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The Questions That Might Otherwise Be Lost

By Leonard Fein

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav: “As your answers have become my questions, may my questions become your answers.”

The know-nothings and the know-everythings are at it again. The know-nothings, as ever, mock Darwin, scorn stem-cell research, affirm abstinence, blame science for what they see as a collapse of American values and an imminent threat to the American family.

The know-everythings — i.e., the scientists — agitated by endless debates about evolution and stem-cell research, irritated by the blatantly anti-science policies of the Bush administration, and emboldened by several recent books — Richard Dawson’s “God Delusion,” Sam Harris’s “Letter to a Christian Nation” and Daniel Dennett’s “Breaking the Spell” — are making their anger with the know-nothings very public. They refuse any longer to suffer in silence or just to live and let live.

The problem is that the scientists have yet to frame a sensible, let alone a persuasive, indictment. So now, they attack. But their railing and flailing reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of both science and religion.

The distinctive hallmark of scientific wisdom is that it is cumulative. A graduate student in physics today knows more physics than Einstein knew. The same is obviously not so in religion. It would be absurd to suggest that Billy Graham or the pope or the most distinguished professor of theology at the most distinguished seminary in the world “knows” more religion than did, say, Isaiah.

The reason for that difference is that science and religion represent two entirely different ways of knowing. Here, for example, are two quantitative statements that have exactly nothing to do with each other: “Two plus two equals four,” and “God is one.”

Much of the time, those two statements can live comfortably right next to each other, without abrasion or even tension. But because the boundaries that define the two systems are fuzzy, they now and then collide head-on.

The most recent instance of such collision is the tone and wording of a newspaper ad that appeared the other day from something called the “Center for Inquiry.” There, pleading that scientific inquiry is widely misunderstood, a distinguished group of scientists and intellectuals declares war on religion.

“We maintain that secular, not religious principles must govern our public policy.” Hence, “political leaders of all parties [should] maintain a strict separation between church and state and, in particular, not permit legislation or executive action to be influenced by religious beliefs.”

It’s easy to see where they are coming from — and, more accurately, what they are fleeing from. The anti-science positions of the Bush White House are, indeed, frightening, as are the persistent efforts of school committees across the country to insist on teaching Creationism or Intelligent Design. But religious fundamentalism, as distinguished from religion, not only gives science a hard time; it also gives religion a bad name.

To assess and dismiss all religion because of Creationism is equivalent to assessing a dismissing all science because of government-sponsored euthanasia. But what if, instead, we consider religious theories of “just war” or the fierce opposition of some religions, such as Roman Catholicism, to capital punishment, as also to poverty? Doesn’t that change things?

Science can tell us that poverty is socially counterproductive. It cannot tell us that poverty is wrong, much less that government has a responsibility to redistribute income. The notion that public policy should not “be influenced by religious beliefs” cuts, and sharply — both ways.

The Web site of the Center for Inquiry tortures its way (and ours) through a vain effort to establish a scientific basis for ethical and moral judgment. In the end, it fails to do so. But along the way, it dismisses religion’s effort, with prejudice and contempt.

It is, of course, very painfully obvious that religion can be pernicious, that the world over, people kill and die in the name of sectarian religion. It has ever been so.

At the same time, however, religion induces humility, compassion, forgiveness, redemption and charity. Religion does not have a corner on virtue, but it is not less a promoter of virtue than science. Terrible things have been done in the name of both, and wonderful things as well.

True, the scientific method is ill-understood by all too many people. But the arrogance of too many scientists is hardly an inducement to understanding. Nor is religion, with all its excesses and its confusions, well-understood, even by those who profess it.

Specifically, people abuse religion when they ask of it to explain the things science cannot. Explanation of natural phenomena is not the business of religion. We are inclined to think it is because that was so central an element in primitive religion, and because so much of primitive religion remains intact in our liturgies and in our yearnings.

But that is not religion; that is mumbo-jumbo. Religion does not come to provide answers where science is (so far) silent; it comes to raise questions science properly leaves alone, and those questions are as compelling as the questions science asks and tries to answer.

As to religion's answers, they are a mixed bag, a collage of humankind's development from the most primitive to the most sophisticated. If we enter religion, as many of us do, only with questions the child who abides within us asks, we will hear only its least sophisticated answers.

Religion is capable of far richer and more serious meaning, but it cannot offer that meaning to those who do not seek it. To seek that meaning we must know that religion does not come to answer questions that are not otherwise answered; it comes to ask questions that might otherwise be lost. As, for example: Where is your brother?