

“Science, Faith and the Student”

In popular thinking, science and faith are embraced in an eternal war. How does the student reconcile faith and science, as these two things are, supposedly, fundamentally at odds? Must the student choose between two ways of thinking? The answer, of course, is that while there may be certain challenges associated with being a Christian while studying science, on the whole, it can be a rewarding experience. Both are different ways of approaching truth, and can complement each other in the search for truth and meaning.

The conflict thesis still retains much popular support, and is commonly promoted in the comments section on articles and videos found on the web. The examples of Galileo and Darwin are the prime examples of the church stifling scientific research. However, careful study of this warfare model reveals that it is simply not true, and it is considered to be discredited by historians, despite still remaining popular.¹ The great Christian thinkers of medieval times would have found the idea that faith is somehow at odds with reason and scientific knowledge to be bizarre.

In Galileo’s case, there was no clear evidence at the time for the movement of the earth, and the church was merely advocating the scientific consensus of the day. There is always resistance when a major change in scientific thinking is proposed. A more recent example of this is the development of the theory of the big bang. Initially, this understanding of the origin of the universe (formulated by a French priest!) was fiercely resisted by those who were in favour of the established steady state model. However, as evidence mounted (notably the cosmic microwave background), the scientific consensus changed, to the extent that the vast majority of cosmologists now accept this model. Few would argue that those who were initially opposed to the big bang were somehow anti-science.

The concept of science as an independent area of study, separate from humanities subjects (including theology), is a relatively recent phenomenon. This is evident in some older universities, which grant degrees in arts to students who have studied the natural sciences. However, this recent separation of these methods of investigation does not necessarily mean that one is false or inferior to the other. Different subject areas have the same ultimate goal: the pursuit of knowledge of the truth. This is evident in St Anselm’s definition of theology as “faith seeking understanding”. Not that Anselm is seeking to replace faith with a greater philosophical or scientific understanding, but that the initial faith is supplemented and enhanced by reasoning. This is an excellent way to approach scientific enquiry from the perspective of faith.

The difference between science and faith is the starting point. Faith starts with God’s revelation, and seeks to work out the truth moving from that point. Science starts with experiments, and seeks to understand the world based on these. However, there can be a strikingly similar process in the development of understanding based either on faith or science, as outlined by Polkinghorne, who compares the development of Christology

¹ McGrath, A. E. (2011), *Christian Theology: An Introduction (5th edition)*, 170, Wiley-Blackwell.

George Walker
National University of Ireland, Maynooth
MSc (Research), Experimental Physics

in the early church with that of quantum mechanics in the early twentieth century.² Indeed, the philosophical implications of the particle-waves of quantum mechanics have still not been fully worked out. The concepts of quantum mechanics are thought-provoking, especially for those who claim that Christian concepts such as the simultaneous divinity and humanity of Christ are too unbelievable to be true.

In addition to science and faith providing different avenues towards the ultimate goal of truth, they can also complement each other in the journey towards that goal. Johannes Kepler, well known to undergraduates for his three laws of planetary motion, believed he had revealed God's geometrical plan for the universe. Knowledge of the workings of the universe through science can engender a sense of awe and wonder at God's creation. Additionally, passages of scripture can help with the expression of this awe; Psalm 19:1 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God." Psalm 111 is known as the scientist's psalm, and verse 2 is on display at the Cavendish Laboratory: "The works of the LORD are great, sought out of all them that have pleasure therein."

Science can provide reasons for belief to people of faith. Not in the sense of reasons for belief in the first place — only God's grace can do that, but in the sense of justification for belief. For example, the orderly nature of the universe was expected by people of faith, and this led to scientific enquiry. Of course, those of faith will argue that science cannot provide the reasons for everything, but if both work together, a much greater understanding of reality can be achieved. If the ultimate reality behind the universe is a personal God, this has huge implications for the human search for truth.³

From this, it is clear that there is no real conflict between science and faith. The contribution of so many scientists of faith is testament to this. Popular understanding is flawed, and the truth about the relationship between science and faith needs to be clarified in the public forum. Faith and science are both different ways of expressing the desire to seek truth. The study of science can enhance students' faith and draw them closer to God. Indeed, many scientists relate their initial coming to faith back to the sense of wonder, which is provided by science. In return, while initially there may be perceived difficulties, faith can result in a deeper sense of reason for science and enhance appreciation for science itself.

² Polkinghorne, J. (2007), *Quantum Physics and Theology: An Unexpected Kinship*, SPCK.

³ Lennox, J. C. (2009), *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?*, 209, Lion.