

14 March 2007

An Essay Considering the Role of the Episcopal Faith in the Career of a Scientist

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Disclaimer: these are my opinions only, and do not necessarily represent the viewpoint of the Fellowship Board or any other entity.

I've been engaged as a college-level educator since 1989. One question that has frequently popped into my mind over the years is how to reconcile my day job as an objective, fact-based engineering professor with my active faith as an Episcopalian. When I work in the classrooms and labs of Montana State University, I wear an academic cap and gown (figuratively speaking) rather than a cassock and surplice. Is there something peculiar about my faith because of my work as an engineering educator? Or to put it another way, is there something special or different about the way I help students learn because I am a member of the Episcopal Church? If you asked my students, would they—or even *should* they—be able to tell that I am an Episcopalian?

A public, secular university like Montana State does not award degrees in spiritual or theological studies. Especially in the sciences and engineering, college work relies fundamentally on systematic procedures to explain physical observations in the *natural* world. By definition, there is no need to explain phenomena in the natural world by asserting *supernatural* forces. The presence of seemingly magical or miraculous occurrences means that we scientists simply haven't learned the secret behind the "magic trick" or uncovered the proper mathematical explanation.

If a student takes this viewpoint to its logical end, he or she might reasonably come to the conclusion that God doesn't have a place in serious academic pursuits. What a hopelessly tragic and despondent state of being that would be!

On the other hand, a student with a different viewpoint might angrily refuse to study paleontology or biology because of a perceived conflict between evolution science and the Biblical account of The Creation.

I confidently believe that both conclusions are wrong, but perhaps not for the reasons you might expect.

Some individuals find great spiritual conflict between the simple desire to have Biblical explanations for the natural world around us versus the quest of science to understand and explain the universe according to empirically derived processes and rules. But from my viewpoint, I simply don't see a conflict at all. Just as I would not go to the book of Genesis in the Bible expecting to find the periodic table of the elements, Maxwell's equations used to explain "let there be light," or a concise statement of Kepler's laws of orbital motion, I would also not pursue a Babelesque experiment to make a telescope strong enough to see heaven, nor lose my faith in God based on the lack of a scientifically testable hypothesis.

God's presence is interwoven through space and time in a manner that is miraculous, supernatural, and marvelous. Through science, therefore, we are observing the *result* of God's hand in shaping the universe, rather than observing His hand *itself*. We need not seek to understand the essence

of God through science, but instead we fervently seek to understand and to be good stewards of His Creation.

Thus, as I consider my original question regarding the ways in which my faith shapes and informs my secular career in academia, I must conclude that my true role as an educator is to celebrate and enlighten each student to the gifts of the Holy Spirit as expressed by Paul in Chapter 12 of his first letter to the Corinthians. As I teach and pursue knowledge, I am truly passing to my students an appreciation of the Spirit that has bestowed individually on all of us gifts of knowledge, wisdom, healing, workings of miracles—and so much more—yet for the profit of all.

I think the most important Episcopal insight for me is that last part: *for the profit of all*. It is not enough to accept the gifts of the Holy Spirit graciously and gratefully, we must use the gifts in service to one another.

Along with many of you, I attended the special Town Meeting convened by Franklin Brookhart, the Bishop of Montana, at St. James Church in Bozeman on February 7, 2007. Among the many inspiring and thought-provoking topics was the Episcopal essence of *unity*: one cannot be a Christian by oneself in isolation. Likewise, one cannot be a scholar or a teacher without a *community* of learning. The difficult challenges of unity—like endless squabbling over doctrinal disputes, and forbearing with those with whom we disagree—are similarly shared concerns.

Yes, it is true, MSU does not offer a degree program in spiritual development, but as you can see, we faculty are actively, *passionately* engaged in spiritual development each and every day. So, although my students probably don't know I am an Episcopalian based on what I say and do in class, I sincerely hope they would not be surprised if they did find out!