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OUR VIEW

Safe train travel must be part of Pacific Northwest's future

The Associated Press reported that since 1969, nearly 300 people have died in U.S. train crashes that existing technology could have prevented.

Add the three people killed in last week's crash south of Tacoma, Washington, and the toll is 301.

It will be 12 to 24 months before the National Transportation Safety Board completes its investigation into what caused the Amtrak cars to veer off the rails on the route's maiden voyage, crashing onto Interstate 5 below. The NTSB said Friday that the train was going nearly 50 mph faster than allowed as it reached a curve.

Technology known as positive train control could have prevented the previous crashes, according to the NTSB. If speed, along with human error, caused Monday's crash, that one also might have been preventable. But the technology won't be operational on that section of track — or on other parts of Amtrak routes in Washington and Oregon — until sometime next year.

Why the delay? Cost. And the relationship between railroads and government.

Unlike highways and airports, most of the U.S. rail system is privately owned. The government steps in to improve roads and runways, although users help pay through taxes and fees. As private entities, railroads make their own decisions on track upgrades and safety improvements, although they're often driven by government regulations and deadlines.

Cost is the key reason railroads convinced the federal government to delay — until 2018 — the deadline for positive train control. Cost is why railroads have been slow to replace old-style tanker cars — like the ones that derailed and caused an oil fire in the Columbia River Gorge last year — with

sturdier, safer construction.

And cost is why Eastern Oregon lost passenger train service in 1997. The decline of federal subsidies made the route unprofitable, and Congress has never appropriated

money for Amtrak to re-establish the passenger route.

From a human standpoint, it's unconscionable that railroad companies have dragged their feet on technology and safety improvements. From a societal perspective, it raises the question of whether government should invest more to help American rail service join the 21st century.

A good rail system benefits everyone, reducing traffic congestion by taking freight and passenger vehicles off roads. A great rail system gets goods and passengers to their destinations faster, saving time and money.

Though high-speed passenger rail remains a dream — at least in the population centers of the Willamette Valley — we do not yet have consistently on-time, dependable train service in the Pacific Northwest. Our hilly and curvy topography requires slower train speeds, which is why the straighter route being inaugurated in Monday's crash was an advantage. Rainy-season landslides can disrupt tracks. And because our rail system lacks sufficient long sidings or dual tracks, Amtrak trains often must give way to freight trains.

Still, Oregon is making headway. The transportation package passed by this year's Legislature includes money for rail freight loading facilities in Eastern Oregon and the Mid-Willamette Valley, rail expansion at the Port of Morrow and an extended rail siding north of Salem.

Compared with the past, those are big steps. Compared with the need and the potential, they are small. And overdue.

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Bettina Hansen/The Seattle Times via AP, File

In this Dec. 18 photo, cars from an Amtrak train that derailed lie spilled onto Interstate 5 in DuPont, Wash.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of publisher Kathryn Brown, managing editor Daniel Wattenburger, and opinion page editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.

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OTHER VIEWS

Cardinal Tobin, am I a Christian?

What is Christmas about, anyway? Can I be a Christian if I doubt the virgin birth? Can a woman become a cardinal? What would upset Jesus today? I put these blunt questions and more to Cardinal Joseph Tobin of Newark, New Jersey, who was appointed by Pope Francis and is in his mold. Here's our conversation, edited for space and clarity.



NICHOLAS KRISTOF
Comment

KRISTOF: Merry Christmas! Let me start with respectful skepticism. I revere Jesus' teachings, but I have trouble with the miracles — including, since this is Christmas, the virgin birth. In Jesus' time people believed that Athena was born from Zeus' head, so it seemed natural to accept a great man walking on water or multiplying loaves and fishes; in 2017, not so much. Can't we take the Sermon on the Mount but leave the supernatural?

TOBIN: People are, I guess, free to take whatever they want.

Just like there's wisdom in non-Christian religions that Christians appropriate.

The most mind-boggling miracle is the incarnation. We believe that the Creator of the Universe, the one who existed before time and before anything else, became one of us. If you accept that, then there are a lot of other things that don't seem to be quite as unbelievable.

It's not a magic show. All of the miracles were not isolated or simply altruistic events. They were actually pointing toward who God is, and who this carpenter from Nazareth really was.

KRISTOF: One area where the Catholic Church seems to me antiquated is gender. If Jesus trusted women like Mary Magdalene, if Phoebe could be a leader of the early church, then why can't women be priests or cardinals today?

TOBIN: Those are two different questions. Regarding priests, it really is a stumbling block for people, and especially in this country and in this culture, as all areas of life are opening up to women that this particular ministry in the Catholic Church is not. So I understand the consternation. I have eight sisters. I know for some women this sort of stumbling block takes them away from the church.

As for cardinals, most are bishops but not all of them. As recently as the 19th century there were lay people who were cardinals.

KRISTOF: So will we see women cardinals soon?

TOBIN: Maybe my theology isn't sophisticated enough, but I don't believe that there's a compelling theological reason why the pope couldn't name a woman cardinal.

Pope Francis has promised to find a more incisive role for women in the church. There are isolated incidents of women being appointed to fairly influential posts in the Roman Curia. I think it's got to be more than that.

KRISTOF: I have huge admiration for Catholic nuns, priests and laity working on the front lines all over the world to fight poverty, disease, injustice. Those people are doing exactly what Jesus talked about. But, so often, religious leaders, including those in the Vatican, seem less focused on the needy

and more on issues that Jesus never breathed a word about, like gays, or abortion or family planning.

TOBIN: It's fair to say Jesus did not make pronouncements on those three hot-button issues. I think, though, that he gave us an ethos and a moral direction, so we don't have to sit down and say, "Jesus, what do we do?" Catholic tradition didn't fall out of the air and decide something capricious. It's based on all sorts of lived experience of people trying to follow Jesus closely.

KRISTOF: Can I ask about prayer? I accept that prayer has spiritual, healing value, but why is it that God answers prayers only in ambiguous situations, such as curing cancer, but never to, say, regrow a leg?

TOBIN: It's interesting you mention that, Nicholas. My dad grew up strong and big, played football for Boston College, went into the service and lost his leg in World War II.

One night he was looking at his prosthesis. He said: "I was thinking I've had that thing half my life now. But if I didn't have that, I wouldn't have your mother, and I wouldn't have you." So he discovered something in that tragedy. Faith got him through it.

Sometimes I think when I don't receive an answer to what I'm praying for, maybe what I'm asking for actually is something that could be harmful for me. I do believe God hears all prayers, and I believe God answers in some way.

KRISTOF: In previous Q&As, I asked the Rev. Tim Keller and President Jimmy Carter whether a skeptic like myself, who admires Jesus' moral teachings but doubts the virgin birth and any physical resurrection, counts as a Christian. Basically, Keller said "no," and Carter "yes," so you're the tiebreaker. Am I a Christian?

TOBIN: I would think that if you haven't completely closed the door on the possibility that God has more to say to you, then I think you're in the tent.

KRISTOF: Let's turn the tables. Anything you want to ask me?

TOBIN: Can I ask a favor? I'm really worried about this country for a lot of reasons, but I'm particularly concerned about refugees and immigrants. I really think this present administration is moving clearly toward a mass deportation. My people are already terrorized. I am so afraid that unless we can find a way of changing hearts, they're going to go ahead with it.

KRISTOF: So is that God's work here on earth? Is that what Jesus would be criticizing today?

TOBIN: I never hear Jesus going out of his way to point an accusing finger at people who are oppressing the poor. What he does criticize in very stark terms is the ones who don't see them, who don't see them as they are. I think that's what happens. We're developing a national cataract.

KRISTOF: Thanks! And for all my skepticism, this I believe: Merry Christmas!

Nicholas Kristof grew up on a sheep and cherry farm in Yamhill. Kristof, a columnist for The New York Times since 2001, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1990 and 2006.

OTHER VIEWS

This gift could cause serious harm

Fort Dodge (Iowa) Messenger

Drone owners must exercise great caution and follow the rules.

No doubt some local residents found remotely controlled miniature aircrafts — drones, in popular parlance — under their Christmas trees on Monday. Recipients likely tore open the packages anticipating tons of fun.

Aircraft pilots have a different view. The proliferation of drones flown by irresponsible owners has created a new, potentially deadly, hazard for those who fly or ride in bigger craft.

National Transportation Safety Board

officials have released a report on the first confirmed midair collision between a manned aircraft and a drone in this country. It occurred Sept. 21 over New York City, when a drone

hit and damaged an Army helicopter. Those on the chopper were able to land it safely.

The drone's operator was breaking virtually every rule in the book. He flew his craft about 2.5 miles away from where he was, despite a Federal Aviation Administration ban on flying drones out of

sight of the operator, for one thing.

If you have a drone or got one this Christmas, enjoy it. But do so safely. Follow all the rules. Don't be responsible for the first fatality involving a drone.

Don't be responsible for the first fatality involving a drone.

LETTERS POLICY