

Healing the rift between science and religion

By John Rosenberg

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A visitor to our congregation last month might have done a double take as the usher greeted her and handed her a bulletin. On the cover was a 19th-century cartoon that featured the head of Charles Darwin on the body of an ape. Next to the picture in bold letters was the phrase, “Evolution Sunday?”

But indeed, it was Evolution Sunday—or Evolution Friday or Saturday, depending upon one’s faith tradition—not only at our church but at more than 600 other faith communities throughout the United States and Canada. What all these places of worship and their leaders have in common is a firm commitment to assisting their members to seriously reflect on the relationship between religion and science, to elevate the quality of discourse between these two ways of knowing, and to begin healing the rift that for too long has separated them.

I was thinking about that rift as I watched the first installment of Neil deGrasse Tyson’s remake of Carl Sagan’s famous “Cosmos” series. Featured prominently is the long battle between Giordano Bruno, a medieval cosmologist, and the Inquisition that resulted in Bruno being burned at the stake. His statue still stands in the Campo de Fiore in Rome in mute testimony to an unnecessary conflict that continues to haunt us today.

Evolution Weekend as it is now known is the creation of Dr. Michael Zimmerman, provost at The Evergreen State College in Olympia and promulgator and promoter of the Clergy Letter Project (theclergyletterproject.org). To date, almost 14,000 clergy from Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist traditions have signed one of four different versions of the Clergy Letter.

The letter for Christian clergy begins by noting that while virtually all Christians take the Bible seriously and hold it to be authoritative in matters of faith and practice, most Christians do not read it literally or view it as a science textbook. While its stories convey timeless truths about the human condition and God’s great love for creation, the purpose of the Bible is to transform hearts not to convey scientific information.

The letter goes on to say, “We believe that the theory of evolution is a foundational scientific truth, one that has stood up to rigorous scrutiny and upon which much of human knowledge and achievement rests. To reject this truth or to treat it as ‘one theory among others’ is to deliberately embrace scientific ignorance and transmit such ignorance to our children.”

The first time we celebrated Evolution Sunday at my church, one disgruntled member accused me of “going political.” I thought it was a curious comment given that we were talking about science and religion, two endeavors that at their best transcend all political agendas.

But I soon discovered that the divide between religion and science has political dimensions today much as it did in Bruno’s time.

This debate, like so many others, is being actively exploited by individuals and groups that find themselves at odds with what scientists are telling us about issues such as climate change and environmental pollution. Their reasons for obfuscation and resistance often appear to be driven more by political and economic self-interest than by genuine theological or scientific dissent.

The Clergy Letter is not without its religious detractors. In a recent Huffington Post article, Zimmerman noted the existence of one group whose sole purpose for existence appears to be their opposition to the Clergy Letter and their desire to defend a literal reading of the Genesis creation accounts (CreationLetter.com).

In one especially blustering paragraph, the authors accuse the signers of the Clergy Letter of holding less-than-orthodox views about a variety of other doctrines and conclude, “It must be said that if they do not so agree with orthodoxy on these matters, they cannot truly be called Christian and their clerical positions are therefore a disgraceful sham.”

Fortunately for my co-signers and me the Inquisition is not currently active.

My best response to critics of the effort to improve the conversation between religion and science is the final paragraph of the Clergy Letter: “We believe that among God’s good gifts are human minds capable of critical thought and that the failure to fully employ this gift is a rejection of the will of our Creator. To argue that God’s loving plan of salvation for humanity precludes the full employment of the God-given faculty of reason is to attempt to limit God, an act of hubris.”

Amen.

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