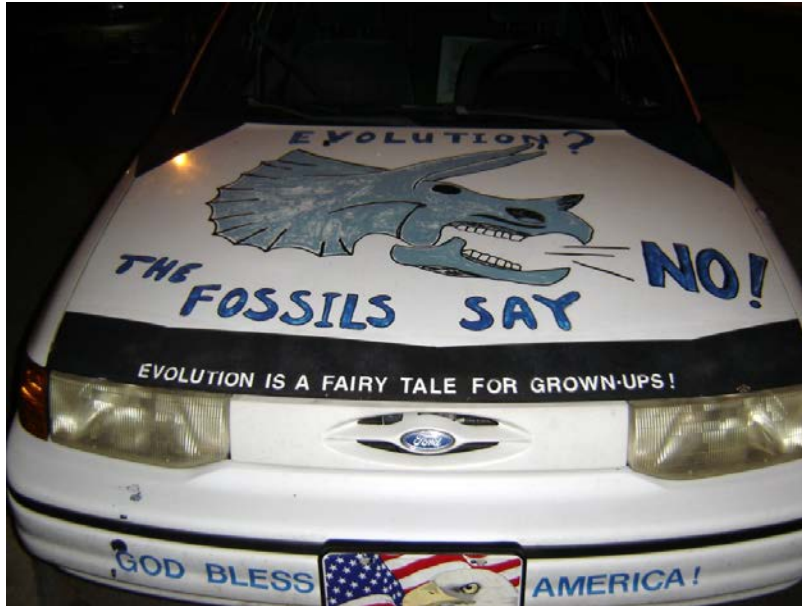


No Need for Christians to Fear Science

November 1st, 2011 at 2:00 pm



There was a college media convention in Orlando at the end of October, and I was one of the people giving a presentation on how college media and college administrators have some built-in tension with each other. A woman in the audience raised her hand and introduced herself as the adviser to a campus newspaper at a small Christian university in the Southeast U.S.

"Our president told us we couldn't cover a particular story," she said. "He literally told us we would not cover it."

The story was about a formal debate that occurred on campus. But it wasn't about gay rights or premarital sex - typical taboo topics at Christian colleges, it was about evolution.

And the person arguing on behalf of evolution had clearly won the debate. But don't anyone dare tell that story.

"What do your biology professors teach at your school?" I asked.

"Creationism." she said.

In a science class.

Well.

In San Diego, where I live, there is a mega-church that has more than 10,000 people attend each weekend, including many students from the Christian college where I teach. One of my colleagues who attends this church swears that the following story happened: The pastor, in his sermon, told the audience to text to a particular number if they believed in a six-day, 24-hour creation, and to a different number if they believed in some form of evolution. The results came up on the high-tech screens, with maybe a dozen or so who said they believed in evolution. The other thousands were for creationism.

The pastor regarded the evolution numbers, according to my colleague, and said, “Well, it looks like I still have some work to do.” The rest of his sermon was about why evolution was wrong and why believing in creationism is necessary for someone to “believe” the Bible.

I was raised in a conservative Christian environment. I went to a conservative Christian university in the Midwest. Never once did I hear anyone say they believed in a six-day, 24-hour creation, or an Earth that was 6,000 years old. They were enlightened enough to look at the evidence. My science professors didn’t exactly teach evolution, but it was pretty clear that they felt that God used evolution as the means of creating everything.

Evangelicalism – even very conservative evangelicalism – need not regard science as an enemy. Yet we see in the political world that candidates who seek evangelical votes feel obliged to deny evolution and climate science.

Candidate Perry said that evolution is “Just a theory” and that climate science is a “contrived phony mess that is falling apart.” Candidate Bachman attempted to link hurricanes, earthquakes and swine flu with Democratic presidents. Candidate Cain said that real science “doesn’t say that we have any major crisis or threat when it comes to climate change.” Candidates Romney and Gingrich have backed off of their earlier public statements that global warming was a real threat.

Of the GOP candidates, only Jon Huntsman has publicly said something that seemed pro-science: “I believe in evolution and trust scientists on global warming. Call me crazy,” he said in a [Tweet](#). And he’s the one who’s way behind in the polls.

For the past three years I have been spending a lot of time with John Polkinghorne so I could [write a book](#) about him. A little Polkinghorne wisdom would go a long way in helping some of these college presidents, pastors and presidential hopefuls.

Polkinghorne, 82, is the eminent physicist who mathematically explained the existence of quarks, the smallest known particles. He’s the former president of Queens’ College at

Cambridge University, a Templeton Award winner, a member of England's Royal Society, a member of England's boards that determined standards for medical ethics and stem cell research, who is also a committed Christian and a priest in the Anglican Church.

The reason he'd be a good influence is that he's not afraid of science, the way some people seem to be. Regarding the politicians specifically, I don't really think they are afraid of science. Before they were presidential hopefuls, many were pro-science - especially Gingrich. They seem afraid of science now, it appears, because they want the favor of a constituency of evangelical Christians that is afraid of science, and the politicians are just cynical enough to put their own intellects on hold to attract votes from the extreme Christian right.

Polkinghorne had his own experience with conservative evangelical Christianity when he was a student at Cambridge. As a believer, he joined the Christian Union, and enjoyed the fellowship with the other students. But instead of it being a liberating experience, it seemed legalistic, narrow minded, guilt-inducing, fearful of other points of view, and inhibiting. "There was a certain bleakness that seemed to be expected of the faithful, which cast something of a shadow," he told me. "They thought that their certainty was reality, but they were mistaken."

As a scientist and a theologian, Polkinghorne has dedicated the second half of his life to writing (more than 30 books) and speaking on how faith and science can live in harmony with one another. There are well-known historical accounts of the Christian Church denying scientific reality. In 1992 the Catholic Church said it regretted how it handled Galileo's presentation of evidence - 400 years before.

But Polkinghorne has said throughout his adult life that one must be two-eyed about looking at the world. One eye is for faith, and the other is for science. Using only one of those eyes gives a skewed view. Using both points us to a larger understanding of Truth. If they both lead to Truth, why be afraid of either? Looking at the Genesis account of creation as a literal event cheapens the story, in his view. "The world is ever-evolving, still being created, and is much more complex than that," he said. "That's what makes it so beautiful. Genesis is poetry, not history."

I am thankful that there are some Christian groups that seem to embrace science, and are committed to improving the environment, whether it's through slowing down man-made climate change, cleaning up pollution or living in a manner that is sustainable to future generations. That's how they interpret the Genesis account of God giving Adam "dominion" over the earth. "Dominion," in their interpretation, means "take care of it so that others can inhabit this earth, too."

Still, there are plenty of others who believe that science contradicts their understanding of the Bible. Sort of like how they viewed whether the sun orbited the earth or vice versa. There are 16 museums in the U.S. dedicated to proving that the earth was created in six 24-hour days. The evidence that says the Creation Story in Genesis 1 is more metaphorical than literal is contradicted with these museums' own version of "evidence." At the Creation and Earth History Museum in Santee, Calif., Darwin's portrait is on the same wall of shame as Hitler's. I took Polkinghorne to the museum last year when he was in the U.S. lecturing at several universities. All he could do was shake his head.

In the time I spent with him and in reading his books, I never felt like he was challenging my core beliefs in a loving God who has created a beautiful world. In fact, he challenged me to think bigger, not smaller.

Maybe that's the message this college newspaper adviser can take back to her president next week, and maybe what the pastor in San Diego and our Republican presidential candidates can hear as they think about this world. There is always more to the story.

*Dean Nelson is the director of the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego. His new book is *Quantum Leap: How John Polkinghorne Found God in Science and Religion*, written with Karl Giberson.*