

Searching for Common Ground Between Science and Faith

By Russ Colson, Feb 11, 2020--Room of Nations, Memorial Union-- Science, Religion, and Lunch Seminars (SRLS) hosted by the Northern Plains Ethics Institute

Science and Religion: DO NOT ENTER! I have certainly felt that way sometimes –not felt fully welcomed as a scientist in a community of faith—not felt fully comfortable as a person of faith among scientists.)

In the more distant past, faith and science mostly allies, with the orderliness of the natural world reflecting the orderliness and rationality of a greater being. God was seen to either inhabit that orderly universe, thus giving it orderliness, or to provide the laws by which that orderly universe operated.

But certain dissonances began to emerge, notably with the conflict between Galileo and the Catholic Church, and with the findings of evolution, and age of the earth in the late 1800s and early 1900s and particularly between Christianity and science. Kind of re-energizing in 1960s

Dissonance has developed to the point that many people of faith doubt that a person of science can be a true Christian, and many people of science see faith as an obstacle to reason.

Seemingly, One cannot enter both worlds.

People looking for pathways to unity have taken different roads. For example, one approach is to simply hold them as different ways of knowing and not worry about the seeming dissonance.

You have your truth, I have mine, let's all be friends.

Agree with the “let's all be friends” part—but the idea that truth is only personal, with no higher Truth with a capital T, is not quite compatible with science, or with most traditional views of faith.

If there is no truth, then the idea of a rational and ordered universe—a key precept of science--takes a hit, If there is no truth, then the idea that existence can have an ultimate meaning—a key precept of faith--takes a hit.

If there is no underpinning true Truth, then argument based on reason becomes meaningless, and we cease to worry about whether or not we agree with a conclusion or belief, and instead consider only whether we like a particular narrative. Relative truth is fairly popular in our world, and perhaps offers a benefit in efforts to combat polarization. It even has some significant academic support. However, there is not much support for it in the natural sciences.

I'm going to share a different approach to finding unity.

Science and faith are often seen to offer incompatible ways of knowing

What are some of the common challenges, looking at Christian faith in particular?

Observation of the natural world vs Devine revelation

Immutable natural laws vs Miraculous intervention

Ongoing change and evolution vs An unchanging God

What is Religion: A way to explain what we don't (yet) understand

Before we dive into finding common ground, I want to give you some idea of what I am meaning by faith. There are a lot of different ways of viewing religion. For example, what might be called a 'scientist's' view is to see religion as an effort to explain the universe. God, in that view, is what we use to explain what we don't yet understand.

Stephen Hawking's book, *A Brief History of Time*—as we explain more and more of our origins and the origins of the universe through science, there is less room for, and need, for God.

Neil DeGrasse Tyson—God is an ever-receding pocket of scientific ignorance

The idea being that religion, and God, primarily serve the purpose of giving us explanations for the frightening unknown.

What is Religion: A political or social institution to provide stability and power

Another view of religion is as a <read title>

This view provides lots of sources for frustration with, even opposition to, faith. I think that Religion, in this arena, has a bit of a checkered history. Source of both good and evil.

But no denying it is a significant and socially important part of faith as it has been practiced through time.

What is Religion: A cultural interaction to provide continuity and community

Another view of religion is as a <read title>

Story of Mike Michlovic- when I was a new faculty member at MSUM, one of the anthropologists, and archaeologist, commented that “you can't have a religion without ritual and sacred objects.” Certainly fit with a definition necessary for an archaeologist. You can't study an idea in someone's mind after a few thousand years have past—you can only try to infer such thoughts from objects left behind or from evidence of rituals practiced.

Didn't really fit with my internal understanding of faith, or my experience with it. Faith was an integral part of my understanding of the orderliness of the universe and what gave that universe meaning, and was only tangentially related to ritual or sacred objects. In fact, the church I grew up in rejected most ritual and all sacred objects as being "pagan" and therefore bad.

What is Religion: Body of universal principles independent of culture or society

Hindi Swami Atmarupananda spoke to this group last October: He claimed that every religion includes principles that are independent of culture. It struck me when he was speaking that this is not how most people see religion—whether a person is religious or not, their view of religion is most commonly associated with the trappings of religion—The mythologies, the sociopolitical structures, the rituals and traditions.

The idea of principles, that are often subtle, emergent, and internal, is harder to grasp. Can't illustrate with a picture—exists only in the mind—difficult to explain or portray.

As Swami Atmarupananda pointed out, it is only in this place of principle that we can begin to find common ground between faith and science. This is a view that I rather agree with and so this is the view of religion that I choose for my presentation today.

<interactive option = Think for a moment where you are on this particular classification of a spectrum of religion>

Points of Unity -- Points of Conflict--

Unity: There is an underlying truth that transcends culture

Conflict: But, how is that underlying truth discovered?

<read over title—pointing out unity and conflict ideas>

The law of gravity is not British or German or white or black, or Hindu or Christian—it applies to anyone, anywhere, --it even applies to alien beings on other worlds. We can describe it with different words, but the underpinning outcome is constrained by what really happens in the world.

To the scientist, the experimental truth of the man of Europe must match the experimental truth of the woman of Asia, which indeed must match the experimental truth of the alien from a distant star. The observational reality of the natural world acts as it acts regardless of our preconceived notions or favored preferences.

Thus, science is an absolute science, based on observations that anyone can make. It is not a 'truth' that is true for only one favored group of practitioners, but to be true at all it must be true for all.

Likewise, in faith, despite wishful thinking or trust in a false ideas, there is a belief in a truth that is greater than our own, personal, favored thoughts.

For example, submitting to higher law, and higher power, implies a belief in something greater than our own personal views.

Christian scripture notes that "hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place." implying that we may think something, but if what we think is wrong, it won't stop the consequences.

Another scripture admonishes that, "no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation." implying that that there is an ultimate and true interpretation which you may or may not have.

In Christian scripture, there is "one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." -- an absolute and universal truth, not a god of my village, or of one part of the earth—one mountain or sea--, or even of one religion.

Thus, like in science, there is an ultimate truth, a higher idea that transcends our ideas.

Now, the belief that there is an absolute truth, universal for all of us, is not at all the same thing as the belief that I, uniquely, have that truth. It's on this point that the unity often falls apart. Both science and faith, and Christian faith and other faiths, may come to different views of what that truth is, and may even use different methodologies and underpinning assumptions to try to investigate that truth.

But the belief that there is a Truth with a capital T should at least put us on the same team in looking for it.

Points of Unity -- Points of Conflict

Unity: Finding truth is a work in progress

Conflict: But what about rigidity of belief?

That brings us to our next points of unity and conflict.

In both science and faith, finding truth is a work in progress.

Scientific exploration calls us to test pre-existing notions, recognizing that we may not have it completely right. Theories and models are a mental image of reality, which continue to gain better resolution and depth as we see and understand ever more of our universe.

The scientist tests to see if predictions are born out, and modifies models in response to new observational evidence.

Contrary to some common misconceptions, the faithful also test ideas. The writer of first John writes, "test the spirits whether they are from God." Old testament scripture admonishes that, "If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken." carrying an idea of testing against future events not unlike science.

The person of Christian faith believes that God's ways are "past finding out" as indicated in scripture and that anyone who "imagines that he knows something, does not yet know as he ought to know," (as written by the Apostle Paul), implying that knowing is an ongoing progression, not a state of being.

Scripture speaks of finding God, but more as an ongoing progression than as a goal to be achieved. The book of Job asks the rhetorical question "Can you by searching find out God? Can you find out the Almighty unto perfection?"

The answer to the rhetorical question in Job is "No". Thus, finding God is a never-ending journey, not a destination.

Christian scriptures say of God that "those who seek me diligently find me." (proverbs but implied in NT) The implication is that finding occurs within the seeking, not as a goal to be achieved on its own.

Rigidity of belief issue:

So there is a commonality in seeing the journey toward Truth as an ongoing process. Yet we know from experience that many practitioners of both science or faith gain a certain rigidity of thought that stops that process.

(story of inability to give up idea of tectites, devoted a career to idea that tectites came from the Moon, After Apollo missions, clear he was wrong, but stood up in meeting and insisted he was still right...etc —in faith, safest way is to talk about rigidities of the past rather than rigidities of the present which tends to give us brain freeze, Earth doesn't move at the center of the universe...etc

Again invoke your speaker from last October, Swami Atmarupananda – Made a very key claim in his presentation: A primary contribution of all religions of the world is an encouragement to go beyond bias to what is pure.

In other words—the primary contribution of religion to human thought is to encourage us to avoid rigidity by thinking beyond our initial bias. Quite a bold statement given how religions can seem so rigid to those outside them.

In both science and faith, both Professor and Prophet, try to speak words that stir a deeper examination, internal and external, words that the world may not at first recognize, the startling, the insightful, the challenging.

Thus, Rigidity is not at the core of either science or faith, but a problematic side issue to be overcome. There is no conflict in the underlying principle—only in application.

Points of Unity -- Points of Conflict

Unity: Transformative change is the way of existence

Conflict: But what is the direction, cause, and ideal of change?

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The universe is pervasively and profoundly one of change. You begin as a child and grow to adulthood. The seed planted in the ground transforms to become a great tree. Stars, like people, come into existence, persist for a time, and then pass away—probably heard in the news the conversation that Betelgeuse might die in a fiery supernova any day now. From the rock types and fossils, we see that today's mountains were once a sea. We see that the world's ruling life--the mammals, the fish, the birds, and others—did not exist in the most ancient times.

We see from the fossil record that there has been a progression, if uneven, toward more creatures in more specialized niches. We see a change in the scope and scale of the individual, with bacteria joining to become eukaryotic cells, eukaryotic cells joining to become organisms, organisms joining to become communities.

Everything changes persistently and pervasively.

We see this expectation of change also in Christian scripture. Those who are saved by grace are saved from what they once were so they can become, as scripture says, "a new creature." Christians are admonished by the Apostle Paul to be "transformed by the renewing of their mind." Christ himself "learned obedience through the things which he suffered"--the embodiment of change. He was transfigured before his disciples, and appeared in different form to some after his resurrection.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God began his interaction with humanity with an age of individual covenant given to a family, followed by a law written in stone given to a nation, and finally a new covenant written on our hearts, given to all humanity. This faith suggests that we and our interaction with God have not been static, but rather active and changing.

In scripture we see a progression from children punished "for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation" to "The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father," and from an "eye for an eye" (already a limitation on vengeance) to "turn the other cheek."

Admittedly, some people of faith are uncomfortable with the idea of change, particularly in the age of evolution. They note that Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (as indeed, it is written in Christian scripture).

However, saying that this means there can be no change is like saying that the stars, or earth, or life cannot change because the underlying laws of nature are fixed.

In fact, the fixed laws of nature are the framework within which change takes place. Likewise, the consistency of God is the framework within which God's changing and growing relationship with humanity occurs.

Change, in itself, does not require that the changing world become anything in particular. One thing might end, and a new thing begin, but there need be no direction. Both science and faith have complex views on the character and direction of change.

The cause of change is also an issue. The biologist might infer that change favors the strong, the bold, even the selfish. Most religions of the world might instead favor a progression toward a more selfless person.

For example, Christian scripture speaks well of strength in weakness. It says that the meek shall inherit the earth, that we should turn the other cheek and be kind to strangers. It claims that there is no law against love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Core ideals of faith include humility, submissiveness, purity, peacefulness, consideration, impartiality, sincerity, compassion, patience, and slowness to anger.

Are these the characteristics favored by survival of the fittest?

Maybe.

Even the biologist has to grapple with the benefits of altruism in evolution. recognizing that, although selflessness might not carry obvious immediate benefits to the individual, it can benefit

the super organism; the cell sacrificing itself for the good of the individual ant and the individual ant sacrificing for the good of the colony.

For thousands of years we have seen the growth of nascent ideals of selflessness, recognizing Other as part of ourselves, seeing our Oneness with all humanity or even all life. We all know the common joke about ordering a hotdog at the Buddhist hotdog stand—can you make me One with Everything. But we see from every-day life that these are nascent ideals, easily tipped over when we are afraid, or greedy, or when we wish to support activities or views that benefit us at the expense of others.

Even so, these may be ideals that, in the end, can be embraced by people of both science and faith.

Points of Unity -- Points of Conflict

Unity: The cosmos is orderly, rational, and consistent

Conflict: But what about miracles?

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<interactive option = What is a miracle to you? Does it conflict with your faith or science? Does it undermine the idea of an orderly universe?>

That the events of the natural world are consistent and rational is one of the great realities accepted by people of faith and science alike. The rationality of the universe, cosmos rather than chaos, speaks of an underlying order that suits the understandings of both faith and science. Judeo-Christian scripture notes the orderliness to the motions in the heavens and the regularity to the cycles of water and seasons on earth, and associates that regularity with the Law of God. Science observes the consistent pattern of events and codifies that consistency into explanatory and predictive laws of nature.

To the person of science, orderliness means that the events of the universe can be resolved into rules of behavior which we call laws.

To the person of faith, the consistency of the universe required to make laws of nature possible reflects the consistent character of God.

So, if, there are miracles, then the disruptive presence of miracles undermines the scientist's belief in a rational universe and perhaps even the Christian's belief in a consistent God through which the laws of nature arise.

If there are no miracles, and we can explain everything by invoking the laws of nature, then why is there a need to invoke God at all? As Neil DeGrasse Tyson said, God would become an ever-diminishing pocket of scientific ignorance.

Here is my way of resolving the conflict, which will no doubt be unappealing to both scientist and person of faith alike, but it is mine after all, so in the end it need only be appealing to me.

Suppose that the laws of nature are simply our way of describing, explaining, and predicting the consistent behavior of our universe (and, if fact, they are—that is a fairly accurate description of the laws of nature).

Suppose now that the consistent behavior of the universe reflects the consistent character of the God who creates, invests, and infuses that universe. In the view of some religions, God even inhabits the universe at every level.

The consistency requires that there will be a pattern to events, and if there is a pattern, then scientists can write descriptive rules—laws of nature—to predict and explain them.

But the descriptive rules that predict and explain in no way undermines or invalidates the underlying cause of consistency--which to the person of faith is God—nor does it diminish the underlying miraculous character of existence.

<interactive option = These ideas may or may not sound “pretty” to you, but regardless, there are hidden challenges in the implications. Challenge to the scientist: laws of nature are an inevitable consequence of a consistent God. Challenge to the person of faith: miracles are events that could, if studied, be explained by scientists through descriptive and predictive laws. Discuss with someone else?>

So, is there common ground?

If you choose to find it, yes.

But you might need to recognize that there are more things in heaven and hell than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

And you might need to consider that science and faith are both journeys, not states of being.