Faith in empirical evidence versus faith itself

Ash Furrow
Submitted to the Brunswickan

I was reading last week's issue of the Brunswickan when I found an interesting article concerning the fact that Federal Science Minister Gary Goodyear doesn't believe in evolution. Well, the article was actually about how unfair it was to criticize someone based on his or her religious beliefs.

The author proposed that we need diverse thinking and questioning of theories that represent the status quo. She went so far as to draw a rather specious comparison between Minister Goodyear and Dr. Ernest Rutherford. I decided to, in the interests of fairness, present an opposing article. While I will address the fallacious comparison of a great scientist to a mediocre Science and Technology Minister, what I really want to do talk about the elephant in the room, the ominous "Science vs. Religion" face-off.

What the article failed to mention was that Minister Goodyear had been asked about his belief in evolution, not his belief in religion. If the interviewer of the Globe and Mail piece that sparked this controversy had asked the Minister about his belief in God, creationism, or the Flying Spaghetti Monster, he would have been quite right to refuse to answer the question.

However, the Minister was asked about evolution (a matter of science, and not a matter of faith). It would be as if, when asked if he believed in the fact that the Earth orbits the Sun in an elliptical pattern, he responded that he was Christian and didn't see how that fit into the interview.

Author of last week's article, Danielle Webb, made the comparison of Gary Goodyear to the well-known scientist Ernest Rutherford. See, Rutherford didn't buy into this "atoms are the smallest particles, period" stuff that was floating around the scientific dinner table of the time, so he decided to investigate and discovered the subatomic particles.

Having changed the course of human history forever, this makes him an admirable man.

The comparison falls apart almost immediately. Rutherford didn't just believe without evidence that there existed smaller-than-atom particles; he had empirical evidence that pointed him in that direction, so he followed it. Science is testing theories through the gathering and analysis of empirical evidence; faith is believing in something with no (or contradicting) evidence.

Furthermore, had his experiments proven him wrong, Rutherford would have accepted the outcome. This strikes to the heart of the "Science vs. Religion" debate; Science is what we observe to be true and Faith is what we believe without proof.

Scientists who don't support faith are often labeled as Atheists, as though that is a bad thing. This got me thinking and investigating (OK, on Wikipedia, but you do it, too) about discrimination against Atheism. The aptly named article had some interesting information.

Perhaps Goodyear invoked religion in the face of a scientific question not, perhaps, because he is a deeply religious man, but rather because he was afraid of loosing public support. Imagine what might happen to him in the next election if someone thought he was an Atheist.

About half of people in the US would not vote for a qualified Atheist presidential candidate. That figure was the highest among the groups queried about. Almost half of people questioned in 2006 claimed that they would not want their child to marry an Atheist. It's incredible to me that in this modern age, we're still freely prejudging a group of people based on their minority opinion.

Some people say that Atheists are immoral and corrupt. I don't think so at all. As a Secular Humanist myself, I believe that people do not need a higher power to derive morals from. Most Christians don't really get their morals from the Bible, or else technically, no one would wear more than one type of fabric at a time and pi might be equal to three (Chronicles II 4:2-5). Rather, people have their own morals and find support for them in their religious book of choice.

Atheists are not so different than those of faith. We choose to believe in what we can empirically measure and observe, while others choose to believe in something they cannot. Is one or the other better? Well, that's a personal question, but I don't believe that someone's belief should prevent he or she from holding office unless there is a direct conflict of interests; you wouldn't want an Atheist representing religion, and I don't want someone who doesn't believe in scientific theories representing Science.

Both my Atheist and Evangelical friends agree that you don't have to share beliefs to get along. I really don't have a problem if Goodyear chooses to believe in something unscientific, but he needs to reconcile his faith with science in order to properly do his job as Science and Technology Minister.

Ash Furrow is the CS councillor-elect of the UNB Student Union.

Learning to embrace change



Mugwump
Tony von Richter

It has certainly been an interesting year, both here at UNB and abroad, and if you had to pick one common theme for the past 12 months it would have to be change.

Of course everyone remembers Barack Obama capturing the hearts and minds of millions across the world with his "Change you can Believe In" mantra leading him to the White House; however, we don't have to look that far to find change as change was the main topic of discussion during February's Student Union election.

Whether you liked their policies and tactics or not, the United for Change slate got people talking about student politics like never before, and while it didn't lead to a huge spike in voter turnout, hopefully it results in a more engaged and educated voting population for the next few years.

It's not only the political world that's different. Even I've changed, as for the first time since high school, I've actually made education my priority. Whereas in the past you could typically find me in the Bruns office at any hour, nowadays I'm usually at the same table in the SUB, studying for one class or working on one assignment for another. Of course, that's mostly due to the influence of one particular person and, even though they're probably not reading this, I just wanted to say thanks, since I don't say it enough in person.

It's funny to think that I used to have a near pathological fear of any kind of major change. While I knew that everything would work out and that we can pretty much adjust to everything, I used to dread any large impending changes in my life. Sure, I still don't like change, but I think this year has finally convinced me that change can be a good thing.

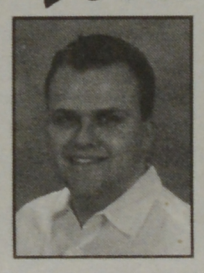
Hopefully UNB continues to change, but only for the better.

Tony von Richter is the Managing Editor of The Brunswickan. Feel free to contact him at managing@thebruns.ca.

Editor's note:

Tony, thanks for everything. You've given your all to this paper for six years, and there's no question how much we've appreciated all that you've done. Your contributions have never gone unnoticed. Best wishes in the future, and enjoy finally having free time. You deserve it.

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