

Epiphany V – February 8, 2009
Religion and Science Sunday
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THE CREATION CONTROVERSY

As most of you know, this is the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin who was born on February 12, 1809 – the same day that Lincoln was born! This year is also the 150th anniversary of the publishing of Darwin's infamous book, **The Origin of Species**. His brilliant scientific work caused quite a stir in its day, and the pot has continued to bubble up.

For instance, a school board in Texas has recently been struggling with the content of their science books and the teaching evolution. A conservative group wants to offer a religious alternative to evolution. So far level heads have prevailed. The case has broad implications because Texas uses so many textbooks that if this distortion of science and religion were used in their books the textbook publishers would have to print the same material in all books.

A few years ago, Kansas was at it again – God or science? Kansas was debating the “origin of species”. One would have thought that this was a moot topic, but not so in Kansas. The concern – as expressed by the head of the state's education department – was that children would be corrupted in science courses if they were exposed to the scientific theory of evolution.

My first reaction to this ongoing debate is amazement because I was taught the theory of evolution in high school, and I went to church, and I was confirmed, and I went to college, and I went to seminary (where one can ask really tough questions about the faith) – and I never sensed a conflict between what I had been taught in high school science classes, and what the Bible taught me about God's people.

Still, a lot of folks get really bent out of shape when the question of evolution surfaces. It is as though God's existence depended upon their disproving the theory of evolution. Perhaps the reason for this comes from the fact that people get science and religion mixed up.

The anthropologist Malinowsky wrote a book some years ago entitled, **MAGIC SCIENCE AND RELIGION**. He pointed out that most people think religion and magic are linked up when, in fact, religion is separate from both, and it is science and magic that are connected. His observations are based on his studies of the Trobriand Islanders. His research revealed that science was common to all civilizations, no matter how primitive they were. For instance, a culture uses science to make things work. Even the uneducated Islanders whom he studied knew enough about physics to build houses that withstood hurricanes. They could build boats to take them fishing. They knew enough about agriculture to plant and fertilize the yams that they raised for food. They even knew that a certain root thrown into ponds would stun the fish and cause them to rise to the surface. But, when they go into deep water to fish they encounter a lot of unknowns and so they use magic to create the “good luck” they need to avoid storms and to have a good catch.

Religion, on the other hand, was employed in the patterning of life. Rituals were used for life transitions such as births, puberty, marriage and death.

Now it's easy to see how people can slip from science into magic, and think that they are employing religion. For example, you look at the weather charts, test the soil for fertility, buy the best seeds and plant your crop. If you also offer a prayer for a good crop you have crossed the line between magic and religion. In effect, you want to have a good magical formula to make the crops grow.

Some religions actually have rituals related to fertility in which they do unmentionable things in the fields in spring in order to assure fertility. In America we confine our spring fertility rites to fraternity houses.

The point is, religion should not be used to explain science. Religion is what you use to explain the meaning of life. Religion is what you draw on to give substance to the creation we experience and the love that we share. Religion is not a formula to make things work. Religion is what our heads use to get beyond ourselves so we can contemplate the great mysteries of life.

When religion is used to replace science, it is a vestige of wanting to use magic to get things to come out the way we want them to. We do this when we think we have lost control of our destiny. And when that happens – as seems to have been the case in Kansas – then science and religion are both distorted.

Now, saying this does not mean that a person of faith does not believe in God as the creator. Even the Roman Catholic Church's official position is that evolution is obviously the best way of explaining how species have changed over the thousands of years that there has been life on earth. In 1996, Pope John-Paul II proclaimed that there was no essential conflict between Darwin's theory and Catholicism.

Furthermore the best minds in the scientific world have stood in amazement at the complexity and wonder of creation. You can't look at your garden in the spring or your child in your arms and not be moved to ecstasy.

Those who are upset about the teaching evolution in science classes seem to think that to do so denies biblical authority. They seem to be ignorant of the fact that there are two stories of creation in Genesis, and they even use two different names for God. In the first chapter God creates everything first and then human beings. The text reads; **Let us make humankind in our image... So God created human kind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. (1:27)**

So here we have male and female created at the same time – not Adam first and then Eve as they are in chapter two. And, they are in God's image, which makes God both male and female. And if you had any doubts about the godhead being both male and female, a new drug has been announced that claims to cure both menopause and prostate cancer! Now if that isn't enough to upset the apple cart of the biblical literalist, I don't know what is.

And speaking of apples: an older man in my congregation at Parkside once told me, **You know pastor, it wasn't the apple on the tree that caused all the problems in the world – it was the “pair” on the ground.**

Now, with the biblical texts in perspective, what should we do when we teach our faith traditions to our children? First, it is important that we do not confuse science and religion in the public schools! To do so helps neither, and it distorts both.

However, this does not mean that there isn't a place in the public school to teach about religion. In fact, it is not inappropriate to teach the content of the Bible and – especially these days – the Quran.

I've only been quoted in the New York Times once. It was when I presented a paper in Rochester on the decision of the Supreme Court that there should be no prayers in the public schools. In that same decision the Court made a point that is almost universally overlooked. It said that it **WAS** appropriate to teach about religion; in fact it was important to do that because you cannot understand much of literature or history without knowledge of traditional religious texts and traditions. You can't possibly understand John Milton's poetry without knowing his religious references. You cannot understand the Middle East without knowledge of the role Mohamed played in bringing the warring Arab tribes together through a faith based in part on Jewish and Christian scripture.

Another reason to teach religion is so that you can recognize its distortions. Listen to some of the TV preachers and you will see what I mean. One very popular young man, who preaches to thousands in his very big auditorium, told his congregation about a man who came to him and said he wanted to buy a very nice car, but something kept nagging at him about doing it. He talked to the pastor a few weeks later and said that he was still interested in the car, but something was keeping him from going ahead with it. A month later he came to the pastor with a big smile said that the car had just gone on sale for \$6,000 dollars less and he was certain that God had been guiding him.

This distortion was put into an amusing verse 150 years ago by Henry Hoyt in which – given the current world economic situation - he seems to have been prophetic:

**Should all the banks of Europe crash,
The bank of England smash,
Bring all your notes to Zion's bank,
You're sure to get your cash.**

The reality is we don't know enough religion. Jonathan Swift summed it up well when he wrote: **We have enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.**

And of course, in the end, God is mysterious and wonderful. And if you doubt the mystery – try to explain the Trinity. And, if you doubt the wonder – look at your child.