

Science and Religion: Is There a Conflict?

By Tyler VanderWeele

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History provides us with a number of accounts of the conflict between science and religion from Galileo, to the Scopes trial, to recent debates concerning intelligent design. What is the nature of this conflict? So far as I can discern, there is nothing irreconcilable between the major tenets of the Christian faith, as laid out for example in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, and the conclusions of science, properly conducted and appropriately circumspect. Yet we have seen and will likely to continue to see conflict between representatives of the scientific enterprise and representatives of religious institutions. There are perhaps many reasons for these conflicts. I would like to briefly address just two: irresponsible interpretation of Scripture and an inadequate understanding of the limits of the scientific method.

Much of the tension between science and religion takes place under the banner of "creation versus evolution." An overly literal reading of the text gave rise to the position that God created the earth in six 24-hour periods approximately six thousand years ago, the inevitable implication being that the modern teachings of science must be incorrect. Although the six-day-creationist position has, by many, been abandoned or modified, the Church has been left with a sense that it must still combat evolutionary science. This is unfortunate; it seems that there need be little conflict here. There is nothing in the common Christian creeds which precludes the possibility of God having created the world and all therein by evolutionary means. On the other hand, no conclusion of experimental science can legitimately challenge the position that somewhere along the evolutionary process God imbued man and woman with a soul.

I believe the Church has done harm to itself on this front. By too closely tying the Christian faith to an anti-evolutionary position, many while at university are convinced by various conclusions of evolutionary science and feel they must consequently abandon their faith.

This is unnecessary; the message of salvation offered in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus has little to do with detailed positions on evolutionary science. The problem seems to have been rooted in the irresponsible interpretation of Scripture. The literal reading of Genesis 1-3 gained popularity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Many of the Church fathers (including Augustine) did not understand it in this way. Contemporary exegesis suggests that we are not to understand it this way. With a more responsible interpretation of Genesis many of the science-religion conflicts might have been avoided.

More generally, we need to be more aware of issues of genre regarding the Biblical texts. Nowhere in the Bible do we have the equivalent of a science textbook; nor do we have anything resembling a modern historical record. We have in Scripture a variety of literary forms: poetry, legal codes, letters, prophetic oracles, historical accounts, and perhaps even some stories with true theological teachings but without any definite historic referent. We must come to appreciate that theological interpretation was involved in the writing of even those parts of the Scriptures which appear most historical in nature and that this position does not threaten our faith. We should come to the Scriptures trying to discern the

lie beyond the natural world – the existence of a soul, the existence of God or the possibility of miracles.

Experimental science is not the only method by which we come to knowledge. That something cannot be demonstrated by science does not imply that we cannot have knowledge of it. We can come to legitimate knowledge through observational data, through historical studies, through experience and even through philosophical and theological reasoning.

Nevertheless, different modes of inquiry will lead to varying degrees of certainty. Where we sometimes go wrong is in allowing scientists to speak on metaphysical matters with the same authority with which they speak on the conclusions from experimental science. Scientists can describe the laws of nature; however the scientific method cannot be used to draw conclusions about whether or not God might choose to at certain times suspend these laws. Scientists can mount evidence for various evolutionary phenomena but the scientific method cannot address questions about whether or not the natural world exhibits design. Such questions are metaphysical.

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questions that the Scriptures themselves raise and we must be attuned to what the Biblical texts we study are trying to teach. Are these teachings true? I believe so—and so far as I can tell these teachings do not conflict with what we know from science.

There may be legitimate points of disagreement with regard to detailed evolutionary positions, but we ought to let science do its work without feeling threatened. Experimental science cannot in fact legitimately challenge anything central to the Christian faith. This brings me to my second point.

I believe a second source of the conflict between institutional representatives of science and religion concerns an inadequate understanding of the limits of the scientific method. Science progresses by repeatable experiment. Science has led to astounding technological advances and has given us tremendous insight into the natural world. Science cannot however, confirm or falsify many claims that

They can and should be debated and scientists should of course participate in these debates. When they do so, however, they are reasoning philosophically and not speaking from the conclusions of experimental science.

I believe that if we are more careful in our interpretation of the Bible and if we better distinguish where science ends and where metaphysics begins many of the so-called conflicts between science and religion will be tempered. We will still find disagreements but the nature of these disagreements will be clearer. The disagreements will not be between "science" and "religion" but between different metaphysical positions. It is inherently more difficult to establish consensus on questions of metaphysics or theology. We cannot and ought not, however, abandon these difficult questions since, for most of us, our approach to them, implicitly or explicitly, shapes how we live our lives. 

