

“Religion and Science: Conversation Partners”

Psalm 19:1-10/John 9:1-12, 35-38

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I. Scripture Reading

In Psalm 19 the Psalmist writes of discovering the wonder of God in nature and creation. This may be the early, original half of the Psalm. It appears that later some theologians got a little nervous about extolling of the revelation of God in nature, so the second half of the Psalm was added; a more traditional statement about the revelation of God in scripture and law.

Read Psalm 19:1-10.

Even 2500 years ago we can pick up an uneasy tension in this Psalm between reflections on creation and more traditional theology. It feels a little like oil and water.

II. Introduction

I am curious about creation. Here are a few pictures of our universe, some from the Hubble telescope:

(show each picture on digital projection as introduced)

Earth-our home in the vastness of the universe

Our sun-one of 300 sextillion stars in our universe.....or a 3 followed by 23 zeros.....or 3 trillion times 100 billion. Our universe is a big place.

Cygnus-just one part of our Milky Way galaxy, contains innumerable stars.

Spiral Galaxy-a massive galaxy 60 million light years away, with older yellow stars in the middle, younger blue stars on the edges, and clouds of dust and gas to form stars and planets.

I am curious about creation.....so I like science. I got a chemistry set as a kid. I immediately looked among the collection of chemicals for the ones with “warning” printed on them. I had hoped to combine two “warnings” and get something exciting. But, alas, the manufacturers of the chemistry set had been warned about kids like me (probably from their attorneys), so all the chemicals that were dangerous in combinations were taken out of the set. The most dramatic reaction I got was foam over the top of a beaker (which I could also get with orange juice and baking soda). I would have to wait for high school chemistry for the drama of putting small pieces of sodium in water....”poof.”

I liked high school chemistry and physics. I became a science and math guy. I took all the science and math classes our small school offered. I was fascinated with the elegance of balancing chemical equations.....of using numbers and symbols in

chemical equations to describe what had happened in an experiment. It was like telling a story in a different language. English and history I took because I had to.....sort of like medicine.

At Whitworth College I took math and science my freshman year. Biochemistry was one of the first classes I took, the introduction to the chemistry of life. I liked it, and studied hard, and got a "99" on a final. Dr. Boshic called me into his office and told me I should consider a biochemistry degree. I said I was interested.

But a funny thing happened. Through the years of growing up I had had experiences with God.....and I was also curious about that too. I once had the clear and overwhelming feeling of God's holiness in worship as a child at the Davenport Presbyterian Church.....and had received healing once from a stomach ache as a kid when I prayed....and I felt at home in worship as a teenager.....and I felt an excitement about discovering meaning in the Bible.

And so at Whitworth College I also took a New Testament class....and another. I volunteered to work at Knox Presbyterian Church with lower income, inner city, junior high kids. I discovered fresh experiences with God at 10PM vesper services at college through candles, silence, scripture and simple songs accompanied by guitars. One day after a New Testament class my professor, Miss Smith, asked me if I had a minute. She asked if I had considered a major in pre-ministry. I said I was a science guy and considering biochemistry. She said that was good.....but I might also consider ministry. As I considered that.....I became more interested.

Science and religion.....math and theology.....they each seemed to come from different worlds.....asking different questions.....sharing different answers. There seemed to be a tension between religion and science....like in Psalm 19. But I was curious about life, creation, meaning, truth, beauty, wonder and mystery.....and Whitworth College encouraged us to understand "all truth as God's truth," so religion need not be afraid of science. I wondered about a conversation between religion and science; not as two fields of study at battle with each other for control of one place called "truth," nor as two fields of study with nothing to say to each other.....but as two ways to be curious about life, truth and meaning that overlap in places for conversations.

III. Brief History

In the pre-modern world people looked at the stars, the sun, rain and storms, the wonder of life.....and told myths, shared poetry and sang songs to give religious

meaning to what was not understood. Religion was the source of authority for truth and meaning.

Things began to shift in the 15th C with the Renaissance. Human reason was discovered as the source to discover truth. People didn't need to be told what was true from an authority, such as the Church, or a king. Rather, truth could be discovered by human reason. The shift opened the door to the scientific revolution and the modern world. The earliest scientists were faithful Christians; Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and Newton. They believed they were discovering the wonder of the ordered creation that God has made.

But the Church was not comfortable with the shift. In an effort to hold back the scientific revolution Galileo was forced to recant his observation that the earth rotated around the sun, and was placed under "house arrest" for the rest of his life. But the modern world and science could not be held back, and the relationship between science and religion began to deteriorate. A sun-centered solar system meant that the earth and human beings were not the center of creation. Newton's physics meant that creation operated on laws of nature, and not the direct, personal activity of God. Life became more and more about material things that could be measured, and less about spirit. Truth became more about reason, and less about revelation. With Charles Darwin's On the Origin of the Species in the mid-19th C the relationship between religion and science had become like feuding families only talking at each other to exchange insults.

But over the last 25 years, or more, things are shifting again. There is a growing humility to science, as it is recognized that there is mystery and truth beyond the scientific method of discovery (i.e. much like there are sound waves beyond our ability to hear). And there is a greater openness in religion, as theology expands to consider the mysteries that science has revealed. Science asks "how?" and religion asks "what it means?" when we consider the vastness of a 15 billion year old universe, the mysteries of our mind and consciousness, and the strangeness of quantum mechanics when a particle smaller than an atom exists for an instant, and then disappears, and then reappears again. The 21st C has pulled back a curtain of wonder and beauty to the creation, and some theologians and scientists are talking to each other. Science and religion do ask different questions, have different methods, and illumine different mysteries. But in a conversation they also correct the worst excesses in the other. As Pope Paul II said, "Science purifies religion from error and superstition." "And religion purifies science from prideful idolatry and false absolutes." And as Albert Einstein commented, "Science without religion is lame, and religion without science is blind."

Fortunately we are entering a time when more theologians and scientists are talking to each other.

IV. Religion and Science

But as the 21st C dawns we live in a time when the prevailing view continues to be that religion and science are in conflict with each other, or at best have a type of “truce” as they explore the explain different aspects of life. One of the unfortunate aspects of this is that people come to believe that they have to choose between science or religion as a basic source of knowledge for understanding and living life (i.e. So there is a creationist museum that opened in 2007 in Petersburg, Kentucky, built on the belief that the creation is only 6,000 years old, and that everything in Genesis should be taken as literally true. And so Richard Dawkins will argue in his book, The God Delusion, that it is not possible today to be a scientific thinker and hold religious beliefs.) Both positions are ridiculous. Gladly the choices are better and more interesting than these.

Historically the relationship between science and religion has been either: Imperialist, or the “at war” view, which believes there is a complete conflict between religion and science, with each seeking power over the other. In this view religion seeks to have science conform to its more literal reading of the Bible, and science seeks to reduce and define all of life to materialism that can be studied by the scientific method. In this view science and religion battle with each other for one piece of ground they call truth.

Dualist, or the “we live in different worlds” view, which is the most common view today. This view understands science and theology as two total separate fields of study, asking completely different questions, using different methods, and not able to talk to each other. Generally science asks “how does this happen?” and theology asks “what does it mean?” Each claims to speak for different truths, and there is no conversation between them. And often, because our scientific knowledge is greater than our theological knowledge, we reduce religion to an expression of personal piety, and believe it has little place in public discourse.

Interactionist, or “let’s have a conversation” view, which is the emerging view, and believes that while theology and science are separate fields of study, there is some overlap and places for conversation. Historically there has been more interaction between science and religion than we may be led to understand. The religious values of reason, truth and the goodness of the creation for study were the context for the rise of science in Western Europe. And it’s no accident that many of the early scientists

were also Christians and theologians. The deep mysteries and wonders that science is increasingly uncovering in the fields of astrophysics, biology and quantum mechanics invite conversations with theology and philosophy.

As followers of Jesus, and people of Christian faith, we need not be afraid of science, nor think we have to choose between science and faith. As I learned years ago, "All truth is God's truth." We can say "yes" to religion, and "yes" to science. As Psalm 19 suggests, there is a place for the revelation of God in the wonder and beauty of creation. And as the Psalm goes on, there is a place for the revelation of the God in words of the Bible. And as the story from John 9 tells us, there is a place for the revelation of God in our experiences with Jesus Christ.

(Show Eagle Nebula, "Pillars of Creation")

Science invites us to a place of wonder and awe.....and for believers to a place where there are hints of the sacred, and hints of the nature and character of God.