



Readings II in Faith & Science

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An Intellectual Gap

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An Intellectual Gap

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Is it a fact that the beliefs with which scientists view their work and creation are very much set by the time they begin their scientific studies? This certainly cannot be a universal statement (touching every scientist), but it seems that, at least in the hard sciences, it is generally accurate. According to my experience in a university setting, the “humane sciences” (psychology, sociology, anthropology) function as much as a religion as a science. These reflections are less true of the humane scientists, many of whom seem to undergo a “religious conversion” as they enter into their science. A sociologist once told me that he thinks that the humane sciences are as close as people can get to a religion without God. I don’t know whether to agree or not.

I have been trained to the scientific method as rigorously as any other scientist. My love for science is as deep as anyone else’s. I can look at the results of science and the reality they model and rejoice in the Providence that has given them to us and set us in the only time when we can be who we are. There is no necessity that sends me to investigate Chance as the origin and mechanism behind everything I sense around me.

I would certainly be different if I had been born 10 or 20 years earlier or later than I was. Barring the miracle that would have speeded up or delayed the meeting of a specific sperm with a specific egg, I could be born only when I was -- one maternal cycle in the history of the universe. But even with that miracle which would have brought together that egg and that sperm 20 years earlier or later, I still would not be who I am. This is simply a complicated way of saying that we, each of us, is a product of nature and nurture, of our genetic structure and our environment. Each of us is a personal link between the history of human existence and its present expression in the contemporary world.

Why are so many scientists convinced that there is no God, no providence, no direction, no finality in the world? This is a question I wrestle with from time to time. I have yet to come up with a definite comprehensive answer; I think I can mention a few of the strands that make up the atheistic tapestry of “modern science.”

One is a reaction, I think, to the sterile a priorism of much of late medieval philosophical thinking. If you wonder what I’m talking about, you might read, or reread, *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco. The kind of thinking indulged in by the very radical wing of the “Spiritual Franciscans,” the cabalists, the dedicated numerologists (the Pythagoreans of that day) and others did little to encourage any realism with regard to the world that actually existed.

Another strand, of course, is a terribly human tendency to be at home in a specific worldview, with a specific model of reality. The Ptolemaic model of the universe was a powerful tool for dealing with the observed world and for over a thousand years it answered all the questions that human curiosity could put to it. I am willing to bet that the Copernican model will not last that long -- that’s certainly a safe bet, at least from the standpoint that I won’t be around to be proved wrong. But the academic community of the late 16th and early 17th centuries was at home with the philosophy of nature that was rooted in Ptolemy and Aristotle.

Another element in the basic skeptical stance of contemporary science, which can talk about Chance as if it really existed, is Voltaire’s enormous propaganda skill. He and his associates used the burgeoning “modern science” as

a club with which to batter the authority structure of his day, the monarchy and the Church. It was Voltaire, along with others, who essentially developed the myth of the gallant Galileo standing against the obscurantist church and civil order. The intellectual rigidity of the French clergy played into his hands. The French clergy of the time was intellectually non-adventurous. Thus, modern science became identified with the Enlightenment search for a strictly rational solution to all human problems. It represented the apotheosis of the “rational man” unencumbered by superstition and not distorted by mal-education.

These are only some of factors involved in the intellectual gap between scientists and the Church. Politics and nationalism and other factors are also present. The fact that some quite excellent scientists have absolutely no problem seeing the providential hand of God in the universe should alert us to the idea that it is not science itself that demands atheism or agnosticism. In brief one can be (and many are) both an excellent Christian and great scientists. Pierre Duhem, among a veritable host of others, is a prime example. It is also helpful to remember that, for better or worse, Newton considered himself to be a theologian. Also it would be instructive to read about James Clerk Maxwell’s (one of the greatest physicists of all time) understanding of being a Christian.

That one can be a good Christian and a first-rate scientist is a commonplace to us in the Church, but many Catholic scientists inform me that it is not always accepted in academic and industrial scientific circles. In the milieu in which these people work, it is widely accepted that one cannot be a good scientist and a believing, practicing Christian. That’s part of the Enlightenment mythology in which these critics of the Church were and are steeped.

What can be done about it? Nothing can be done in a speedy fashion. There is no quick fix that I can see. One thing that would help would be a greater interest in and understanding of real science (and of the “true” faith) in Catholic schools. I am often frustrated by an attitude among highly educated Catholics: “I don’t know anything about science.” The implication of this statement is usually: “I’m not going to learn anything about it.” I find this attitude even among university faculty and administrators. I have found it among some who are recognized as very prestigious theologians and philosophers. Well, this translates into: “I’m not interested in a major (if not the major) cultural force in the world today.” I find that difficult to reconcile with a Catholic stance toward reality.

We can start with the natural curiosity of young Catholics in our schools. We should (I’m willing to say *must*) satisfy that curiosity with good scientific training and with motivation to pursue it as a good thing in itself and as a prime area for evangelization and even worship. We should at the same time teach the Catholic faith together with explaining the openness of that faith to the world. I was lucky personally to have had that kind of a Catholic education 50 years ago -- not the kind dear to writers and playwrights whose attention and memory seems focused on patent leather shoes.

Perhaps I’m wrong about the catechesis of the last 25 years, but it seems to me that we have by and large failed to transmit to younger Catholics the richness of the doctrinal tradition. I am running into young people who think the church teaches that the world has no value. This shocks me. What surprises me less is that so many of them have been taught that the world is sacred, with a sacredness that goes far beyond anything taught in Christian understanding. Neither, of course, is true. The problem is that so many think it is true.

Christianity teaches neither that the world is useless nor that it is sacred. The world is sacramental, pointing to the final state of creation in God and being a part of that final state.

We can do little of permanent value in the faith/science area if we do not encourage careers in science in our young people, especially because it is an excellent way to fulfill our baptismal mandate as children of God and teach the splendor of the faith as suitably as possible.

Getting back to the notion of God’s Providence, I suggest that Advent is an excellent time to reflect on and preach to others of the loving care that God manifested in the preparation for his becoming one of us in the Incarnation. Fr. Joseph Fitzmyer, a noted scripture scholar, used to delight in teaching about the four women mentioned in Jesus’ genealogy. He noted that one committed incest (Tamar), one was a prostitute (Rahab), one a pagan (Ruth)

and the fourth an adultress (Bathsheba). Yet each contributed to the body of the Lord Jesus Christ. That, perhaps more than anything, suggests the loving Providence of God, his loving hand in tying our Savior to our weaknesses and our sins.

I suspect that there's no need to mention David's lust or Solomon's follies in discussing the family history of the Son of Man. He is like us in that not one of us is with an unblemished heritage. Boaz had to marry the pagan Ruth and David had to join in an adulterous union with Bathsheba for the Son of God to become Jesus of Nazareth. I am not denying Boaz's or David's free will nor am I talking about metaphysical necessity. But for the history of salvation to lead to Jesus of Nazareth these things had to have happened for the Christ to be who he actually was. Christ's genetic history and the history of Israel is what it is because of David and Boaz and all the other sinners mentioned.

As I have grown older, I have become more careful in saying what God can and cannot do. That's appropriate since I am neither infallible nor omniscient. As best we know, God's provident hand had abundant room for Rahab and Tamar and Ruth and Bathsheba. God's hand had the patience to allow the race to mature enough so that Jesus was born at the fitting time, a concept put forth by theologians who could not even guessed about the physical fittingness of the time. We owe our understanding of physical fittingness to our scientific advances. We know now from advances in the life sciences that God became man at the only time when Jesus of Nazareth could have been born, barring a miracle that totally ignored the history of the Jewish people.

There are many things that the Faith can learn from science. Young Christians should be told how appropriate training and a life in science can help the Church grow in her understanding of God and his activity and are in fact an excellent form of our worship of God. But for the history of salvation to lead to Jesus of Nazareth these things had to have happened for the Christ to be who he actually was.

Far from being a conflict between science and faith, there is an important linkage. It is up to us in the Church to bring this out into the light of day.

Questions

How can we, as bench scientists, humanists, theologians, etc., help to bridge the purported "gap" between science and religion? Is it true that: "One cannot be a good scientist and a believing, practicing Christian"? Why? Why not? Often overheard at meetings from people in education: "I don't know anything about science..." (with the implied..." and I don't want to learn"). What does that statement say about the opportunity for cooperation between science and other academic disciplines?

Can we "put a man of the moon" using the Ptolemaic model of the heavens? Discuss this possibility.

What did Nominalism in the late Middle Ages contribute to the rise of modern Science? Did it encourage the realism necessary to do science?

Although we like to think what it might be like to live in past or in the future, is it really possible? Will it ever be really possible? Yet isn't each one of us a potential link between our personal past and the future? What might this mean for the future of the human race?

Discuss how politics, nationalism and other factors play an important role in the relationship between faith and science.

Does Christianity teach that the world is useless in our salvation? Does it teach that the world is sacred? What does sacramentalism imply? Does sacramentalism point to the future state of creation? Is it part of that future? Does Christianity teach that we will rise from the dead recognizably ourselves? Would we recognize ourselves without the singularities produced in and by the body?

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