

Exploding the Myth

Some Reflections on Science and Christian Belief

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My serious commitment to both science and Christian faith were made at much the same time some 50 years ago when I was converted in my first year of a science course. I was eager to pursue a scientific career, but made a coincident commitment to Christ that, as it happened, provided purpose for that career as it unfolded as a University academic.

I have had a long time therefore to look at some of the issues, real or imagined in the science faith arena. While I must deplore some of the ways some of my fellow Christians and some of my fellow scientists have created unnecessary areas of conflict, I have been convinced that there is no truth to the myth that there is fundamental conflict between science and faith. However, the common perception in our universities is that science and Christianity don't mix - that science has now provided an alternative way of looking at the world which makes any religious explanation of nature unnecessary and outdated. In this climate being both an academic scientist and a Christian has had its problems. Being considered by many of ones colleagues, as somewhat strange or inconsistent in holding both a scientific and Christian view of the world brings about a certain sense of defensiveness. This perception of conflict is not however restricted to the Australian University scene. It is widely held in our secular world. I was interested to see the recent review by Joel Crotty in "The Age" of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra's rendering of Haydn's Creation beginning with "It will always be disputed whether God by working overtime created the universe, or that the big bang pushed forth the evolutionary train". Thus God and science are seen as alternatives even by the musicologists!! Some 72% of UK University students in a recent questionnaire indicated that they see science and faith as in conflict, while statements like "Genesis tells us that God made the world, but we know that it was the big bang" are common in secondary school essays.

The same sentiment is often expressed with regard to the creation of humanity, with which I am as a physiologist rather more familiar scientifically - "If God created man then evolution cannot" or the equally exclusive statement "evolution provides a naturalistic explanation for the origin of man which makes any religious explanation redundant ". Thus the scientific description of the evolution of species and its culmination in the development of humanity is considered by many to replace an understanding of God as creator. It seems to me that there are many flaws in these arguments. To confuse a process that can be explored, and understood in scientific terms, with the primary cause

of that process is rather poor logic. It is like denying the role of the cook, if we can describe the basic chemical and physical processes that result in the cake.

God's creative role in the world is not made unnecessary by our ability to understand His methods. For many scientists, the wonder of an evolving world with its interplay of chance and law, as exemplified in the process of evolution by natural selection, and resulting in the emergence of ourselves as moral, self-conscious individuals able to relate to God and worship Him, inspires worship and raises many questions that are unanswered and unanswerable from within science itself. Indeed science can be seen, as it was by many of the founders of modern science, as an act of worship.

Far from science and faith being in conflict therefore, science demands a context that can only be provided by faith in a personal triune God. The remarkable coincidence that is "me", and of humanity deriving from a complex and finely balanced set of scientifically observable factors, makes more sense if it is considered as part of a process in which God is active at every point. Not as a sort of intervening God, but as one who operates through the remarkable mechanisms discoverable by science. God is not a master magician God, but rather one who is involved with every facet of the world that science describes. Thus, to see by faith the role of a personal God in the development of humanity, seems to be a more rational response to the inevitable non-scientific "why" questions that are thrown up by a proper scientific appraisal of human origins. To suggest that humanity arose by pure chance or that such questions are neither important, nor valid seems to be inconsistent with a proper scientific pursuit of truth, even if such a pursuit must be pursued beyond the limits of the scientific method.

Science and faith are thus complementary. Science describes the world of nature, a world that owes its existence to God, who chose in love to bring it into being by a remarkable series of processes. Indeed, we can only make sense of the way the world works, its interlocking beauty, its simplicity of beginning and developing complexity, culminating in creatures capable of a personal relationship with God, by an understanding of the Trinitarian God Who in Christ became incarnate and Who by the immanent Holy Spirit governs its activity. I am not therefore a speck of cosmic dust in a vast arena of meaningless, but part of God's creation and therefore I have purpose and direction.

It also seems that faith brings a moral dimension to science. We need to place our scientific endeavour in the context of a Christian view of the world and ourselves as stewards even co-creators, with God of His creation. Thus in using the fruit of scientific advances, I am not "playing God", usurping His authority, but rather working in cooperation as His steward., serving His purposes.

I have found the conflict myth neither true in a historical sense or in the contemporary scientific scene. While there have been some battles between entrenched interpretations of Scripture and science, these should not be exaggerated. In fact many of the so-called struggles between science and faith have been between rival scientific approaches, not between science and faith at all. The so-called Galileo conflict was primarily a struggle against the prevailing Aristotelian science and the Darwin conflict a struggle between

static and dynamic pictures of the world. Both were unnecessary and are now well resolved, but the memories linger on in popular perceptions helped a little by polemic history. As I have explored the relationship between science and faith over the last 40 years or so, many of these issues have been clarified

For me then, science needs to be pursued in a context of Christian commitment. It is concerned with the investigation of an ordered and consistent world - the creation of an ordered consistent God who made all things "good". Understanding "the way things are" needs more than just a limited scientific world picture, but a full Christian world view. Thus my Christian faith is neither irrational, incredible nor unnecessary in my scientific life. It is an integral part of it, giving it purpose and direction.