

Science, Faith and the Student

If the claims of the new atheists are to be believed, the idea of science co-existing with faith is intellectual doublethink that is to be rooted out wherever possible. It is worth noting, however, that the views of the new atheists are not in fact new, merely the pouring of new wine into old wineskins. Indeed, the statement “The man of science has learned to believe in justification, not by faith, but by verification”^[1] penned by ‘Darwin’s bulldog’, Thomas Huxley, would not look out of place on the twitter feed of Richard Dawkins. The view that science and faith are incompatible has been espoused across several centuries and yet, as many Christian scientists know full well, it is plainly untrue.

Man’s involvement in scientific endeavours has been ongoing since before the fall. It is often overlooked that in the naming of the animals and birds in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:19-20) Adam became the unwitting pioneer of the field of taxonomy; thankfully, scientific pursuits did not end in Eden. Scientists with faith in God, made manifest in Christ, have been responsible for some of the greatest scientific discoveries of the past century. Werner Heisenberg, pioneered quantum mechanics, Georges Lemaitre, first proposed the Big Bang theory, Francis Collins, headed the project which mapped out the human genome in its entirety. All committed Christians, all excellent scientists, none in doubt of the reality that lay behind their discoveries. As Heisenberg put it “...nature was the immediate expression of God’s intentions.”^[2]

‘How did you do that?’ is often the response to a magician’s trick; a desire for knowledge and understanding seems ingrained in human nature. Indeed, humanity’s quest for knowledge stems from its Creator “For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth comes knowledge and understanding.” (Prov 2:6) and as such, studying creation is a privilege, for “Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them.” (Ps 111:2) There are those that argue that revealing the method behind a magic trick spoils the magic and as such, science somehow diminishes God’s creation. Christians are called to know God (Hos 6:3) therefore, studying creation via the medium of science helps Christians know God more fully. God reveals qualities of Himself through creation (Rom 1:20) and in the same manner of knowing an artist through studying their work, so too Christians can know the Lord through studying creation. Through the understanding of scientific knowledge, the faith of the student may grow. In observing the intricacies and complexity of the universe, the student may see the manifold wisdom of God and discover not only evidence for His existence, but evidence of his good nature; a good nature which yearns to be trusted.

Whilst the student may well know (or at least discover) that faith and science are compatible, science is not studied in a cultural vacuum. Attendance in UK churches is diminishing rapidly and it is predicted that less than 10% of the UK population will be church members by 2020^[3]. The believing student will find themselves in the minority at university, nonetheless, they may utilise this for God’s glory. If the comments of Michael Gove are to be taken seriously, the UK “has had enough of experts.”^[4] In light of this, it will be the role of the student, not the prominent scientist, to demonstrate to their peers the correct understanding of the word faith in Christianity. The secular world’s characterisation of faith is synonymous with credulity. That “faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, lack of evidence.”^[5] With a definition such as this, it is not too difficult to see why the new atheists think science and faith are incompatible; the student must not cede this ground. Faith can be defined biblically as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.” (Hebr 11:1) It is akin to trust. Trust that Christ was neither a liar nor lunatic, but Lord. Trust that through Christ’s death and resurrection forgiveness is offered freely to all by God’s grace. If the student is to convey this message as a credible representation of creation, their scientific knowledge must not be called into question.

This idea is not a new one, for even St Augustine encouraged scientific wisdom amongst Christians. “Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world, about the motion and orbit of the stars and even their size and relative positions, about the predictable eclipses of the sun and moon, the cycles of the years and the seasons, about the kinds of animals, shrubs, stones, and so forth, and this knowledge he holds to as being certain from reason and experience...The shame [Christian scientific ignorance] is not so much that an ignorant individual is derided, but that people outside the household of the faith think our sacred writers held such opinions, and, to the great loss of those for whose salvation we toil, the writers of our Scripture are criticized and rejected as unlearned men.”^[6] In a culture that is becoming ‘post-expert’ it is up to scientifically-versed and faithful students to bridge the supposed rift between science and faith within their chosen field.

With the new atheists pressing that science and faith are diametrically opposed to one another and some of the world’s finest scientists arguing the opposite, the student must nestle snugly into the chasm created by this discord. On the one hand, the investigation of God’s creation and pursuit of scientific knowledge should be done in the name of and with faith in its creator (Col 3:17). On the other, in an environment that seeks to deride faith in Christ, the student must demonstrate scientific acumen so that through their diligence and aptitude, holding a firm faith in Christ’s death and resurrection cannot be dismissed offhand as unintellectual by their peers.

Bibliography

All bible passages taken from the English Standard Version unless stated otherwise.

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- [6] **Augustine, St.** *Augustine, the Literal Meaning of Genesis. Vol 1 from: Ancient Christian Writers., vol. 41*. Translated and annotated by Taylor, J.H., Chapter 19:39, Paulist Press, 1982.