

Science and Religion: The James Webb Space Telescope and Our Evolving Ideas

About God

Psalm 19: 1-7

How should we think about the relationship of science and religion? And how do the findings of science affect our ideas about God?

For example, the James Webb Space Telescope. It provides pictures of the universe that extend farther and are clearer than the Hubble Telescope or any telescope before. The pictures of the universe it has captured are breathtakingly beautiful. They fill us with wonder. The expanse of space boggles our minds. Can our ideas about God catch up with what our eyes can now see?

The telescope is showing us what one called “the baby pictures of the universe”. Some of these pictures are making scientists rethink theories about the Big Bang and the timetable of the beginning of the universe. One astrophysicist said recently that the universe is 90% dark matter, matter our eyes cannot penetrate. *Living the Questions* certainly speaks to our knowledge of space.

Over the centuries of Christian history, Science and Religion have had a fractious relationship. Are they opposed to each other? Need they be? Can they be partners in the search for truth?

Unfortunately, often the Church has opposed the findings of science because of the threat that those findings might contradict the Bible or Church Doctrine. Galileo's findings that the earth revolved around the sun, rather than the sun around the earth, were condemned by the church. Not until the 21st century did the Church apologize for its persecution of Galileo.

In America, the fiercest battle between religion and science was over evolution. The battle still rages. In the early 20th century, it split denominations and spawned the rise of modern fundamentalism. An unexpected and alarming trend today among American Christians, primarily Evangelicals, has been a new wave of science denial, including medical science.

But science can sometimes overstep its own domain of expertise with a *scientism* that denies all truths except those in its own realm. On the relationship of science and religion, Wendell Berry writes:

There is no reason, as I hope and believe, that science and religion might not live together in amity and peace, so long as they both acknowledge their real differences and each remains within its own competence. Religion, that

is, should not attempt to dispute what science has actually proved; and science should not claim to know what it does not know.

Another way to put it: Science cannot prove or disprove the existence of God, and religion cannot determine the age of the universe.

Stephen Jay Gould, Harvard paleontologist and evolutionary biologist, describes the realms of science and religion and their relationship with each other with what he has named “Non-overlapping Magisteria”. It has its own acronym: NOMA. It says that each realm has its own domain of knowing, seeking and teaching the truth. And they do not overlap.

Another way of expressing it is to say that science and religion ask two different sets of questions. Science asks When and How. Religion asks Why, the question of meaning and purpose.

III

When I was teaching religion at Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, an HBCU, the President called me into his office seeking help. The new Science Building was about to be finished. It sat next to the University Chapel. He asked if I would come up with twelve quotations or sayings concerning the positive relationship of science and religion that could be inscribed on flat stones along the path between the Chapel and the Science Building. “What a great project”, I

thought, and dove in. I sent the twelve in, but the project was never completed. I suppose they ran out of time and money. Our reader's choir read these sayings to you. I want to roll them out again with my comments. Then we will have conversation.

I

**The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims
God's handiwork. Psalm 19:1**

This psalm, which we read together earlier, is a poetic rendering of praise based on the cosmology of the time, a three storied universe, sky, earth and water underneath the earth. The sun streaks from one end of the sky to the other. God has placed in the heavens a tent for the sun, who comes forth from it as a bridegroom every morning. Theology, cosmology and poetry are a harmonic whole.

II

**The gods did not reveal, from the beginning, all things to us, but in the
course of time through seeking we may learn and know things better.
*Xenophanes (Greek Philosopher 6th c. BCE)***

What an adventure God has set us humans on, to learn and know more and more as we seek the truth of all things!

III

Truth is one, and people call it by different names.

Rig Veda (Hindu Scriptures)

Here is the profound truth taught in many religions. God is one, reality is one, truth is one. We know it by different names.

IV

You must accept the truth from whatever source it comes.

Maimonides (Jewish Philosopher, 1138-1204)

The greatest Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages, still revered, taught that the truth of all things could be found and that we must live our lives by it, no matter where the truth comes from.

V

We know the truth, not only by reason, but by the heart.

Blaise Pascal (French scientist and philosopher, 1623-1662)

This French scientist, mathematician and philosopher is best known for his collected sayings called *Pensées*, or Thoughts. He believed that the heart has its own deep realm of truth. His most familiar saying is: “The heart has its reasons the mind knows not of.” Rationality alone is not enough. Religion helps uncover the wisdom of the heart.

VI

**I was merely thinking God's thoughts after him.
Since we astronomers are priests of the highest God in regard to the
book of nature, it befits us to be thoughtful, not of the glory of our
minds, but rather, above all else, the glory of God.**

Johannes Kepler (German Astronomer, 1571-1630)

Is the search for truth, all kinds of truth, a kind of priesthood? Are we all in this pursuit together, thinking God’s thoughts after God?

VII

**Let no man...think or maintain that a man can be too well studied in
the book of God's word or in the book of God's works...but rather let
men endeavor on endless progress or proficience in both.**

***Francis Bacon (English Philosopher 1561-1626) (Printed opposite the
title page of Charles Darwin's *On The Origin Of Species*)***

I love the idea of the double calling to be proficient in both God's word and God's works. Also most interesting to me is that this quote was printed opposite the title page of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*.

VIII

Subtle is the Lord, but malicious He is not...Nature hides her secrets not by means of ruse, but because of her essential loftiness.

Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.

Commented [S1]:

The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science.

Albert Einstein (German-American Physicist, 1879-1955)

Here are three sayings which capture the scientific, mystical mind of Einstein.

Of the first quote, "Subtle is the Lord", there are many Christians today who still believe in the "New Earth Theory", which is part of what they call Creationism. The earth, they say, was created in 4004 B.C.E. They believe that the fossils and geologic evidence scientists have found that disputes this theory were placed there by God, who wanted to test our faith. Subtle is the Lord, but a trickster God is not!

A noted Jewish scholar, Arthur Green, writes that evolution itself is a sacred story, alongside the Genesis creation accounts, not opposed to it.

IX

Less and less do I see any difference between research and adoration.
Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (French Paleontologist and Theologian, 1881-1955)

Here is the French paleontologist whose incorporation of evolution into his theology provoked the Church to send him off to China, where he helped discover the Peking Man, evidence of the earliest human to date. Teilhard de Chardin's theology proposed that the human race was progressing toward what he called the Omega Point of full personhood.

X

Both science and religion are needed to interpret and understand the rich, varied, and surprising way the world actually is.
John Polkinghorne (English Physicist and Priest, 1930-2021)

Polkinghorne was an award-winning theologian on the relationship of science and religion, a relationship is beautifully summarized by this quote.

XI

Science investigates; religion interprets. Science gives man knowledge which is power; religion gives man wisdom, which is control. Science deals mainly with facts; religion deals mainly with values. The two are not rivals. They are complementary.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (American Minister and Activist, 1929-1968)

King's description of the complementary roles of science and religion was one largely accepted in his day.

XII

You shall know the truth and the truth will make you free.

Jesus, John 8:32

You knew I'd end up with Jesus. We can run from the truth, deny the truth—about the world and about ourselves—but when we know it, as best we can as humans, it sets us free.

A key question for the church today is: Will we be a reality-based, truth-based religion?

If I were to add one of my own, a thirteenth saying, it would be this:

Seek the truth wherever it leads, without fear—scientific truth, spiritual truth, moral truth, historical truth—all of it, for God is the author of all truth and seeking to lead us into its light.

Amen

