

Evangelicals & Science

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 29, 2011 | Distinctly Catholic

The relationship between faith and reason is one of the fault lines in Western culture. There have always been different schools of theological thinking within the Church to be sure, but the lines became especially fractured after Martin Luther warned his fellow Protestants to "Beware the whore, Reason, for she will go with any man." In our own day, the fault lines are most frequently found in the "battle" between science and religion and, it appears that the GOP presidential primaries will include at least some attention to these lines.

Jonathan Dudley has just written a book, [Broken Words: The Abuse of Science and Faith in American Politics](#) [1] that looks at these fault lines from the standpoint of a young man who was raised as an evangelical, went to a conservative evangelical college, Yale Divinity School and now studies medicine at Johns Hopkins. You can get a sense of his thesis in the very opening sentence: "I learned a few things growing up as an evangelical Christian: that abortion is murder; homosexuality, sin; evolution, nonsense; and environmentalism, a farce." Needless to say, he has learned some things since then, but, unfortunately, how to be fair, or balanced, or step back and make intellectual connections, are not among the things Mr. Dudley has learned. He has produced an uneven book that is at times very instructive but is at other times as tendentious as the conservative evangelicals he criticizes.

Dudley's account of the differing approaches to evolutionary theory over the years is one of his stronger sections. I was unfamiliar with this 1853 quote, from an evangelical theologian, Charles Hodge: "For five thousand years, the Church understood the Bible to teach that the earth stood still in space, and that the sun and the stars revolved around it. Science has demonstrated that this is not true. Shall we go on to interpret the Bible so as to make it teach the falsehood that the sun moves around the earth, or shall we interpret it by science, and make the two harmonize?" It is a shame, as Dudley writes, that more evangelicals did not stick with Hodge's essential sanity on the relationship of science to faith. Dudley also shows that "Intelligent Design" is both a PR sham and a scientific one, which is important because what Catholics may mean by "intelligent design" is not what contemporary evangelicals who are trying to push evolution out of the way mean by "intelligent design."

But, even here, Dudley seems to accept the indictment of evangelical thought offered by its most secular critics. He offers no bridges between the two. He fails to note that evangelicals too readily accept the indictment of them offered by the secularists, that instead of finding ways to integrate their faith and their reason, they let others define them and their categories. His discussion of how prior biases and worldviews do, or do not, affect our reading of Scripture could have benefited from some time with Newman's "The Development of Doctrine." And, while it is true that the issue of tax exemptions for Christian schools galvanized many conservative evangelicals to get involved in politics in the late 1970s, it is not entirely true to say, as Dudley does, that the "evangelical Right, therefore, was not as concerned about abortion initially as it was with defending racially segregated schools." Many of the schools were not racially segregated, and many evangelicals were simply concerned with government intrusion of any kind.

But, the worst section is the first, in which Dudley grapples with abortion. At one point, he writes: "The question of when moral life begins in a question of how far back the category 'human' should extend; the

question of the value of human life is a question of how what is already placed in the category "human" should be treated. The mistake many evangelicals make is to conflate the two questions. I am not exactly sure what he means by this because it sets up a section in which he examines many other issues, such as capital punishment, war, and acceptance of torture, all of which, Dudley argues, evangelicals support. Later, he tries to pick apart the pro-life focus on the innocence of the unborn child, but he never connects that to his earlier equation of abortion with other attacks on human life such as capital punishment. Surely, there is a difference between the moral innocence of an unborn child and that of an assassin or mass murderer. I oppose capital punishment because I believe nothing, not even gross violations of morality, warrant the taking of a human life, but I also see that Dudley is as prone to conflation as others.

His position on abortion weakens the further he goes. He writes: "Although the potential to become a person may warrant significant respect perhaps enough that embryos shouldn't be deliberately created and destroyed for research purposes being able to become a person does not make one a person, any more than being an acorn makes one an oak tree." But, here we are back at the relevant categories and, again, Dudley is confused. Yes, there is a difference between potential personhood and the fulfillment of personhood. Indeed, that difference is marked by a continuum that extends far past birth itself and, as I am hoping, past fifty too! But, an acorn is not going to grow into an elm tree or a maple tree and an embryo is not going to grow into a dog or a cat either. And, besides, you can't kill dogs or cats for the hell of it.

The section that struck me as the most interesting was Dudley's charge that "the most popular pro-life argument on this front is to hold up enormous pictures of aborted fetuses in public or to show videos of abortions using ultrasound." I agree that many such pictures are exploitative of the human life being photographed. When Randall Terry has a video with an aborted child on a pillow, I, too, am disgusted. But, surely one of the problems in our culture is our unwillingness to discuss, let alone imagine, what abortion really is. It really is brutal. It really is an act of violence. And, as standard ultrasounds are showing millions of expectant mothers, that is no acorn inside them, that is a child. Dudley considers none of this. He seems to drink the NARAL Kool-Aid as quickly as the evangelicals have drunk the anti-science Kool-Aid.

I had hoped this book would give hope that a new breed of young evangelicals is coming up, more open to the demands and the possibilities of science and reason, less brittle in their interpretation of Scripture, more willing to seek, and to find, nuance and not just certitude in the life of faith. Instead, I am afraid this book has thrown the baby out with the baptismal water. Dudley has abandoned the dogmatism of evangelical conservatives but has embraced a dogmatism of his own, one that tracks neatly with the dominant cultural beliefs of the intellectual status quo. It is a shame he could not have made this book a vehicle for transcending the dogmatisms of each, instead of just jumping from the one to the other.

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[1] http://www.amazon.com/Broken-Words-Science-American-Politics/dp/0385525265/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1314618633&sr=8-1