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Religion & Science

Michael Sean Winters | May. 23, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

The other day, I called attention to an excellent essay [1], published at the Huffington Post, by Charles Reid, law professor at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota. Reid argues that Christians must be literate in science and combat the idea that science and faith are necessarily at odds and doomed to the kind of struggle Dan Brown likes to write about.

It has been almost one hundred years since William Jennings Bryan said, ?It is better to trust the Rock of Ages than to know the ages of rocks.? Bryan was one of the legal protagonists in the Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee, in which John Scopes was accused of teaching evolution in a public school in violation of Tennessee law. In the event, Bryan won the case in court, but the fundamentalist denial of evolution lost in the court of public opinion. H.L.Mencken and hundreds of other journalists filed reports from the small town court room, but Mencken?s acerbic style framed the case: ?The Scopes Trial, from the start, has been carried on in a manner exactly fitted to the anti-evolution law and the simian imbecility under it,? Mencken wrote. ?The rustic judge, a candidate for re-election, has postured before the yokels like a clown in a ten-cent side show, and almost every word he has uttered has been an undisguised appeal to their prejudices and superstitions.? Don?t you wish Mencken had had a comment box!

Of course, for a believing Christian, Bryan was right: It is better to trust the Rock of Ages than it is to know anything else. But, the implication that religious trust and scientific knowledge are at odds is where Bryan went wrong. He was not alone. The decade before the trial, in the years 1910-1915, the Bible Institute of Los Angeles published a series of books called ?The Fundamentals,? which argued first against the use of higher criticism of the Bible, asserted the inerrancy of every comma in the Good Book, and consequently saw scientific theories such as evolution as deeply challenging their faith.

It is important to remember that when fundamentalists claim to be the only believers whose faith has been uncontaminated by modernity, they get it exactly wrong. They are the innovators. In the early Church, the Fathers developed a variety of ways of understanding certain scriptural verses. Through the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, different theologians demonstrated that they could be faithful Christians and embrace the scientific ideas of their times. Traditional Christianity has never adopted a fundamentalist reading of the scriptures and it was only in response to modernity and its challenges that fundamentalism emerged.

Certainly, there were millions of Christians through the centuries who had a simple faith akin to fundamentalism. They read the account of Creation, for example, and embraced it as historical truth as they embraced tales about the founding of their nations or stories about a local baron. Let none of us look down on such people whose education did not cause them to question and whose concerns in life were more basic and rudimentary, not least because even modernity feels the need to create its own fanciful mythologies. Think Horatio Alger. And even today, people get the relationship wrong between religion and science. In GOP primary debates, inevitably someone asks the candidates if they believe in evolution. Evolution is a scientific

theory. It is meant to be demonstrated, not believed.

There was a memorable moment in a 2008 debate when Sen. John McCain paused before answering that question, a pause that I am reasonably confident was not induced by an intellectual quibble but a political one. This has become the problem and not just for GOP presidential aspirants. After the Scopes trial, fundamentalists went into a self-imposed cultural exile. In the late 1970s and 1980s, they re-entered the mainstream via politics, and all the intellectual coarseness and superficiality that attends the contemporary practice of politics was joined with the relatively new brand of Christianity. The certainty of a William Jennings Bryan would have made him a perfect television guest, no? But, it was the certainty of the Rev. Jerry Falwell and other religious right leaders that became first the face of fundamentalism on the nation?s television screens and, as well, the face of Christianity to the ambient culture. Within a ten to fifteen years of the founding of Falwell?s Moral Majority, the number of people who said ?none? when asked to self-identify their religion began to grow.

Some Catholics sought to do business with these new leaders of the religious right. Fr. Neuhaus organized Catholics and Evangelicals Together, which really brought the culture warrior model of the religious right into the mainstream of Catholic thinking. To be clear, this alliance was about politics, not religion. Catholics and Evangelicals were not coming ?together,? around Marian doctrines or ecclesiology. This was about reducing religion to ethics and thence to politics. I am all for ecumenical pursuits, my friends, but let us be clear: When a Catholic says ?church? and a fundamentalist says ?church,? we mean something very different and those core differences color everything that follows. And, not only are the differences, well, fundamental, but unless those differences are highlighted, we will get tarred with the same brush as our fundamentalist friends.

This is why Professor Reid?s essay is so important. He writes:

For the greatest danger Christianity confronts at the present moment is not incipient persecution, but increasing marginalization and irrelevance. If Christians cannot engage reasonably and responsibly with science, there will be no place for them in the public life of advanced societies.

It is not enough for Catholics to do their thing. If we do not occupy the public square on an issue such as climate change, for example, we will be seen as ?yokels,? to use Mencken?s word, and we will deserve to be seen as yokels. And, increasingly, we will marginalize ourselves.

We sing in the hymn ?Alleluia, Sing to Jesus,? that ?faith believes, nor questions how.? True enough. Science asks the how questions. But, our faith asks, and answers, the why questions. Our culture must ask both sets of questions, no? And, while it is easy to see how some new understanding of ?how? will cause us to reflect more deeply on how we understand a previously arrived at answer to ?why,? we must, as professor Reid suggests, demonstrate in the public square that our faith is not inimical to science in the least. And, just as importantly, we must not be afraid to occupy the public square so that when someone hears the word ?Christian? they think of a chemsitry student at Notre Dame as much as they think of a fundamentalist preacher ranting against evolution.

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[1] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/charles-j-reid-jr/christians-must-confront-scientific-illiteracy_b_3307516.html