

NATIONAL REVIEW

Scientists Don't Have to Choose between Faith and Reason

The Society of Catholic Scientists draws attention to, and creates fellowship among, religious people in the scientific community.

By Stephen M. Barr — November 1, 2016

Several recent studies have shown that many young people today, including young Catholics, lose their faith because they imagine that there is a conflict between religion and science. One could blame the “New Atheists” and their aggressive in-your-face proselytism for this. But the reason they have had any success, despite the manifest weakness of their arguments, is that they have been pushing on an open door.

In the Catholic context, the problem is that there has been very little catechesis on modern science and its relation to faith at any level of education from grade schools to seminaries – despite the great importance Pope Saint John Paul II placed on the subject.

That's the bad news. The good news is that many in the Catholic Church have recognized that something was missing, and many promising initiatives have begun. For example, excellent programs have been started in the last few years by Christopher Baglow and John Cavadini to equip Catholic high-school teachers to teach about the relation of science and faith. Cavadini is a theology professor at the University of Notre Dame and head of its Institute for Church Life. Baglow is a theology professor at Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans and the author of a fine textbook on science and religion designed to be used in Catholic high schools. (No such textbook had ever been written until he wrote his in 2009.) At least one Catholic seminary now has a course on science and religion. And in 2014, Notre Dame gave its Laetare Medal — the oldest honor awarded for American Catholic leaders — to a Catholic biologist, Kenneth R. Miller, for his writing on the subject.

Catholic scientists themselves are beginning to be more active in this area. Just last summer a group of us started an organization called [the Society of Catholic Scientists](#). It aims, among other things, to “foster fellowship among Catholic scientists” and to

“witness to the harmony between the vocation of science and the life of faith.” Despite its high qualifications for membership, the group is growing rapidly, gaining new members nearly every day. Some are among the top scientists in their fields.

This organization can be thought of as a response to a statement by Pope St. John Paul II. In 1979, he gave an address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in which he said:

Those members of the Church who are either themselves active scientists, or in some special cases both scientists and theologians, could serve as a key resource. They can also provide a much-needed ministry to others struggling to integrate the worlds of science and religion in their own intellectual and spiritual lives.

It is important for people to realize that the scientific community is not, as many think, a realm devoid of faith. It contains a wide spectrum of attitudes toward religion, from devout belief to staunch atheism. Even so, religious belief can seem much less prevalent in scientific fields than it really is. Scientists, like other people, often go about their professional duties unaware of many aspects of their colleagues’ lives, including their spiritual lives. (It was 15 years before I realized that a certain member of my own department was a practicing Catholic like myself.) It is therefore easy for religious scientists, especially young ones, to imagine that they are isolated and out-of-step. This is one reason that a primary goal of the new Society, fellowship among Catholic scientists, is of great importance.

For scholars, fellowship must have an intellectual component, and so the Society plans to have annual conferences and sponsor local events, such as public lectures, seminars for graduate students, and discussion groups. Another kind of event, the first of which will take place in Boston this November, and which we hope will be replicated widely — is a “Gold Mass” for scientists, analogous to the familiar “Red Masses” for lawyers, “White Masses” for health-care professionals, and “Blue Masses” for people in law enforcement. (We resisted the temptation to call it either the “Critical Mass” or the “Rest Mass.”)

These new initiatives should not be seen merely as responses to the new atheism. Their goals are positive, not polemical. The motto of the Society of Catholic Scientists is “knowledge with devotion, research with wonder” (*speculatio cum devotione, investigatio cum admiratione*), words adapted from St. Bonaventure. Science can be a way to God. The great Johannes Kepler, discoverer of the laws of planetary motion (and a devout Christian) wrote, “I thank you, Lord God our Creator, that you have allowed

me to see the beauty in your work of creation.” That was the spirit that animated most of the great founders of modern science, from Galileo, Boyle, Pascal, and Newton in the 17th century to Faraday, Kelvin, and Maxwell in the 19th, and it continues to inspire many in science today. That is not as widely known as it should be, but perhaps through initiatives such as the Society of Catholic Scientists it will be.

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