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## Man of science, faith Local professor embraces religious, natural worlds

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FEB 22, 2013



Rob Dillon, College of Charleston biologist, faithful Christian and organizer of the annual Darwin Week -- in his genetics lab there on Friday February 15, 2013. (Wade Spees/postandcourier.com)

WADE SPEES

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Rob Dillon doesn't fit neatly into the archetypal confines of the glass jars and test tubes that clutter his old-timey science lab at the College of Charleston.

Premier snail researcher. First Amendment buff. Devout Christian. Scoutmaster. Former constituent school board member. Choir guy. Genetics professor. NASCAR fan.

Tall and lanky, with a splash of mad scientist, Dillon may be best known locally for organizing Darwin Week, which just concluded its 13th run in Charleston, and for his devotion to keeping his revered faith out of science classrooms.

The annual weeklong Darwin series attracts nationwide experts to discuss the many combustible issues surrounding the relationship — if one is even possible — between science and faith.

Dillon grins thinking of Darwin Week speakers who contend that science disproves the existence of God.

Their reasoning: God cannot be proven. Therefore, he does not exist.

Not so, Dillon says.

“We act like the scientific method will falsify religion,” said Dillon, a biology professor who specializes in genetics and evolution.

A proud Presbyterian who wears a scientist’s white lab coat, Dillon simply considers the two realms unrelated.

Science constructs testable models to study the natural world.

Faith embraces the mysteries of the spiritual world.

“They are not compatible or incompatible,” Dillon says. “They are different ways of looking at the world.”

Dillon launched Darwin Week in 2001 to oppose rumblings in Columbia from those who wanted biblical creation to inhabit science classrooms alongside evolution.

Why not bring in experts from both sides to launch a civil, educated discussion? Dillon tapped friends in the Charleston chapter of Sigma Xi, a national honor society for research scientists.

However, Darwin Week really took off in 2005 and 2006, when the intelligent design movement promoted teaching that an “intelligent designer” created living organisms.

So far, science teachers like Dillon have fought efforts to teach any kind of creationism in public schools. On his office wall hangs a printout of a Ford Foundation Award that shows South Carolina received an ‘A’ for its science curriculum standards.

“I do get a lot of satisfaction out of that,” he grins.

In 2009, Dillon also won a “Friend of Darwin” Award given by the National Center for Science Education.

And today he serves on the National Review Panel, which reviews state science standards.

If God and science are two different worlds in his mind, then throw in politics as a third.

“I’m not a fish. I can’t swim in that world,” Dillon said.

Yet, he does.

He founded South Carolinians for Science Education, a group of roughly 400 like-minded teachers and others he can rally to fight efforts to teach creationism in science. He has testified at legislative hearings.

And he served two terms on the St. Andrew’s District 10 Constituent School Board.

Once elected, he was dismayed to find that the public governmental meetings opened with prayer.

He didn’t make a big fuss.

Instead, when he became secretary, he opened with readings from folks like philosopher John Locke, a Christian who famously called for the separation of church and state.

On Sundays, you'll find Dillon at First (Scots) Presbyterian, where he and his wife, Shary, have sung in the choir since they arrived in Charleston 30 years ago.

Suffice it to say, Dillon is no wallflower there.

"He doesn't believe anything should be unanimous," laughs the Rev. Danny Massie, the church's pastor and a longtime Dillon friend. "He always voices his opinion, and he doesn't care how many people agree with him. But he can still work with those who differ with him."

At congregational meetings, Dillon is known for objecting to money spent on anything unrelated to church mission work or to spreading the gospel.

"Then it's not money well-spent in his mind," Massie says. "He is very serious about his faith."

Dillon's faith fuels his passion for helping those in need.

He has traveled to poverty-stricken areas of Honduras and Mexico on mission trips and is at work on a grant to fund a clean-water initiative. He also builds houses with Habitat for Humanity and now is at work on a North Charleston home.

But does Dillon believe God created the world in seven days? Did Noah get two of every global species onto a boat while the Earth flooded?

"There is figurative language in Scripture," Dillon notes.

He leaps up to stand precariously on a rolling office chair to reach a copy of the King James Bible high up on a crowded shelf near his genetics lab. "We greatly value the separation of church and state in our congregation and our denomination," Dillon calls down.

At the College of Charleston, he's happy to see creationist texts in the library. And he likes to see religion be part of the college's Darwin Week.

Then again, he also belongs to Americans United for the Separation of Church and State.

Creationism serves an important role. He just likes it confined to religion or philosophy classes. Or church.

Dillon is a man who likes categories, mentally filing away details, organizing definitions into their proper, logical files. "I'm never conflicted in what I do," Dillon says, grinning.

So was he ever conflicted over devoting his professional life to studying freshwater snails?

Dillon scrubs his chin for a minute, thinking.

Out of biology's vast spectrum, he's not sure why he came into this specialty. As a boy, he loved fossils, snails, anything he could dig up and analyze.

At one point, he had 14 snakes and several critter collections.

His sophomore year in high school, he decided to become a college professor and study the natural world. Choosing snails was more a matter of sloughing off other interests than choosing snails for any reason.

He's on sabbatical now. A top freshwater snail expert in North America, he's traveling the country in his Nissan pickup, kayak and boots in back, hunting for gastropods.

He works with state agencies in charge of water quality that store soil samples chock-full of microinvertebrates for their own studies. Dillon sifts through the samples to take painstaking counts of snail remains contained therein.

He compiling his findings on Freshwater Gastropods of North America, an online state-by-state database of 15 species distributions. One day, he hopes to have the entire country tallied and entered.

“Conservation is the ultimate goal,” Dillon says. “Nobody really knows what’s rare and what is endangered.”

And don’t get him started on the term “endangered.”

“That is a political term,” he said, one based on predictions of what will happen to a species in the future, usually due to mankind’s activities. “That involves a value judgment. It doesn’t mix in with science.”

At 57, the father of two grown children scans his cozy genetics lab with pride.

He’s taught and researched here for 30 years, publishing and sending forth countless students. Years ago, he and two others discovered a new snail species, *Physa carolinae*, in a Johns Island ditch.

Now college officials are considering renovating the old science building. Dillon looks around his office, cluttered with NASCAR flags, books, papers and old metal filing cabinets.

Then he grins widely. Maybe it’s a new cause to fight.

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