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Faith And Science Come Together At Conference For Society Of Catholic Scientists

Many Catholic scientists told me this past weekend in Chicago that the hyped ‘clash’ between science and religion is getting old. And one of the goals of the new organization they had gathered to launch, is to counter the myth that science and faith are incompatible.

But it’s not the only goal—nor even the most important, as several of the scientists in attendance told me.



Professor Karin Öberg of Harvard discussing exoplanets.

For many I spoke to at the inaugural conference of the [Society of Catholic Scientists](#) at the Millennium Knickerbocker Hotel, the issue of faith versus science was not nearly as important as forming a network of support for fellow scientists and students who share the same religious convictions.

Stephen M. Barr, the founder and president, is professor of physics at [University of Delaware](#), and a frequent contributor both on the lecture circuit and in print, to the debate about faith and science.

One of the reasons for starting the organization, he said, was derived from his own experience as a young Catholic in science. “I felt isolated, because— not just in the world of science, but in the world of academia—people tend to keep their faith quiet, keep it under wraps, and that creates an illusion that there aren’t many religious people in the academic world. But especially in the scientific world.”

And as a consequence young scientists can feel quite alone, he said. “They don’t know of

colleagues, or professors of theirs, or senior people in their field, or even nationally and internationally known scientists who are religious, let alone Catholic. And I think that isolation can be very demoralizing for people.”

Karin Öberg, professor in the department of [Astronomy and Astrophysics at Harvard](#), agreed. “I believe that it is important for Catholic scientists to support one another. Many of us are alone, in the sense that we are the only openly practicing Catholic in our departments. When reflecting over how to live out our vocations as scientists, it is immensely helpful to do so in fellowship with other catholic scientists.”

Öberg delivered one of the [first presentations](#) at the conference on the evolution of habitable worlds, and I must say I found her data delightfully optimistic on the chances for finding life outside the solar system. In the meantime, however, she hopes NASA will support sending a probe to Saturn’s moon Enceladus where plumes of water vapor with organic compounds have already been seen spewing out from beneath the icy surface.

Even if it turns out there is no life there, she told the audience, any data collected from such a voyage is going to be enormously helpful to future explorations.

It was certainly not a prerequisite for conference speakers to be Catholic. For example, cosmologist [John D. Barrow](#) from Cambridge University delivered the keynote lecture of Saturday morning: a state of the universe review of cosmological models (with his characteristic dry wit).

Robert Berwick of MIT delivered an afternoon lecture, ‘Why Only Us?’ on the origins of human language, highlighting much of the work from the [recent book](#) he co-authored with Noam Chomsky.



University of Delaware physicist and co-founder Stephen M. Barr, introducing Brown University biologist Kenneth R. Miller.

But two of the highlighted speakers of the conference were indeed quite well known Catholic scientists: [Kenneth R. Miller](#), the Brown University biologist who became nationally known for his defence of evolution against creationists,

especially during the Kitzmiller v. Dover trial in 2005.

The co-author of the best selling high school biology textbook in the country, Miller was present to receive the first St. Albert Award from the Society, in honor of St. Albert the Great, who is considered the patron saint of science in the Catholic Church.

Miller actually had been invited to speak at the March for Science, which was taking place in cities all over the country at the same time as the conference. "And I would actually be speaking at the one in Providence, if I was at home in Rhode Island," he said. "Because I was invited to do so."

But one of the things that motivated that march, he told me, is the sense of disaffection from popular support that the scientific community feels.

"And I think part of that disaffection is the sense that science is in fact anti-religious," he said. "That science promotes an absolute secularist agenda. I think that harms the reputation of science in the eyes of the public. And I think an organization like the Society here can go a long way towards healing it. So, I think this organization is a good thing."

While not himself a member of the Society, Miller has been invited to join and is considering it. "I'll see what the organization does, and wants to do."*



Br. Guy Consolmagno chats with Kenneth R. Miller

The banquet address after the dinner Saturday night was delivered by [Brother Guy Consolmagno](#), the head of the Vatican Observatory. In addition to being a Jesuit who specializes in the study of comets, he's also a first class science fiction geek, and was initially drawn to MIT as a student, he said, because of its classic science fiction book collection.

For Consolmagno, too, the importance of the new organization lies in its social support for other Catholic scientists.

"Just simply to recognize so many people you may have seen at other meetings—and, oh, gosh, to realize they're suddenly here, they're Catholic, too! That was a great surprise," he said.

“The joke is: ‘You go to church? I never could’ve told that!’”

When he first became a Jesuit, he said, he’d already been a scientist for twenty years. “And I was surprised but in a very delighted way by the number of fellow scientists who came up to me and told me about the churches they went to.

“And I think this kind of support helps us be more comfortable being who we are and why we do the science. Ultimately, to remind us we’re not doing it for grants, and not doing it for fame and glory. We’re doing it because we love the stuff. And that love of the stuff really means loving the creator of the stuff.”



Marisa March, astronomer at University of Pennsylvania.

This is not to suggest that many Catholic scientists feel hostility from their colleagues who are not religious or even sympathetic to religion. As Marisa March, an astronomer at University of Pennsylvania, said in her talk, she was pleasantly surprised by the support she received from her senior colleagues when she told them she wanted to take a leave of absence to explore whether she was called to the religious life in a convent.

Another post-doctoral researcher told me she was hopeful “that personally, the Society will help me to more deeply understand my vocation as a scientist, and how my faith can play a vital role in the integrity with which I carry out my work as a researcher.”

She cited the constant support that the late Pope John Paul II gave to scientists in their work.

“I think for many of us who are researchers and practicing Catholics,” she said, “we feel that both our faith and our work as scientists are two parts of one whole, constituting both our search for a deeper understanding of our place in the universe, and a path of service through which we address questions of basic research that deeply matter for society.”

Father Nicanor Austriaco, a [rare combination](#) of biologist and priest in the order of the Dominicans, emphasized the importance of the Society for the next generation.

“It’s for the young scientists,” he said. “Many young Catholics who are considering science do

not think that it is possible to reconcile their faith and their science. And I have known many who have felt that they needed to choose one over the other.”

The Society, he hopes, can push back against that. “And as one student I know said, ‘I may not know all the answers, but if I know there are Catholic scientists out there, I know that someone is thinking about those answers. And it’s okay for me to struggle with it.’

“And I think that’s what we’re all about. We’re there to try to show, to witness, the coming together of faith and science.”

The other reason, Barr pointed out, is to combat the widespread myth that the world of science is devoid of faith—is a hostile territory for religion.

“It’s absolutely not the case. So, we’re going to witness to the world. My hope is that the existence of our society, especially as it grows, will be a witness to the world, that there are many faithful Catholics in the world of science. Not only in the world of science, but doing cutting edge research, people who are at the tops of their field. And I think this will help to destroy this pernicious myth that there is some sort of incompatibility between science and faith.”

Barr also hopes the society can be a forum for discussion, especially for the many interesting questions that are raised by science: about the multiverse, about the potential for inhabited planets orbiting distant stars, about how life began.

“So, there are many interesting philosophical and theological questions that are raised by discoveries in modern science. And so we’re also a forum for discussion among scientists primarily, Catholic scientists, on these issues. But we’re also hoping to create more opportunities for discussion between Catholic scientists and Catholic philosophers and theologians and historians.”

Barr too cites the inspiration of the late John Paul II. “So that Catholic scientists can be a resource for other Catholic scholars and to the general public and for the Church.”

* UPDATED: 4.25.17: 1:15PM: After the conference and after my initial post, Stephen Barr reported to me that Kenneth Miller had accepted the invitation to join. “I had not yet joined SCS because I wanted to get a better idea of the composition of the organization and of its goals,” he told Barr. “Now that I have both because of last weekend’s meeting, you may count me as an enthusiastic new member!”

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