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Anonymous Atheists

Ken Briggs | Feb. 27, 2011 NCR Today

I teach a seminar on science and religion. The greatest challenges are 1)to budge the assumption that the two are forever at odds; and 2) to coax students to talk about their beliefs.

The second is the harder. The idea that religious ideas can be as worthy or respectable as scientific propositions is foreign, even among those who attended religious secondary schools.

Their reluctance to speak of personal beliefs reflect the culture's tendency to confine religion to private life, apart from public, intellectual discussion. It's also rooted in the common notion that talking about one's religion constitutes an attempt to "force" convictions on another.

It is cool, however, to be anti-religion. The zeitgeist seems to have made it respectable to declare atheism. To a large degree, this is typical questioning of indoctrinated religion, and a healthy one. But I think there has been a stronger presumption against religion based on no early training.

None of this is a criticism of students. They have imbibed the culture they did not make. And they're a wonderful group.

The prevalence of religious silence leads me to guess who is or isn't a believer (I don't favor one or the other). It calls to mind Bonhoeffer's suggestion that Christians, for example, will make known their faith more by the way they behave than what they profess ("You will know they are Christians by their love" as the song says).

A recent batch of papers again upended my guesswork. The two who seemed most "religious" declared their staunch atheism, in passing, and my choice for the most thoughtful skeptic said she was a devout Mennonite.

I find this uplifting. There is more mystery in all of this than meets the eye (mine anyway) and cautions me against any certainty where the spirit works.

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