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Las Vegas SUN

November 26, 2005

Exploring science, religion

Educator says creationism, evolution don't have to be at odds with each other

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Las Vegas Sun

Evolution versus creationism, the ethics of stem cell research, the effects of genetic testing.

Students in Margaret Towne's Science and Religion class at UNLV and the Community College of Southern Nevada regularly grapple with such issues as they explore the historical and philosophical divides found in debates over such complex, contentious topics.

It's a chasm that Towne, a biologist with seminary training, would like to overcome. A devout Presbyterian, Towne's scholarly mission is to show how science and religion can inform and influence each other in positive ways. Call it a scientific crusade of sorts.

Science, for instance, can teach people of faith about how their creator worked, while religion can provide scientists with ethical guidelines in their pursuit of truth, Towne said.

"Religion tells us the who did it and why, and science tells us the when and how," Towne said. "The two together tell us the whole story."

Towne first wrestled with the issues between science and religion as an undergraduate and graduate biology major at the University of Michigan, then as a young biology professor at Juniata College in Pennsylvania. When the science she learned conflicted with the creationist teachings of her youth, she did not know how to reconcile them.

Seeing some of the same struggles in her students as a young professor, Towne decided to pursue seminary training, spending a year at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1966. She eventually earned a doctorate in education from Montana State University, developing an award-winning philosophy class in science and religion and writing a book dedicated to showing fellow Christians how evolution did not have to conflict with their view of God as the creator.

"Honest to Genesis: A Biblical and Scientific Challenge to Creationism," published in 2004, offers

Christians a middle path between the strict literal interpretation of Genesis that insists that the Earth is only 10,000 years old and was created in six days and the atheistic theory that denies God altogether.

Theistic evolutionists, as Towne dubs herself, read Genesis for what it says about God and his interaction with mankind. It is a profound book theologically, but is scientifically flawed because it was written within the limited knowledge of its own culture, Towne said.

Theistic evolutionists agree with Creationists and Intelligent Design advocates that God is ultimately the author of all creation, Towne said. They just believe that he created through natural laws such as evolution.

Her book includes a review of the facts behind evolution and an analysis of how the Genesis accounts should be read, as well as detailed responses to many of the Creationist and Intelligent Design concerns against evolution.

Towne also addresses many questions to the Creationists who take the stories of Adam and Eve and of Noah and the flood literally -- such as how was there no death in the Garden of Eden and how Noah managed to fit all the animals onto his ark without the carnivores eating the herbivores.

The two creation accounts in the opening book of the Bible are not meant to be taken literally, and in fact are full of contradictions if read that way, Towne said. In one account, God creates men and women from the power of his spoken word, while in the next account, he forms Adam from the dust of the ground, and Eve from Adam's rib.

The science of evolution is well documented across several different disciplines, from geology and paleontology to biology and biochemistry.

But Creationists are right in that scientists have not definitively shown how life began, Towne said. Charles Darwin's "primordial soup" idea is still one hypothesis, as is another that life began in vents in the ocean floor. But origin of life questions fall under a separate field of inquiry -- abiogenesis -- and Creationists often try to deny evolution based on the weaknesses there.

Intelligent Design followers point to this gap and say that natural laws were not enough to create life, that God had to physically "step in," Towne said. Human cells, for instance, have such an "irreducible complexity" to them that there must be a divine author, some say.

But if God is the automatic answer whenever anything cannot be explained, that prevents the scientist from delving further into the unknown. God is reduced to a "god of the gaps," Towne said, a god often forced to flee when science comes up with a new explanation.

Ultimately, if God is the author of the Bible and the author of creation, "we needn't fear what his creation tells us," Towne said.

Towne's students say the topics of discussion -- which in one recent class touched on topics that included a Vatican conference on human genome technology, dog cloning in South Korea and what to do with new genetic testing to detect Down Syndrome -- have raised intense internal debate.

Megan Branstetter, 22, a member of South Hills Church Community in Henderson, appreciates the integration of science and religion. As a former biology major, she wrestled with these questions, and looks at science for what it can reveal about God.

Fellow Christian and classmate Cheryl Coleman, 42, agreed, adding that she has had to shed many of her "traditional biases" in Towne's class.

But Coleman said at heart she is still a Creationist. For her, there are some things that only God's revelation can reveal.

Towne understands that, saying: "We resist change the most in the area of the sacred."

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