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Philosophy and science during the holidays



SIUE photo

Matthew Schunke.

Posted: Saturday, December 26, 2015 10:05 am

Segue/Logan Cameron |

In this week's segment of Segue, SIUE College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) Dean Gregory Budzban, PhD, hosts Matthew Schunke, PhD, associate professor in the Department of Philosophy.

Schunke has been an SIUE professor for seven years, having accepted the position upon completion of his doctorate in religious studies from Rice University in 2009.

As the holiday season is in full force, the conversation is centered upon spirituality and religion in the modern world – a topic of much debate from both scientific and religious perspectives.

The discussion includes the role of religion in modern world culture, the scientific and philosophical discrepancies on faith and religion, and the tensions that arise from these disagreements. Numerous historically religious practices have been adapted to American culture and Schunke discusses the example of the counterculture movements in the '60s and '70s, noting that yoga fitness classes are a product of this movement. Budzban jokingly adds, "Which is purely an exercise class, right?" Schunke responds by saying, "Right ... although there are a lot of cases going on right now with yoga studios and their tax exempt status, and there's an interesting question of 'well ... is that religion, or is it spirituality?'"

Schunke goes into great detail on modern religion and its critics, particularly mentioning the work of philosopher Alvin Plantinga and his text *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, which is in

many ways a response to a group referred to as “new atheists.” He categorizes this class of people as one that is a bit more convicted in their atheism, meaning that they are not just saying “god doesn’t exist,” but actually that religion is a problem that is plaguing society and is sort of “hold over” that we need to get rid of. His discussion on the text focuses on the evolutionary impact of religion, science, society, politics and culture as means to collectively shape people’s faith and religious dogma.

Schunke explains that much of the tension and hostility in this subject matter is caused by the adamant beliefs held by both social groups. “It’s interesting that a quite modern understanding of religion relies a lot on literalist understanding of scriptures and will acknowledge that there’s faith, but that faith has a lot of certainty put into it,” he says. “Sometimes, these are the movements that come into the greatest conflict with science or set themselves up against science. “If you have a literalist understanding of the myth of Genesis – the creation myth – it’s hard to reconcile with science. If you’re taking it as a literal, seven-day, young earth creation, it’s just incompatible with what we know via science.

Budzban notes that some of the “new atheists” exhibit some of the same “fundamentalist” tendencies, assigning a level of certainty to the methods of science that cannot be logically justified. In fact, Budzban emphasizes the mathematical and scientific work that has contributed to the further understanding of religion, citing Isaac Newton and modern physicist John Polkinghorne. He adds that much of the same people who have lent insight to the topic share both scientific and religious beliefs, using Polkinghorne, an Anglican priest, and Pope Francis, a chemist, as examples. With this, Budzban makes the point that there is, in many cases, a mutual understanding.

While spirituality is often coined as a way to say, “I’m not bound to a particular religious dogma. This is something personal and unique to me,” Schunke explains that the term has also transformed to explain people who are somewhat of a mix between several regions. An example he uses is the unique practices performed by spiritual individuals who display religious practices of both Catholicism and Buddhism.

While neither man seeks to discredit the practice of spirituality, Budzban believes that spirituality, in some cases, is “a way to perhaps avoid the complex questions that are at the heart of religion. To say, necessarily, it’s a tepid response that allows people to potentially avoid these questions and say, ‘well I’m being spiritual, but I don’t want to address this question or that question.’” Schunke also feels that the term is sometimes used as a device to attempt to side-step greater religious issues.

Although this topic will never wane, Budzban’s ultimate hope is that one day, leaders from both the philosophical and scientific perspectives can understand each other’s beliefs and have mature discussions about the further understanding of spirituality and religion as a whole.

Tune in to WSIE 88.7 FM every Sunday at 9 a.m. as weekly guests discuss issues on SIUE’s campus.

By Logan Cameron, SIUE Marketing & Communications