general, and how this applies specifically to the question of communism.

The criteria for this should be, first of all, determining whether the subject in question is significant enough to deserve serious engagement and contestation of opposing positions. Then there is the question of whether, as a result of such engagement and contestation, not just the truth about what is at issue, but the correct and necessary method for getting at the truth, will be furthered, rather than undermined. And a key element in that is whether there is a reasonable expectation that engagement and debate can and will be approached by the people holding the opposing positions by presenting arguments which are based on, and can be contested by, the marshaling of facts and evidence and the evaluation of those facts and evidence by testing them against reality through rational, logical reasoning—as judged, in large part,