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Modeling Science and Faith Integration May Be More Powerful than Words

Reflections on *The Study of Science in Catholic Higher Education in the United States: A Modern Nuisance?*

Thomas G. Plante

“Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.” - Albert Einstein

In “The study of science in Catholic higher education in the United States: A modern nuisance?”, Fr. Cunningham offers a thoughtful and engaging commentary on the history and state of science education in Catholic universities in the United States, carefully weaving history, science, and even politics in a seamless and multilayered manner. But before offering reflections on what he *said* in his paper, I’d like to make a few comments on *who* he is which, at the end of the day, might be actually more important.

Fr. Cunningham is a physics professor at Loyola University Chicago. He studies experimental particles and astrophysics including cosmic rays, dark energy, and heavy quark particles. He also wears a Roman collar as a Jesuit priest. Like Copernicus, Mendel, Boscovich, de Chardin, and many others, he is both a top-flight scientist and a Roman Catholic priest. This important fact speaks volumes and perhaps louder than his words.

In our increasingly polarized community where too many believe that you must be either a person of faith or a person of science (e.g., supporting and embracing creationism or evolution, prayer or medicine, science or religion), Fr. Cunningham is living proof that

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science and faith can be fully integrated and each can offer something very important to the other. Thus, he models not “science *or* faith” but “science *and* faith.” Or in the words of one of the most well-known and influential scientists of the twentieth century, Albert Einstein, “Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.”

When Fr. Cunningham teaches college and graduate courses, attends professional scientific conferences, publishes academic papers in peer-reviewed outlets, celebrates Mass, listens to confessions, offers spiritual direction, and so forth he is constantly making an important and bold statement that science and faith can not only co-exist but can even thrive. In fact, they go together. Furthermore, he offers an important model to others as well. He bears witness to his students, colleagues, congregants, and fellow clerics that a man of science *and* a man of faith can co-exist in the same person without compromise or apology. And, perhaps his meta-message to all those with whom he interacts is, as Jesus demands at the end of the Good Samaritan parable, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).

Many years of social psychology research have revealed that observational learning and modeling of and for others is powerful in terms of learning and behavior change. We learn to think, feel, and behave by watching others. And so, if we want to integrate lives of both faith and science we need those who well blend these areas of life, both clerics and laypersons, modeling for others. Again, as Jesus requests, “Go and do likewise.”

Fr. Cunningham’s article, however, does not shy away from the well-deserved criticism of how the Roman Catholic Church has mismanaged the science and faith relationship in the past. He highlights the active suppression of science by Church leaders stating that “Catholic colleges from the nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries viewed their mission not as one focused toward objectivity and research but rather as one focused on strengthening Catholic culture and further promoting Catholic identity” (p. 10). He concludes that “Catholic academic circles were far behind their Protestant counterparts during this period” (p. 10). We have been playing catch up for more than half a century, and he points out that even today only Boston College and Georgetown offer doctoral programs in physics among the 28 Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States.

Sadly, if we are to be honest, our Catholic Church has acted in ways that, in hindsight, are terribly embarrassing and exasperating. For example, even in our current twenty-first century, many contemporary people continue to express tremendous anger and even rage at the Church for the way it handled Galileo, promoted and conducted the Crusades, and treated those who they referred to as “heretics” over the centuries. In more current times, most rank-and-file Catholics as well as the general public continue to be furious at and enraged by the Church regarding the clergy sexual abuse crisis, the Vatican banking crisis, the “Bishop of Bling” controversy in Germany, and so forth.

Many also are enraged by Church teachings on sexual ethics including absolute prohibitions on contraception, abortion, pre-marital sex and cohabitation, and same sex unions. Plus, the role of women in the Church raises the blood pressure of many as well. In all of these examples, and those provided in Fr. Cunningham’s paper, the Church is

accused of putting its head in the sand, acting defensively, behaving in a narcissistic and arrogant manner, and holding onto an outdated world view long gone. Additionally, destructive and pervasive clericalism has taken its toll in so many areas of the Church. In the words of one former Jesuit academic colleague, “Our most holy Roman Catholic Church is a divinely inspired institution...occasionally run by idiots.” Tragically, too many people, both Catholics and non-Catholics alike, see a man in a Roman collar and will conclude that he is a pedophile long before believing that he is a scientist.

So, we who work in the academy and hold our Catholic higher education model near and dear to our hearts and in great esteem have our work cut out for us. Errors and poor judgments of the past continue to haunt us. As academics, we know that few things in life are simple and straightforward. The relationship between science and faith is complicated. Many thoughtful words and research is needed to move this conversation forward in order to make progress. As they say in football, this is a running game, not a passing game. We make progress a little at a time.

Yet perhaps most importantly we need many more faith and science models such as Fr. Cunningham. We need many more men and women of faith, both clerics and laity, who engage in top-quality science to step up and demonstrate that a life of faith and a life of science can co-exist and even thrive. In doing so we cannot erase the errors and poor judgments of the past but can certainly make things better for our future and have hope for progress. Science often advances in incremental steps with thoughtful and high-quality research conducted, reviewed, and published with much scholarly critique and input along the way. And the integration of science and faith must march forward in a similar manner with excellent role models to help lead the way, boldly proclaiming “Go and do likewise.”