

When I in Awesome Wonder Consider: Relying on Science to Preach about Faith

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In each church every week, there sits someone who trusts greatly in God and who relies heavily on science. There is someone who prays deeply to her Lord and who deeply hopes in the science behind her cancer treatments. There is someone who sees the Holy Spirit's signature in the great outdoors and who researches new technologies to help him be a better steward of creation. In each church there are compassionate Christians who employ the latest techniques devised by scientists to provide clean water, feed the hungry, repair eyes with lasers, respond to disasters, and communicate across the globe. If you have ever emailed a prayer request to another Christian, read your church newsletter online, or researched your sermon on your cell phone, then you are relying on scientific advances people hardly dreamed of a generation ago. What would be the effect if we preachers relied on science *inside* our sermons to speak to those in the pews who both trust in God and rely on science? Nancey Murphy, a leading scholar of science and religion, urges preachers to do just that — to strengthen their communication of the gospel by becoming familiar with scientific thinking, models, and language.¹

At first glance, this may seem like a peculiar plea because so many people assume that the fields of science and theology are poles apart. The popular assumption, frequently fueled by media accounts, is that “Science” and “Religion” are locked in an epic contest against each other, constantly battling for the hearts and minds of the public. Indeed, almost every year, usually around Christmas and Easter, the major US news outlets publish stories about how science has revealed “the truth” behind some element of Christian belief. Also appearing with predictable frequency are the articles and books by activist atheists who are as narrowly fundamentalist in their views about science as some of the faithful are in their religion. For these militant materialists, science is their religion, and they exclude any other methods of describing reality and searching for truth. The real truth, however, as Murphy and many others have shown, is that science and religion are not the monolithic combatants that they have been portrayed to be, and Christian theology (and the preaching of it) should be enhanced through knowledge gained by science. While it is true that on any given Sunday the preacher must contend with the voices of scientific materialists who have been whispering in parishioners' ears during the week, the capable preacher will be able to respond by helpfully using science in service of the gospel. After a half-century of intense dialogue between scientifically-minded theologians and Christian-believing scientists, we see the many ways in which science and theology are allies, not enemies, in addressing questions about God, human nature, origins of the universe, providence, the functioning of world, love, forgiveness, and many more areas of thought and belief. Every preacher would greatly extend his or her homiletical reach if we were to rely on ideas and concepts revealed through science as we preach the theology of our faith.

Ian Barbour has dedicated his illustrious career to aiding both scientists and

theologians in their understandings of each others' fields, and he provides four instructive categories through which we assess the relationship between science and theology: (1) conflict, (2) independence, (3) dialogue, and (4) integration.² The category of *conflict* involves fundamentalist approaches on either side, and the result is just what one would imagine, much disagreement and mutual disdain from science toward theology and vice versa. On one side of the battle field stands the camp of scientists who believe that all theology is fictional mythology and that the only accurate view of reality is through materialist lenses. The only thing that matters is matter – that which can be touched, observed, or measured – and the only method of experiencing reality is through the five senses. It stands to reason, then, that scientific observation is the only reliable path to knowledge, and any other methods, especially those of faith (like prayer), are flawed and will produce a false conclusion. To materialists, the world emerged by sheer chance and is governed by randomness on a daily basis. Anything that exists can be explained by reducing it to a molecular level, and any attempt to attach meaning to molecules is ridiculous. Each person, therefore, is merely a complex grouping hierarchical chemical and biological systems whose component parts function together as a whole – and nothing more. Across the fence from strict materialists are fundamentalist Christians, who hastily criticize any conclusion of science which contradicts a worldview based on a Biblical literalism. Fundamentalist Christians stir up conflict toward science around issues like creation and evolution, excluding any views incompatible with the Genesis creation stories and reacting harshly against any suggestion of randomness in a universe ruled by a supremely sovereign God.³ Fundamentalist Christians are glad to take up the gauntlet thrown down by fundamentalist scientists in their defense of "The Truth."

In the *independence* model of relating science and theology, the two fields rarely conflict with each other because they involve different spheres of influence and rarely have contact. They ask and answer such divergent questions that there is no need for them to conflict. Each camp acknowledges the other's right to exist, but they see no benefit of traffic between them. Science analyzes the materialist functioning of life, while theology involves the spiritual. Theology deals with questions of value and meaning while science deals with mechanical data. A consequence of this view is that reality is compartmentalized into different domains, and science addresses questions about some areas and theology others, and they rarely, if ever, overlap.

In the *dialogue* model, we begin to see the ice thaw between science and theology to the point where they enjoy mutual benefits. Talking to each other, scientists and theologians interact with genuine curiosity toward what the other has to say and how it might influence their own knowledge. Science and theology engage in dialogue as they examine each other's methodology and delineate their own philosophical assumptions. The role of the observer in both fields is noted, with scientists in particular acknowledging that there is no absolute objectivity in the advancement of ideas. Even in the "hard" sciences, one's perspective often influences the conclusion reached. In dialogue the scientist and the theologian consider how the whole of any system is greater than parts and what it means. A *theological* anthropology sheds light on what it means to be a human being. The tiniest elements of the smallest cells that unite into the tissues that comprise the organs, nerves, bones, and brain of the body all function as parts of the whole, yet the whole is more than the sum of its parts. The health of the whole person is dependent upon the proper functioning of the constituent

parts from the bottom of the system to the top, and yet, at the same time, the whole can affect the constituent parts in a top-down manner. While humans cannot have a mind without a brain, the mind is not reducible to the tissues of the brain. When it comes to the vast systems that comprise the human person, the world, and the universe, scientists and theologians in dialogue inform each other's views on how the constituent parts affect the whole and vice-versa.⁴ Theologians possess a better grasp of the complex, interworking systems in and around us, and scientists remain open to purposes above and beyond the physical and material. Theologians recognize that scientists offer analogies for how God is involved with the world, and scientists appreciate the potentialities for divine action both immanently within and transcendently above the natural systems of the world without overwhelming them or violating their operations.

In the *integration* model, scientists and theologians forge a close partnership with the intent of building an extensive metaphysical system that incorporates observations of both fields, usually resulting, however, in the restatement of some aspects of Christian doctrine. A common conceptual framework such as process philosophy is used to interpret both scientific and theological ideas. The Anthropic Principle is one familiar and popular example of the integration of science and theology.⁵ Physicists postulate that life in our world would never have been possible if the expansion rate or temperature of matter just seconds after the Big Bang had been different by fractional amounts. Therefore, they conclude with the help of theologians, that the universe is "fine-tuned" for life by an intelligent source.⁶ There is a divine wisdom behind creation that makes it intelligible to rational beings. Within the integration model, theologians would add to a scientific theory of evolution that slow-moving processes are the means through which God creates and sustains (and ends?) species of life.

Barbour's models are helpful in providing the preacher with the terms through which he or she may begin to address the relationship between science and theology. Using the dialogue method especially, we find that science offers the preacher helpful analogies to describe God's ways of interacting with the world. With this dialogue model in mind Pope John Paul II said, "Science can purify religion from error and superstition; religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes. Each can draw the other into a wider world, a world in which both can flourish."⁷

There are several very practical reasons why it makes good sense to engage science in preaching. The first reason is to reach out to the skeptics among us and to open up for them new routes to God. Every congregation contains its number of devoted doubters, those who show up, who volunteer to serve, and who even want to follow Christ, but who cannot fully immerse themselves in discipleship "for scientific reasons." They resonate with the words of the father in Mark 9 who said, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" In the first church I served, the devoted doubter's name was John, and he sat on the far side of the sanctuary against the wall. He crossed his arms and furrowed his brows frequently during our worship services. He stood during the hymns, but he would not sing. He looked up during the Apostles' Creed, but he would not speak. Nevertheless, he came to church every week. He explained that he appreciated the goodness of Christian morality – of love, honesty, and forgiveness over sin, deceit, and violence. He had a heart for people who struggled through life. He could not, however, move beyond the notion that believing in a personal God

meant contradicting scientific methods and empirical knowledge. In private moments, with uncrossed arms and an unclenched face, he remarked to me: "I wish I could believe what you say, but doesn't science disprove religion?"

John's attitude toward faith changed one day when I quoted in my sermon from the physicist-theologian John Polkinghorne and mentioned The Society of Ordained Scientists, a group of professional scientists who are also Anglican ministers. The group's logo consists of a cross surrounded by a DNA helix, symbolizing the group's intertwined commitments. For some reason John had never seriously considered that there are professional scientists who are also professing Christians, and he had never heard a preacher offer the congregation resources for those who think like he does. Scientific thinkers and their ideas, when related to theology, will prick the ears of those who are unwilling to commit to God "for scientific reasons." Dropping the name of a scientist-theologian into one's sermon will stir up the curiosity of the skeptics, opening their minds and hearts to God's activity in the world and in their lives.

Another benefit of engaging the science-religion dialogue is the expansion of one's vocabulary and descriptive powers when it comes to portraying the richness of God's activity in the world and in human lives. We fortify our interpretation of a biblical passage when we allude to related knowledge gained through science. For example, the Bible speaks in beautifully poetic language about the wonders of creation, the complexity of the natural world, and how it all derives from God's creative hand. The ringing declaration of Psalm 19 that "the heavens declare the glory of God" is amplified in the congregation's ear when the preacher momentarily describes the multi-million year process of a star's formation, shining life, and dark disappearance. Jesus uses the splendor of the lilies of the field to illustrate God's promises to care and provide for God's people. A brief description of the profound intricacy of a single lily can be brought to this conclusion in the troubled parishioner's heart: "If God can create and care about a single flower like the lily, you cannot imagine how much more God cares about you and your struggles!" Preaching a Pentecost sermon about the disciples' miraculous, Spirit-inspired ability to communicate in many languages will be enhanced by a reference to the formation and functioning of language skills in the brain. Reading about how the mind registers speech in its translation from one language to another will add depth to our description of the Pentecost event. The preacher could begin by noting the science that relates to the story and say, "Here is where the Holy Spirit acted within the disciples' minds on Pentecost," and then he or she might infuse theology into the science by saying, "and here is why it matters...." The knowledge gained by science serves as a helpful segue to the theology and faith revealed in the text.

Science provides great insight to the preacher when it comes to matters of the heart. Brief descriptive illustrations of the science behind human relationships will help congregants understand and deal with their loved ones (and enemies) in a faithful way. For example, an interpretation of the parable of the unforgiving servant will be better if it includes material from a study on the psychology behind forgiveness. When a preacher addresses such topics as the relationship between sin and anger, he or she ought to have sorted through a few of the latest scientific studies on the causes and affects of such emotions.⁸ The same can be said about religious conversion,⁹ addictive behaviors,¹⁰ resurrection,¹¹ and so many topics. The preacher does not need the science to verify theological truth claims, yet the science adds an illustrative dimension to the

theology being proclaimed.

A final benefit of relating theology and science is also a necessity: to stay current in one's appraisal of ethical dilemmas that confront Christians regularly. Ministers cannot neglect addressing ethical problems in either their counseling or preaching, and the conversation between science and theology informs their views and consequently aids their parishioners. The science-theology dialogue offers important insight into a variety of ethical issues that ministers address often with parishioners, such as medical treatment options, reproductive dilemmas, end of life choices, questions involving genetics, stewardship, the environment, and many more. Parishioners are right to expect their pastor to be aware of technological and scientific changes and how they affect discipleship.

Carl Boberg was a young minister who took great pleasure in walking among the woods and hills of his native Sweden. His wrote poetry to describe the wonders of creation around him. His most famous poem mentions far-away worlds, stars, rolling thunder, and God's power "throughout the universe displayed." These words were put to music and became the hymn "How Great Thou Art."¹² Boberg's scientific powers of observation and love of nature informed his theology and understanding of God, and countless Christians have worshipped using his words ever since. The same spirit of worship is true for Christians today who hear science inform theology in their minister's preaching and prayers.

Notes

- 1 Nancey Murphy, "Post-Modern Apologetics: Or Why Theologians *Must* Pay Attention to Science," in *Religion and Science: History, Method, Dialogue*, ed. W. Mark Richardson & Wesley J. Wildman (New York: Routledge, 1996), 105.
- 2 Ian Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion: Enemies, Strangers, or Partners?* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2000).
- 3 Karl W. Giberson, *Saving Darwin: How to be a Christian and Believe in Evolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 43-119.
- 4 William R. Stoeger, "The Mind-Brain Problem, the Laws of Nature, and Constitutive Relationships," in *Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, ed. Michael A. Arbib, Theo C. Meyering, Nancey Murphy, & Robert John Russell (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications, 2002), 129-146.
- 5 John D. Barrow & Frank J. Tipler, *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988).
- 6 William A. Dembski, "The Design Argument," in *Science and Religion: a Historical Introduction*, ed. Gary B. Ferngren (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 339-340.
- 7 John Paul II, "Letter to Reverend George V. Coyne, S.J.," in *Origins*, v. 18, n. 23 (November 17, 1988), 378.
- 8 Thomas F. Denson, "The Angry Brain: Neural Correlates of Anger, Angry Rumination, and Aggressive Personality," *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 21, no. 4 (2009), 734-744.
- 9 A. L. Greene and Peter J. Kahn, "'Seeing Conversion Whole': Testing a Model of Religious Conversion," *Pastoral Psychology* 52, no. 3 (2004), 233-258; Paul N. Markham, *Rewired: Exploring Religious Conversion* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stack Publishers, 2007).
- 10 Peter V. Hale, "Addiction – and Rational Choice Theory," *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 34 (2010), 38-45.
- 11 Ted Peters, Robert J. Russell, and Michael Welker, eds., *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002).
- 12 Robert Morgan, *Then Sings My Soul* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 213.