

Civil Discourse and the ASA

Jennifer Wiseman



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If you don't have something nice to say about someone, then don't say anything at all." This was the wise admonition often given to my siblings and me by our mother during our childhood. Perhaps this is a bit simplistic — after all, Jesus did not always say “nice things” about everybody — but for the rest of us it should at least be the starting point in our conversations about viewpoints differing from our own, and especially about those who hold them.

Yet as I write this, our nation is reeling from the mindless rampage of a gunman who shot a US Representative and several other citizens who were peacefully assembled with her. Though the perpetrator was obviously troubled in many ways, many people are soul-searching the possibility that our nation's political discourse has become too negative and verbally abusive, driving some on the edge to violence and many others to unproductive divisions. Even our media serves as a vehicle for polarization rather than an objective marketplace for news and ideas.

What does this have to do with an organization focused on science and Christian faith, namely the ASA? Quite a lot. The state of national discourse on science and religious belief is also, by some measures, at a low point. This can be attributed to many possible drivers. For one, science education, at least in the USA, currently leaves many without even a basic understanding of scientific history, methods, and current knowledge. This leads to a vulnerability of belief: if a trusted religious authority figure speaks erroneously on a scientific issue, and conflates this error with a theologically disputable “biblical view,” how can an uninformed Christian citizen discern what to believe?

The scientific community has also contributed to poor discourse, both by the extreme polemics offered by a few popular authors who conflate science with an antireligious manifesto, and by a much larger

segment of the scientific community that simply does not quite understand the concerns and beliefs of a significant segment of the largely religious public, from whom they need support.

We do not know each other either: outside the ASA, many Christians have never known a scientist, and vice versa. In some Christian circles, we have also lost touch with the diversity of Scripture-honoring views held throughout the centuries that are relevant to scientific understanding today. Christian “camps” and labels have developed around certain philosophical stances: “Creation Science,” “Theistic Evolution,” “Intelligent Design,” “Darwinism,” and “BioLogos,” to name a few regarding origins. Then there are the “camps” on issues that inform policy and behavior as well: Why is the climate changing, and what should we do about it? Does God call us to lifestyle change for the sake of the environment? When does human life begin? Is embryonic stem cell research ever a good thing? How much should we care and do about the welfare and suffering of other species? How should we use our technology? Are our institutions run in honorable ways? Finding like-minded fellow believers on any of these themes can be refreshing. Yet well-informed and stimulating cross-discussion and debate are critical for the health of an open society, especially for Christians, as we believe there is truth to be found through honest discourse. Sadly, some Christian groups seem to have also fallen into the national abyss of name-calling and disrespect, not just of viewpoints but also of the people who hold them.

Within the ASA, we discuss all kinds of issues regarding the relationship of science and Christian faith. Now is the time to reaffirm *how* we conduct our discourse, and where and why. Now, more than ever, ASA members need to model to the church and to the world what civil, even loving, discourse can look like. Why? Because Jesus said that the way others will know that we are his disciples is by our

Guest Editorial

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love for one another. How do you love someone who espouses views you believe are wrong or even harmful? By accurately representing those views, as respectfully as possible, while clearly advocating an alternative. By seeking to understand viewpoints outside of our own comfort zone, and by getting to know and even bless people who hold them.

Here are some ideas for how ASA members can make a godly impact on discourse within our faith community and our nation(s) as a whole:

- Model a healthy and informative tone on Internet blogs, Facebook, and chat rooms. Be *present* as a voice on these forums where many turn for discussion; it is here where we can be salt and light! (Try our “ASA Voices” blog to start!) When others lash out with name-calling or simplistic dismissal of unpopular views, be the one to offer a viewpoint with clarity and respect, never denigrating another person.
- Always affirm that what binds Christians together is our united allegiance to Jesus Christ as our one and only Savior. Affirm that many Christians who share a complete devotion to Christ hold differing views on modern science and related Scripture.
- That said, do courageously offer differing opinions and clearly promote them if they serve to uplift the church and the world. Discipleship sometimes means taking courageous stances that go against the world’s grain or even church tradition.

- Outside the church, discussions on “science and religion” can be opportunities to “provide a reason for the hope that is within you, with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15). It is not “religion” that saves people, it is a Person, Christ the Lord. Keep an eye toward whether our discourse helps or hinders people from seeing the Lord.
- Support efforts of secular groups toward positive discourse, such as the “Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion” program of the AAAS.
- Affirm the intrinsic value of people to God. We believe that each person, though fallen, is made in God’s image. Treat them that way in our discourse.
- St. Paul offers a helpful model. Before speaking to others on Mars Hill, he first took time to learn the beliefs of his audience and to find common ground.
- The prayer of St. Francis offers this godly yearning: Seek not so much to be understood as to understand.

In the aftermath of the current shooting tragedy in the USA, President Obama has advised the nation, as we engage in discourse, to speak to each other “in a way that heals, not a way that wounds.” Let’s take that advice to heart as we model strong, respectful, and truly helpful dialogue on our faith in Christ and our scientific study of God’s marvelous creation.

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