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October 11, 2012

HUFF
POST RELIGION

Science and Religion Peace Talks Remain Controversial

Posted: 08/30/2012 3:07 pm

Earlier this year Pope Benedict XVI created a new foundation to promote constructive dialog between science and faith, something we desperately need (CNA/EWTN News). The initiative draws on years of conversation coordinated by Science & the Ontological Quest (STOQ), a project funded in part by the Templeton Foundation. I made a modest contribution to this conversation a few years back when I was asked to speak at the Vatican on "America's Ongoing Hostility to Evolution," a phenomenon that European Catholics find incomprehensible.

In a [recent blog](#), the prominent new atheist biologist Jerry Coyne uncharitably attacked this effort to promote peace between science and religion. The Vatican initiative involves "weaselly accommodationism" he wrote. He criticized references to Thomas Aquinas on the grounds that the great Medieval scholar was really a "waffler" being "trotted out" to defend an eccentric position on creation. Religion, he said, provides only "self-help bromides" in contrast to science that provides "truths."

The science and religion "debate" wrote Coyne, has long been confused, ever "since science began showing that the claims of religion, including Catholicism, are not credible." He goes on to say that the "debate has been lively since 1896, when Andrew Dickson White, co-founder of Cornell University, published his two volume anti-accommodationist opus History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom."

Coyne's perspective is widely shared by the New Atheists but there are few with his energy (he posts substantive blogs on his site Why Evolution is True at least once a day). He also does his homework, taking time to read the works of leading religious thinkers. He is reading the King James Version of the Bible from cover to cover, a project that many Christians have been unable to complete. (He even made it through the book of Numbers, which contains some of the most boring stuff that has ever made it into print.)

Nevertheless, I think his critiques of the Vatican project are slanted and unfair. For starters, Thomas Aquinas is not being "trotted out" to make some point, as though he were some obscure figure cherry-picked from a pantheon of options because his 13th century view of creation comports with contemporary views of evolution. Aquinas is, by most estimates, the most important Christian thinker since St. Paul, and his views on creation have informed all subsequent thinking on the topic by both Protestants and Catholics.

Like other thinkers from previous centuries, Aquinas certainly held beliefs that we can no longer embrace. Coyne mentions that Aquinas believed the earth was 6,000 years old, for example, and thought the events in Genesis, including the Eden story, really happened as described. "So let us hear no more," he concludes, "about Aquinas showing that there's no conflict between the Bible and science."

What Coyne is missing here -- because he opposes harmonizing science and religion -- is the difference between beliefs that Aquinas shared with his century, embraced uncritically because they were not controversial, and Aquinas's more original thinking in response to the challenges of his day. All Western thinkers believed the earth was roughly 6,000 years old until the science of geology was born. Kepler dated the creation at 3992 B.C. and Newton dated it at 4000 B.C., but nobody would argue that these were the central ideas of these early scientists, or that their work on the nature of planetary orbits should be ignored because they thought God created those orbits 6,000 years ago. The same for the Garden of Eden, which was on many maps during those centuries and which Columbus thought he might have discovered when he set foot on the Americas. In the centuries before Newton, most scholars believed the stories in their ancient books, whether Moses's accounts of Eden, or Aristotle's tales of an uninhabitable "Torrid Zone" at the equator.

Aquinas's central insight -- the one that is appropriately defended as his enduring claim and not just something that everyone accepted in his time -- is that the foundation of the Christian doctrine in creation is the belief that God created and upholds everything, including the laws of nature. This remains relevant today because it lets us distinguish between God as the primary cause or source of the laws of nature, and the activity of the laws themselves. This, in turn, provides a helpful way to understand secondary (and tertiary, etc.) causes. God can create the law of gravity without having to be the immediate cause of everything that results from that law. Or, more importantly, God can create a world with the capacity to change and evolve without having to direct the details of those processes. This is complicated, of course, and raises its own set of questions, but it provides a basis for dialog by showing that new scientific developments can be incorporated into traditional Christian understandings.

Unfortunately, such dialog between science and religion will continue to be widely misconstrued as a "debate," largely because Andrew Dickson White did such an effective job painting it with that brush. White's influential polemic, one of the holy books of the New Atheists (you can download it for free at infidels.org) has been widely condemned for its irresponsible scholarship, but convenient mythologies can be hard to displace. I have just started teaching a course at Stonehill College titled "Does Science

Disprove God?" and one of the primary goals of the course will be to expose the poverty of White's thesis.

The Vatican project, executive director Father Tomasz Trafny told the Catholic News Agency, raises the important question of "how to offer a coherent vision of society, culture and the human being to people who would like to understand where to put these dimensions -- the spiritual and religious and the scientific." At a time when religiously motivated concerns make it almost impossible to discuss the warming of our planet, the curriculum in our schools and even the reproduction of our species, we should embrace efforts at dialog, not assault them.

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