

Christians in Science Summer 2011 Essay Competition

Winning Essay

Faith & Science

Mary Wood, August 2011

'It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out.'^[1]

Of the numerous facets that distinguish humanity as a species, curiosity is one of the most often maligned. Children are cautioned to beware of this alleged cat-murderer (originating from a misquotation of Ben Jonson's play *Every Man In His Humour*, in which he pronounces that *'Care'll Kill a Cat'*^[2]) Even that much-revered theologian of old, Saint Augustine, inexplicably produced his own addendum to the Bible by declaring that prior to God's creating spree in Genesis, *'Curiosis fabricavit inferos'*^[3]. ('He fashioned hell for the inquisitive.')

These adages, by no means isolated examples, stem in part from the strong association of risk with the perusal of our fascination concerning the mysteries of the World around us; some of the greatest discoveries are inextricably linked with tragedy – Marie Curie died from radiation poisoning following her investigations into radioactivity, Captain Robert Scott died along with his fellow explorers in his attempt to reach the South Pole, an expedition conducted for little other reason except that it was there to be reached, and copious pages could be effortlessly filled with similar examples.

Yet the Bible itself, despite Augustine's protestations, asserts the complete opposite, as is its wont with many of our worldly axioms. The quotation above, taken from Proverbs, characterises God as the perpetrator of a treasure-hunt of epic proportions, with humanity in the role of an excited child in search of the coveted prize: the truth.

And certainly this seems to comply with what we observe in our basic human nature; the very reason we possess such a collection of deeply-ingrained warnings against curiosity is because we are innately curious beings and will stop at little in our quest for understanding; Philip Yancy puts it adroitly:

'Being human means grasping for something more, just as Adam and Eve did. "The computer, in contrast, is a passive system: its goals and the strength of its drive to reach them are those given it by the designer. Left to itself, it will sit inert, awaiting further orders. We will not; we look for new goals, and, to reach them, are forced to solve problems we did not have before; we do not let well enough alone.'^[4]

God made us beings that delight to search out and uncover the secrets of creation. Scientific explanation is conspicuous in the book of Genesis by its absence; in this history of God's status as creator and his relationship with mankind, it is left for future generations to uncover the mysteries of the formation of the elements and the galaxies. We are, however, informed that Adam was tasked with the naming of each and every creature; it is clear that part of mankind's commission in subduing the Earth is to discover, categorise and steward its riches, whilst giving the glory to God as its sovereign creator. God omits to inform us about the nature of neutrinos in the Bible because it is his desire that we should discover them for ourselves.

A desire for the truth, otherwise known as ‘curiosity’, is thus a fundamental and essential human instinct. It inspires science just as it pervades all aspects of life, from court-room justice to the Buddhists’ eternal quest for enlightenment. We are left frustrated by cliffhangers, and feel considerable pity, if not derision, for those who hide in fear from exposure to the truth, like the proverbial head-burying ostrich. The world of academia is most ruthless on those that fabricate results, and most audible in praising those who demonstrate integrity. The hero, Neo, of the film *The Matrix*^[5] is given a choice between continuing to live in a world of comfortable fabrication or embracing the terrifying true world; the audience backs him every time as he barely hesitates in selecting the latter.

In faith as in science: history bulges with philosophers and theologians, with countless wars fought over ecumenical trivia. We are desperate for the truth that lends meaning to our endeavours – for what, after all, is science if there is no significance to our existence beyond the dryness of academic research? It is God’s ubiquitous character that lends the richness and excitement to new discoveries.

Fortunately God rewards the curious with answers that satisfy: *‘Seek and you will find’*^[6]. Just as the scientist who is sincere in their pursuit of veracity will continually increase their knowledge, so are we permitted insight into the great mysteries of God’s will through his word. Just as in science those who fear the risk too much to investigate the unknown are those that will never reap the enormous benefits of research, those that never dare to truly seek the meaning of our existence will miss out on the greatest prize of all.

From Newton to Faraday it is easy to see why science and faith walk together so naturally in the lives of many, united as they are by their unquenchable thirst for truth. Indeed, and perhaps counterintuitively to initial presumption, Faith has the advantage over science in proffering certainty, since *‘Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen’*^[7], whereas every scientist is only too aware of the constant presence of cautionary error margins and the necessity of expressing results in terms of the often negligible accuracy that can be assumed; the very names of some scientific laws show just how nebulous our understanding can be – consider Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle! And yet the Christian is allowed that amazing privilege of certainty – it is not a cautious or timid belief, a clutching onto straws we are fervently hoping are actually there, but a firm standing upon the rock of assurance. The Christian may be assured and confident of their status before God, whilst joyfully exploring the marvellously complex and intricate world that he has bequeathed to us; science adds further joy to faith, and faith gives eternal meaning and purpose to the endeavours of science.

Bibliography

- [1] The Holy Bible (English Standard Version) Proverbs Ch. 25, vs. 2
- [2] Jonson, B. *Every Man in His Humour*
- [3] St. Augustine *Confessions*,
- [4] Yancy, P. *Rumours of Another World*, Zondervan Publishing House, Michigan, 2004
- [5] *The Matrix*, dir. A. & L. Wachowski, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1999, Film
- [6] The Holy Bible (English Standard Version) Matthew Ch. 7, vs. 7
- [7] The Holy Bible (English Standard Version) Hebrews Ch. 11, vs. 1

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