AAAS extends science in theological education program
Science in the Seminaries enhances science education across the religious community

By Anne Q. Hoy

Building on broad interest generated by a three-year pilot project integrating science into theological education, the American Association for the Advancement of Science is now expanding the initiative to advance understanding of science and technology across the religious community to as many as 35 seminaries over the next 5 years. A set of seven seminaries in Michigan, Missouri, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin have been selected as the first of four groups to participate in the expanded program over the next 18 months. Three additional groups of seminaries will be chosen to join the program in stages.

“The hope is that the seminary students exposed to enriched classes will find science relevant and interesting to their vocations, and in the future, help them make science a positive component of congregational life and favorably impact the everyday lives of a broad swath of Americans,” said Jennifer Wiseman, director of the AAAS Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion (DoSER) program.

Fr. John Kartje, a trained astrophysicist, rector, and president of Mundelein Seminary, a Roman Catholic theological seminary in a northern Chicago suburb, expressed hope that his school’s participation in the expansion phase will give students and faculty a “deeper knowledge and better appreciation for the findings and methodologies of scientific research.”

“As Mundelein Seminary prepares priests who will be serving in parishes across the country, it is important that they possess a basic foundation in the fundamentals of science and are up to date on current trends in research and discovery,” Kartje said. “Such ‘scientific fluency’ will help them better connect with their parishioners and better integrate their theological expertise into the scientifically savvy culture in which they will minister.”

Anna Case-Winters, professor of theology at McCormick Theological Seminary, said the chance to participate in the initiative drew immediate faculty support from the U.S. Presbyterian theological seminary located in Chicago. “We believe that for religious leaders today, capacity for thoughtful interaction with the sciences is not optional—it is essential,” Case-Winters said.

Participating seminaries have pledged to incorporate science into at least two of their core courses and to hold at least one campus-wide event over the next 18 months. “We provide science resources and they plug that into the larger context of their programs,” said Curtis Baxter, a DoSER program associate. “The seminaries decide on their own how to incorporate the science into courses they already teach.”

AAAS will recruit science advisers from nearby research and academic institutions to share knowledge and experience in designing engaging science coursework, assisting theological educators at each seminary to sort out how best to integrate science into courses the seminaries have selected. The program makes available information on advances in science and technology and provides the institutions with access to the Science family of journals.

Coursework that seminaries plan to fold into their core classes covers a broad sweep of science, ranging from evolution of the cosmos to genetics and neuroscience. One seminar plans to explore topics such as anxiety, addiction, and dementia to prepare church leaders to better minister to congregants. Some seminaries plan hands-on activities, including a pilgrimage to Israel to study archaeological sites and field trips to laboratories and science museums.

The five other seminaries participating are the Seventh-Day Adventist Theological Seminary of Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan; Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri; Bethany Theological Seminary in Richmond, Indiana; Kenrick-Glennon Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri; and the Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology in Hales Corners, Wisconsin.
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