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Guest Column: 'Values' campaign doesn't value some things we need

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By LAWRENCE M. KRAUSS

This month, Nashville will be graced by a pre-election visit from James Dobson, head of Focus on the Family, who will be accompanied by several others, including Richard Land from the Southern Baptist Convention. They will be featured at a rally to "learn what is at stake this election and get equipped to fight for the critical issues that will protect the family."

Family values will no doubt continue to be framed as an issue in the upcoming elections in Tennessee, in particular in the Senate race. However, when voters consider this issue in light of the rhetoric of right-wing fundamentalists such as Dobson and Land, they should consider a broader perspective of the best interests of their families.

I have just moved to Nashville from Ohio to spend the year doing teaching and research at Vanderbilt University. Tennessee shares many things with Ohio. In particular, both states have wide economic disparities among their populations, and both states are attempting to improve their economic competitiveness by fostering new initiatives in high technology, in particular biotechnology.

If families in Tennessee are to flourish, children here should receive the best and most modern education possible. In particular, if they are to compete with the global work force in the 21st century, they must be technologically literate. If they are to have job opportunities here, the state must foster an active research environment — one that can spawn high technology companies that might feed the state's economic engine.

This is where Dobson and Land come in. As a scientist and educator, I have had the opportunity to watch both of them at work. Both have continued to attempt to interfere with the teaching of biology in public high schools by propagating the false notions that evolution is both scientifically suspect and also inherently atheistic.

These demagogues do a disservice not just to science but to all people of faith. Evolution is one of the best-tested scientific theories in existence and is responsible for a host of important developments that aid our society, including the development of new drugs to fight disease. Moreover, the science is completely independent of one's religious beliefs. There are many devoutly religious biologists who understand that the fact that evolution via natural selection is responsible for the diversity of life on Earth in no way implies a lack of divine purpose to the life or the Universe.

But individuals such as Dobson and Land also seem to feel — mistakenly — that knowledge is a threat to faith on a far broader scale. As scientists learn to use stem cells — extracted without risk to any human life — in the global quest for new therapies for debilitating diseases such as Alzheimer's disease, some influential Christian fundamentalists want to continue to tie the hands of U.S. scientists.

Thus, when we hear talk of "defense of the family," voters should consider whether candidates and their endorsers are exploiting misplaced religious fears instead of focusing on how to help the next generation prosper intellectually and economically. Those who preach ignorance in the name of God and who attack modern science and technology out of a misplaced sense of faith are the real threats to our families. Our children deserve better, and so does this state. •