

# FAITH AND SCIENCE IN DIALOGUE

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Ministry



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Many students on campuses wrestle with the things they learn in their science classes and religion classes, what they hear from friends and media, and what the church tells them. Faith and science often seem to hold contradicting viewpoints. It is important to open up discussions about faith and science so that we see where there are overlapping beliefs and how faith and science can support each other.

## Part 1. Why Dialogue?

There are many reasons to have a faith and science dialogue but the most important are these:

1. To clear up misunderstandings that scientists have about religious faith and misunderstandings that people of faith have about science. St. Paul would call it "telling the truth in love." This means that people of faith commend science for what it does well and to question the things that it does not (and can not) do well. For example, a scientist I know (who is more or less agnostic) posits that science operates under the following axioms:

- We can proceed as though there is an external reality, and we can learn much about it.
- The world behaves according to ("natural") rules, and to the extent that we can figure out what these rules are, we should be able to make all sorts of predictions, i.e., the behavior of the world is incredibly regular.
- There is no need to invoke the supernatural. Miracles (violations of natural laws) do not occur. We cannot abridge or modify the laws of nature by appealing to a deity, conducting mystical rites, or simply wishing things to be different from how they are.

The first two of these axioms are axioms that people of faith can support. The world created by the creator is indeed regular and knowable. The third, however is more than just a "scientific" statement. It posits that there is no need to invoke the creator. This is a philosophical statement (reductionism) that limits what can be known. It is like a physicist saying that "all reality boils down to physics" or a chemist saying that "all life boils down to chemistry." These are true statements, but they are incomplete and inadequate to fully model reality.

On the other hand, people of faith need to hear the skepticism of science who looks at faith practices and says "What religion seriously invites non-adherents' criticisms and challenges? (In science, ALL challenges are legitimate, regardless of their authors' beliefs, motives, race, gender, biases.) What religion is skeptical of its own

teachings? What religion sees difficulty in the fact that there are countless other (mutually incompatible) religions, all deriving legitimacy from revelation?" Faith can not hide behind revelation when it comes to dialogue with science. How is the revelation consistent with the reality that God gives us from other sources? How is it consistent with our understanding of God and his universe?

2.To see that faith and science both have vital roles to play in the 20th century. Albert Einstein is said to have remarked that "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind." Science has brought us an industrial revolution that has changed the way we work and live. Who can do without transportation systems (cars, especially), electricity (and atomic energy), modern medicine (and genetic work), and mass media (t.v., cable, radio and the internet)? But these things have also brought environmental degradation in a wide scale, reductions of biodiversity and an increasing disparity between the "haves" and the "have-nots" of the world.

One physicist I know, a devout Jew, says that he's not sure that science answers questions that are "big". Science answers interesting questions, he says, but not the big ones! What he means is that the big questions in life - "How am I to live?", "How am I to treat my neighbor?" "Whose in charge of all this universe?" are not questions that science can answer very well because they are multi-faceted, value-laden questions. The questions can not be broken down into constituent parts to be examined empirically. Religion (religious faith) has been "the keeper of the questions" keeping these questions in front of us for at least four thousand years, knowing that the answers may be often time-dated and change as we change and grow. But the questions themselves are deep and eternal. Science asks "how" things happen, religion asks "why" (that is the purpose behind the "how"). Both are necessary to understand life

3.Lastly, All Truth is God's Truth. "Wisdom" we are told in the Bible was God's "Master Builder" who knew the lines and the limits of the creation. Those who are not scientists do not need to fear wisdom obtained by science. God gives us this creation to use and the wisdom to understand it. We can not live in ignorance in such a "high tech" world. Dialogue takes place when we see that both faith and science have a place in our lives.

## **Part 2 - Beginning a Dialogue**

The most asked question about a faith and science dialogue is "how do I begin?" as if there were only one answer. A great computer guru once said to me regarding some "repairs" to be made to a recalcitrant computer, "just try it, you can't make it worse!" The same can be said about a faith and science dialogue - "Just try it. You can't make it worse." People of faith who are also scientists welcome a dialogue with people who have no science background. Even scientists who profess no faith are often interested in dialoguing with others who have faith to understand them better. With that in mind, here are a number of ways to begin a dialogue:

1. Celebrate the work of scientists in your parish/campus location. A great opportunity exists to do this in 1998 as the commemoration for Nicholas Copernicus (astronomer) and Leonard Euler (mathematician) falls on a Sunday (May 24th) this year. Use this commemoration to acknowledge the scientists in your parish/campus setting and have them talk about how their faith affects their work. Use this as a springboard to continue conversation.

2. Read a book together. Many parishes have begun a dialogue by having both scientists and non scientists reading books like *The Faith of a Scientist* by John Polkinghorne (who is both a physicist and an Anglican priest). What questions does the book bring out for you? What is the "ministry" of a scientist? Is theology still the "queen" of the sciences?

3. Subscribe to faith and science publications and then discuss materials found in them. The ELCA publishes a newsletter on faith and science, as well as a companion publication, *Covalence*, for the Ecumenical Roundtable on Science, Technology and the Church. Both contain articles that can be used for discussion. In these publications, you will receive information about seminars, mission events and study materials that are of use in parish and campus settings. Contact the author at "lutheran@summon.syr.edu" for more details or subscription information. In a similar vein is *Science & Spirit Magazine*, now concluding its eighth year as a modest publication offering a broad overview of the field of science and religion. *Science & Spirit* informs readers about conferences, courses, and seminars, provides lists and reviews of relevant books and articles, and provides news and views on contemporary issues.

4. Keep informed of issues of faith and science. The John Templeton Foundation sponsors many workshops through many university and institutional settings. A handy way to know what is going on in the faith and science dialogue is to subscribe to META, a edited and moderated listserv and news service dedicated to promoting the constructive engagement of science and religion and to sharing information and perspectives among the diverse organizations and individuals involved in this interdisciplinary field. For more information on subscribing to this free email service go to <<http://www.templeton.org/meta>>

5. Begin a "brown-bag" discussion group. Many campus settings find that a light lunch (or even Pizza!) works well to bring diverse communities on campus together to discuss areas of common interest.

6. Use *Zygon* (quarterly journal of religion and Science) as a discussion starter. Most colleges and universities subscribe to *Zygon*. Peruse the articles in *Zygon* for topical issues that affect your campus and then use the article as a way of beginning cross-disciplinary discussion.

7. Make "Contact" with *Contact* (the movie). *Contact* is one of the first movies that shows extensive dialogue between a theologian and a scientist. Pop *Contact* in a

VCR, order some pizza and then discuss.

8. Team teach a Templeton Science and Religion Course with a scientist. The Templeton Foundation offers \$10,000 grants (half to the department, half to the teacher(s)) for the teaching of "Faith and Science" courses. Contact <<http://www.templeton.org>> for details.

There are many other ways to start a dialogue. But these are some proven "starters" for conversation. I welcome others that have worked in your parish, your campus, your neighborhood.