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Idaho Common Sense™



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Science or religion - must we choose?

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Have scientific discoveries proved theology false? Has theology proved that science cannot be trusted? More important, is either of these questions appropriate? Must we side with one or the other? Recent discussions in the Idaho State Journal and other publications suggest this is precisely what some people believe.

Some scientists are convinced you must check your brain at the door when you enter a place of worship. To the contrary, the church is a wonderful place to challenge, to question, to debate. I have many questions for my Pastor, some we come to agreement on, others we do not. Does that diminish my belief in God? Does that diminish my ability to understand scientific truths? Not at all. A religious belief system is not a rejection of science, a replacement for science, or a competitor of science. Rather, it explains what science cannot.

Arthur Peacocke, professor of biochemistry at Cambridge University and an Anglican priest said, "Many biologists, certainly in my own country (England), grow up feeling that if you are going to be a biologist you must show that you have a prejudice against religion." Is this attitude appropriate? I would suggest scientists should have open minds concerning God in relationship to the world precisely because of their science, not despite it. Conversely, those with religious beliefs need not fear scientific proofs and truths. In my case, the more science discovers and explains, the more complexities science unravels, and the more we learn about the previously unknown; the more science enhances my faith.

Never the less, how should a college professor teaching evolution respond when students ask if evolution and theology are contradictory? Some claim this question, if asked in a science classroom, should be dismissed as

inappropriate. They believe theology has no place in a science discussion. Is there or should there be a place for theology in the science classroom? U.S. District Judge John E. Jones ruled there is "overwhelming evidence" that intelligent design "is a religious view . . . and not scientific theory," agreeing that science and theology belong in different departments.

Still, how should a college professor handle these student's questions? Francisco Ayala, professor of biology at the University of California Irvine, said these questions occur in every class he teaches on evolution. Further, he does not dismiss their questions as inappropriate. Instead, he "treats these students with the great respect they deserve . . . because a scientific view of the world is hopelessly incomplete, unable to answer those questions of value, purpose, or meaning." He is comfortable with students having their own belief system, whatever it may be, while maintaining the integrity of his science. He does not feel threatened by their questions. This is understanding. This is tolerance. He is using a very kind approach to help his students through an uncomfortable, difficult situation. He is teaching science, not theology; but, he is doing so without demeaning theology, considering it insignificant, or claiming it is unintelligent. More important, he is dealing with their sincere questions with sensitivity rather than dismissal.

Would understanding improve if both sides stopped looking down on the other from a self-proclaimed perch of perfection, out-of-hand dismissing the other? Blinders and tunnel vision are dangerous. To those with religious beliefs, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz said, "If you know someone who says the Throne of God is empty, and lives with that, then you should cling to that person as a good, strong friend. But be careful. Almost everyone who says that

has already placed something or someone else on the Throne, usually themselves."

Research suggests most people on either side of this issue are respectful of the other's views. It's just that the fringes are so much more vocal. I suspect more people than I would anticipate see little or no contradiction between science and theology. Could the reality be that neither need feel threatened by the other because they are not contradictory, rather they are complimentary? Robert Pollack, professor of biological sciences at Columbia University said, "The singular moment of creation instantaneously is, in fact, a miraculous event outside the laws of science as we understand them."

Can the fringes, the extremes, be educated, allowing tolerance of the other's views? As Mark Noll, professor of history at Wheaton College said, "It's not a zero-sum game, where the presence of God means the absence of things we can figure out by nature, or the things we can figure out by nature means the absence of God." To those scientists who claim that science will eventually explain all there is to know about our world and the universe, Professor Ayals says, "in matters of value and purpose science has nothing to say."

My personal view. Science, with its ever increasing complexity and its ever expanding understanding, continuously reveals the perfection of a Creator.

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