



Worksheet 14: Science & Faith

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.
Psalm 19:1-4 (NRSV)



Science and faith in conflict?

People sometimes speak of science and faith as if they are irreconcilable. It is thought that if you have faith, you must reject science; and conversely, if you accept science, you must reject faith.

The Uniting Church does not think of the relationship between science and faith in this way. According paragraph 11 of the Basis of Union:

... the Uniting Church enters into the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry which has characterised recent centuries, and gives thanks for the knowledge of God's ways with humanity which are open to an informed faith.

Is faith irrational?

One popular reason for thinking that science and faith are irreconcilable is as follows: science has a rational basis, whereas faith does not. Science relies on evidence for its claims, whereas faith, by its very nature, cannot take evidence into account.

This reason assumes that faith is essentially blind. It implies that the Christian belief in the Trinitarian God is simply a matter of closing our eyes, crossing our fingers, and hoping for the best!

Christians do not need to understand faith in this way. The Church has often understood faith as something that begins with an act of trust, but does not end there. Rather, the wisdom in this initial act of trust is gradually revealed over the course of a life of discipleship. As the Psalmist says, 'O taste and see that the LORD is good' (34:8).

The Basis of Union echoes the Psalmist's sentiments. In paragraph 3, it affirms that people are called by the Spirit to 'trust in God as their Father', but also adds that the faith of God's people will be nourished and enriched 'on the way', through the Word, the Sacraments, and the gift of the Spirit.



This sheet is part of a series on theology in the 21st century. It is prepared for the Assembly by the Working Group on Doctrine as a discussion starter for small groups, in congregations, faith communities or other settings. It may also be used for personal reflection. Low resolution copies of this sheet can be downloaded free of charge from the Doctrine website: www.assembly.uca.org.au/cudw

Quotes

"Theology is the science of faith . . . It is however not something irrational . . . It means that the knowledge with which this science is occupied is not knowledge that we ourselves can acquire, but knowledge that requires complete participation and devotion, and only so comes to us." – Gerben J. Stavenga (theologian)

"One can as little compare the biblical creation story and a scientific theory like that of evolution as one can compare, shall we say, an organ and a vacuum-cleaner" – Karl Barth (theologian)

"Faith tells us what the senses cannot, but it is not contrary to their findings. It simply transcends, without contradicting them." – Blaise Pascal (mathematician, physicist, writer).

"I was merely thinking God's thoughts after him." - attributed to Johannes Kepler (astronomer).

Questions

What has been your experience of the interaction between science and faith?

In the light of what you have read, how do you respond to the quotes above?

How would you describe the relationship between science and faith?

Further Reading

Thomas Dixon, *Science and Religion: A Very Short Introduction*

Michael Doud, *Thank God for Evolution*

Peter Harrison (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion*

Alister E. McGrath, *Surprised by Meaning: Science, Faith and How We Make Sense of Things*

Ronald L. Numbers, *Galileo Goes to Jail and other Myths about Science and Religion*

John Polkinghorne, *The Polkinghorne Reader: Science, Faith and the Search for Meaning*

David Wilkinson, *Reading Genesis after Darwin*

Creation and Evolution

The theory of evolution is sometimes thought to be incompatible with the Christian faith, for at least three reasons. First, evolution tells us that the world did not come into existence in six days, as the first chapter of Genesis states. Second, Christians believe that God created the world, whereas evolution provides a godless account of existence. Third, some people claim that evolution tells us that all life on earth exists as a result of 'chance', whereas Christians believe that the world exists as a result of God's intentional act of creation.

The first of these reasons relies on a misunderstanding of the genre of Genesis. It contains two creation stories: the six-day creation narrative (1:1-2:4); and the Garden of Eden narrative (2:5-3:24). The primary purpose of these stories was not to provide a scientific account of the origins of the universe, but to witness to the relationship between creation and its Creator. In the context of a world where the great majority of human beings were subjugated by a few, Genesis affirms that all human beings are created in the image of God (1:27).

The second and third reasons rely on a misinterpretation of the theory of evolution. While evolution holds that the world has developed over time in accordance with scientific laws, Christians confess that God is the creator of the world and its accompanying scientific laws. This means that life is not simply a matter of 'chance', but has been invested with meaning and value by a good God.



The Value of Science

In the Nicene and Apostles' Creed, Christians confess that God is the maker of both heaven and earth. This means that the physical world which we inhabit is a good world – that is to say land and water, mountains and oceans, plants and animals, and not least human bodies, are all extraordinarily valuable. In fact, the first chapter of Genesis uses the word 'good' ten times to describe creation!

The Christian belief in the importance of our physical selves has helped form a longstanding Christian tradition of valuing medicine and the use of scientific knowledge for healing purposes. It led the early church to construct hospitals throughout the Roman Empire. Importantly, the church made these hospitals available not only to fellow Christians, but to people everywhere in need of healing.

For Christians, however, the value of scientific study goes beyond its usefulness to human beings, and even other living creatures. It is an act of devotion that brings us closer into relationship with God. Just as the study of artworks may nourish our love for the artist, so also the study of creation may nourish our love of its Creator.



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