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The Church and Science in the New Millennium

INTRODUCTION

As I drive to school each day I cannot escape reading the signs of the times in the neighborhood. A religious book store headlines a new book: *Mommy, Why Don't We Celebrate Halloween?* For \$2.99, parents can get quick help in explaining to their children how their friends are actually participating in a pagan ritual when they dress up like monsters and goblins at the end of October. Further along I spot the title of next Saturday's sermon posted outside a Protestant church: "Why and How the End is Coming." As someone who has taught homiletics for the past twenty-five years, I wish we Catholics also had the tradition of announcing the Sunday homily in a pithy, focused statement. But I also admit my suspicion. I wonder what scientific data, what biblical hermeneutics the preacher will employ for that sermon. Yet another sign catches my eye. It is the announcement of a seminar concerning the Beast in the Book of Revelation. For \$20 we are invited to hear someone speak on "What Church Would Jesus Join Today?" Again, my Catholic bias kicks in. I am certain that the speaker will use unscientific data and flawed biblical tools of interpretation to make sure that the Church Jesus would join today is his own and definitely not Our Lady of Sorrows.

As we enter the new millennium, we can be sure that predictions about the end times and conflicting theories about creation/evolution, science/religion, historical consciousness/fixed beliefs will proliferate. Those of us ministering in today's Church will have to wrestle with how believers can relate to science.

There was a time when theology was a familiar conversational partner with science. Before the late seventeenth-century science (from the Latin word *scire*, "to know") referred to universal knowledge which comprised all specialties including philosophy and theology. Christianity's tradition of biblical revelation was so well valued in theories of knowledge that Christian theology was called "the queen of the sciences."

The modern definition of science as knowledge obtained from human observation and research came about when it became separated from speculative thought and revelation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The data of revelation was now considered suspect and irrelevant by the scientist. Absolute Reality was found not in the Bible but under the telescope.

More recently, a number of developments have begun to question the facile distinction between theology and science. I will name three.

(1) *A Dynamic View of the World*. As we reach the twenty-first century, science has taken on "a more catholic appreciation of its work and a more modest estimate of its role in understanding the nature of ultimate reality" (Fiddes, 1987:96). Scientists also sense that they see through a glass darkly. Many have retreated from dogmatic scientific positivism, according to which scientific knowledge is the only kind of knowledge accessible to us.

Ironically it was the very discoveries and successes of the twentieth century that led scientists away from the abstract study of forms of nature to an exploration of inner relationships. Physicists today search for a unified field theory, "the manifestation of a single force which, embracing the reality of space and time, energy and matter, will explain all the disparate forces of the universe (ibid., 97).

When cosmologists today speak of the universe in terms of a dynamic unity in which all action and reality have a common focus, science becomes more user-friendly. The search by physicists for a unified field theory, the manifestation of a single force embracing the reality of space and time, energy and matter seems a proper empirical fit for contemporary biblical scholarship. Theologians, both speculative and pastoral, must recognize this positive sign of our times.

(2) *God at the Edge*. Ten years have passed since Stephen Hawking's provocative *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*. Carl Sagan wrote in the book's introduction that Hawking's argument for "the absence of God" is based on the premise that there is "nothing for a Creator to do." Hawking knows that the concept of the absolute beginning implied in the Big Bang model implies the existence of God. "The notion of a beginning means that there is an edge to the cosmos, and the acknowledgment of an edge requires us to ask what lies beyond the edge" (Peters, 1989:54). But Hawking argues for a single uniting quantum theory of gravity which holds that our developing universe is not fixed by original boundary conditions. The universe, therefore, does not need a transcendent Creator to bring it into existence or to carry out a divinely appointed evolutionary purpose.

What is fascinating about Hawking's theory and the arguments of cosmologists who oppose it, is that "he has seen that physical cosmology cannot avoid entering into theological discussion. He has seen that the question of the beginning of all things—the edge to reality—leads ineluctably to the question of God" (Peters, 1989:56). Theology may not be "the queen of the sciences" as it once was, but the new cosmology cannot escape the discussion of a Creator.

(3) *The Church and Historical-Critical Methodology*. In the 1960s Nikita Khrushchev boasted how Uri Gagarin, the first Soviet cosmonaut, had

finally “disproved” Christianity by going around in the heavens without once meeting God or the angels. The Soviet Premier’s claims were met with laughter by modern religious people since they had incorporated into their belief systems the Copernican Revolution. They had accepted what Galileo had said long ago: “The Bible does not tell us how the heavens go but how to go to heaven.”

The Catholic Church gave a significant sign to the world that it sought a conversation partner with science when Pope Pius XII issued his encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* in 1943. The scientific critical study of the Bible that appeared in Catholic circles at the end of the nineteenth century finally received official approbation. Vatican II further supported the historical-critical method when it declared that we “should carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind, that meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of their words” (*Dei Verbum*, 12).

Biblical scholars have paid attention to the specific forms of biblical literature and to the original issues that the biblical creation texts were addressing and the meaning of the words for those first using them. The use of historical-critical methods has allowed theological concepts to accommodate the age of the earth being stretched from the Bible’s roughly four thousand years to science’s roughly four billion years before Christ.

NEW CHALLENGES FOR THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

Despite the three areas of possible fruitful dialogue between theology and science listed above, a number of new challenges are also present for theology and ministry today. I point to two in particular.

(1) *The New Literalism*. While the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993) refers to the historical-critical method as “the indispensable method for the scientific study of the meaning of ancient texts” (34), it also warns that “many members of the faithful” find “the method *deficient* from the point of view of faith” (30–31). *The Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests* (1994: 48–49) advises preachers to use “sound exegesis, *principally patristic*, and meditated on according to the various methods supported by the *spiritual tradition* of the Church” (emphasis mine). Such ecclesial statements have made biblical scholars like Joseph A. Fitzmyer suspicious of what seems to be a turn from historical-critical hermeneutics (cf. *Scripture: The Soul of Theology*).

Some Catholic authors are disappointed by the literal interpretation of Scripture and the lack of appreciation of the new cosmology in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The *Catechism*, for example, ignores the fact that billions of years before *homo sapiens* insects, plants, dinosaurs, horses, apes lived and died. Which is why Michael Morwood challenges

the *Catechism's* claim that with the Fall of Adam and Eve, "death makes its entrance into human history" (#400). He writes, "scientifically, this is nonsense" (Morwood, 1997:31).

Morwood pleads for a renewed appreciation of the story of creation as myth so that we do not continue to build a whole theological system based on a literal interpretation:

The story of creation, as a myth, is marvelous, and we will always respect the way it puts us in touch with deep human realities such as sin, struggle, death, meaning, and relationship with a God who can at times seem to be loving, sometimes vengeful, sometimes demanding, sometimes close, sometimes distant. As a myth it also has the capacity to relate us with other religious movements and their efforts to understand the transcendent (1997:118–19).

(2) *The Energetic Scientific Creationists.* I have described my spotting of the signs of today's scientific creationists on my way to school. Those who believe in "creation science" based on six twenty-four-hour days of creation, a "young-earth" dating, and a worldwide "flood geology" are particularly energetic about their beliefs. There are more than 350 books on the market that challenge evolutionary science. Many fundamentalist radio and television programs reaching multi-millions weekly have further spread the gospel of "creation science." As I drive to school, I do not see any signs outside Catholic and mainline Protestant churches inviting people to seminars which demonstrate the differences between modern scientific and ancient cosmological literature. It is difficult to locate an intelligent dialogue with the new cosmologists in our Bible study groups, homilies, and the RCIA. Our school boards, our neighborhoods, our air waves are inundated by "scientific creationists." Conrad Hyers has observed:

. . . it is clear that the ultraright has been energetically at work in all aspects of lobbying, publishing and mass media, while those representing a moderate and presumably normative position on the Bible and science have been napping (Rohr, 1988:185).

Those who minister in today's Church cannot ignore a healthy dialogue with today's scientists. History teaches us what an arrogant, isolated stance toward science and a biblical literalism can lead to: an impoverished doctrine of creation, inadequate christologies, patriarchal structures, ecological destruction, and a detour from pluralism and diversity. The references listed in this column can serve as a useful bibliography for today's pastoral theologian. I especially recommend Michael Morwood's new book *Tomorrow's Catholic: Understanding God and Jesus in a New Millennium*.

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