Faithless Science: The Pressing Need for Reconciliation between Science and Religion

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The disconnect between science and religion is a fairly modern concept, largely resulting from reactions to the Protestant Reformation and the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation in the seventeenth century. In spite of the unstable religious climate in which they operated, some of the brightest scientists of the age held to their belief in God and sought not only the advancement of science, but to also better understand religion: their motivation to advance science. Eugene M. Klaaren states, “It has become clear that [Newton], like Bacon... and others, searched among the ancients for original piety, wisdom, and knowledge” (94). If religion was important to the great scientific minds of the seventeenth century, then it should also be important to the great scientific minds of succeeding centuries. As this is not the case, modern science has become faithless search for the mere satisfaction of curiosity.

Neither God’s existence nor the creation were called into question in the seventeenth century. To be certain, there is no blasphemy in seeking to understand God’s will and the manner in which He operates. Additionally, instead of trying to understand God through creation, the idea was to understand Him based on an individual reality. This individual reality included human reason, will, and affection; however, the creative power was not attributed to any of these characteristics. As a result, many of the modern scientists wrote about these characteristics and determined who God was in their individual realities (Klaaren 87-88).
Newton rejected the Trinity in favor of one God and viewed Him as the Creator and Author of the world. He was very aware of the limitations of science as he wrestled with the concept of gravity. As far as he was able to determine, it was some unseen force that kept the planets in their proper motion and orbits which he could not describe except by its effects. According to Klaaren interpretation of Newton’s work, “God remained the transcendent cause of gravity, not the power of or spirit of gravity itself” (100). Essentially, Newton was able to describe the effects of the phenomenon, but maintained the phenomenon itself as a miracle.

Bacon and Boyle both supposed that the Reformation, as well as the Jesuit Counter-Reformation, would both bring about a change in all branches of knowledge that would further both the work and glory of God. Interestingly enough, three centuries before Einstein would develop his theory of relativity, “Bacon saw past, present, and future as distinguished but not separated, related but not fused” (Klaaren 92). Possessed of such clarity, he certainly could not have foreseen that his work in developing the scientific method would ever become the basis for a disconnect between science and religion.

Descartes, however, by denying both void space and spiritual extension in his correspondence with Henry More, was also denying the existence of God and opening the door for science to be based more on what could be explained logically, rather than what was necessarily or widely accepted as true (Koyré 138).
Charles Darwin, beginning as a very pious man, followed the dangerous path of doubt as did Descartes, and also abandoned his faith because of what he perceived as irreconcilable differences between his observations of the natural world and a general disbelief in the Bible’s accounts (Henderson 45). Although the effort is to reconcile science with faith, it is imperative to recognize and change the mindset that believers ought to avoid science because it corrupts faith, and that scientists ought to avoid religion because it dilutes the efficacy of observations and experiments.

Percy Bridgman, recipient of the 1946 Nobel Prize for physics, suggested, “It is difficult to conceive anything more scientifically bigoted than to postulate that all possible experience conforms to the same type as that with which we are familiar” (qtd. in Clark 78). Clark continues to explain more of Bridgman’s ideas, including the concepts of length, velocity, acceleration, force, mass, energy, and thermodynamics, to name only a few (Clark 78-82). Why then, if such seemingly well understood concepts come into question at both the macro and micro levels, can one expect to apply the same tests that have worked for science to the question of the reality of God? Freud suggested that God was the personification of the impersonal forces of nature, while Marx suggested that religion was simply the opiate of the masses (Henderson 15). Such views have certainly been influenced by a number of prior works, but the damage started with Bacon, Boyle, Newton, and Descartes. Religious experience does not conform to those phenomena with which science is familiar.
Einstein recognized this early in his life when he experienced the miracle of a magnetic compass, which invariably pointed the needle north by some force unknown and unseen. This miracle from his childhood is what inspired him to pursue physics. As he developed his relativity and quantum theories he made two very bold statements. “In every true searcher of nature, there is a kind of religious reverence,” and, “I believe in a God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists” (qtd. in Henderson 12). Although he chose to reveal this harmony to the world through science, Einstein was still deeply troubled by the trends he was witnessing in quantum theory, which suggested that the universe was governed more by chance than a specific design and established order. He spoke freely and often about God with his many collaborators, who offered their opinions in return.

A group of the world’s leading physicists gathered for a conference in Brussels, Belgium in 1927. Although the theme was quantum mechanics, their evening conversation centered on theology and one member of the group remarked, “Einstein keeps talking about God: what are we to make of that? It is extremely difficult to imagine that a scientist like Einstein should have such strong ties with religious tradition” (Heisenberg 82). Paul Dirac, a British physicist and Nobel Prize recipient in 1933, quickly showed his scientific atheism which Henderson defines as “that variety of atheism in which God is put down in the name of science without, however, any actual support from scientific research” (15). The group went further by distinguishing
Einstein from Planck, who had suggested that science and religion should be dealt with separately. Rather than crippling either science or religion, Einstein adamantly stated “Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind” (qtd. in Henderson 17). Without a reconciliation between science and religion, or a more informed understanding of truth, knowledge and wisdom are both of little import.

Because of Einstein’s theory of relativity, or “the interrelationship of all things in nature,” all things now point to a single constant: light—one of the most ancient and traditional symbols of God (Henderson, 17). His efforts to explain nature included a reconciliation between science and religion that his collaborators, and the scientific community at large, have yet to accept or embrace.

Henry Eyring faced similar problems within the scientific community, but also dealt with borderline hostility toward science from the leadership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Fortunately, Henry never saw the need to keep his work in science and his faith as a Latter-day Saint (LDS) separate. He never felt that they were in conflict. The confidence of early Church leaders in the science was remarkable, especially in the following statement from President Brigham Young:

Our religion will not clash with or contradict the facts of science in any particular. You may take geology, for instance, and it is a true science; not that I would say for a moment that all the conclusions and deductions of its professors are true, but its leading principles are; they are facts—they are eternal. How long the Earth has been organized is not for me to say, and I do not care anything
about it. As for the Bible account of the creation we may say that the Lord gave it to Moses, or rather Moses obtained the history and traditions of his fathers, and from these picked out what he considered necessary, and that account has been handed down from age to age, and we have got it, no matter whether it is correct or not, and whether the Lord found the Earth empty and void, whether he made it out of nothing or out of the rude elements; or whether he made it in six days or in as many millions of years, is and will remain a matter of speculation in the minds of men unless he give revelation on the subject. If we understood the process of creation there would be no mystery about it, it would all be reasonable and plain, for there is no mystery except to the ignorant. (qtd. in Eyring 55)

In contrast, Henry Eyring carefully chose his words when Elder Adam S. Bennion asked what he thought of the recent publication of *Man, His Origin and Destiny* by Elder Joseph Fielding Smith. The book was particularly inconsistent with scientific findings as well as the beliefs of two deceased Church leaders who were both very accomplished scientists, James Talmage and John Widtsoe. Essentially, Eyring suggested that the book could be regarded only as “the private opinion of one of our great men” (Eyring 61).

A formal debate ensued with Eyring standing his ground in both faith and science, while Elder Smith continued to argue his position based on faith, but backed with little scientific evidence (Eyring 60-63). Although this dialogue took place in a much different setting, the differences between Smith and Eyring were much like the differences between Planck and Einstein; Eyring and Einstein both believed that science and religion must be used together in the search for truth.
Many LDS university students struggled to reconcile their scientific studies with their faith, and Eyring responded by publishing *The Faith of a Scientist*, which was eventually printed by the LDS Church in paperback for wider distribution among its congregations (Eyring 67). Certainly, this was a step toward a reconciliation between science and religion in Eyring’s sphere of influence.

Although he was a renowned chemist, well respected by his colleagues, and nominated for the Nobel Prize at least six times, this was the only scientific honor he did not receive. When asked about it in an interview, he was not short of praise for his former colleague, Albert Einstein¹, who won the Nobel Prize in 1921 for the photoelectric effect (Eyring, 36).

Of course, bridging the divide between science and religion must involve more than these two great scientists, so those who have been trained more in theology than chemistry or physics might employ a model of a divine scientist. Essentially, this world is a testing laboratory for God to act as the great experimenter, placing His children on the Earth to see how they will fare in His experiments (Crawford 45).

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¹ Henry Eyring shared the following regarding Albert Einstein: "I went to Princeton in '31. Einstein came in '33. I left in '46, so we overlapped thirteen years.... On one occasion a man from the Navy and I spent the morning with Einstein at his home talking about high explosives. I think he was more interested in relativity than high explosives, but he was not a bad chemist. He didn't talk sense all the time because he had been studying astronomy and physics and such things. At noon we walked out into what had been a rose garden, but in wartime had been replanted as a victory garden. Now, I'm a farmer from Pima, so I guessed what the crop was, but I didn't know whether Einstein knew or not. So I picked up a plant and asked him what it was. He didn't know. We walked about a hundred yards to where the gardener was sitting on his wheelbarrow. As I walked by, I asked him what it was. He said, "They're soybeans." Well, I thought what you would have thought: 'Einstein doesn't know beans.'"
However, there are still others who are more trained in the sciences that will counter this model by suggesting that current science can do more than the scientific atheism of Einstein’s day. The Mayo Clinic, Harvard University, and Duke University have been doing experimental work to attempt to provide empirical evidence for a nonmaterial element. Their attempts have involved the healing power of distant, blinded intercessory prayer. It is essential to provide support for the existence of a nonmaterial element in order to scientifically test, verify, and falsify the hypothesis of God’s existence (Stenger, 29).

Many proponents for God will suggest that the intricate design of species, ecosystems, planets, etc. presupposes His existence. But if all that exists has been made by His design, it is a bad one, as engineers could easily increase longevity and functionality beyond what evolution has done (Stenger 69). The failures of revelation are abundant as well. If the Bible can be proved to be unreliable in any regard, it can be said that it cannot be reliable at all (Stenger 170).

The underlying problem with such methods is the fact that they seek to divide faith and science, ignoring the fact that those best suited to deny God’s existence are those without faith, thus exacerbating the problem of faithless science. Conversely, those best suited to support God’s existence are those possessed of faith, thus bringing faith back to science.
Perhaps more important than all the arguments of the scientists who do or do not exhibit faith, is the majority of people who exhibit faith who may or may not have any interest in science. Such was certainly the case for Henry Eyring. Evolution has often been a topic of deep concern for the faithful. Scientists readily teach the theory, and will typically scoff when the unlearned say that evolution is “just a theory.” The disconnect that causes this reaction started with scientists four centuries ago, and scientists ought to lead the reconciliation efforts. Although it may be difficult to do at times, education does much more than scoffing to bring the faithful and the scientists together.

In these efforts, much can also be said for those faithful who wish to slow the pace of scientific advancement, not out of fear of progress or change, but for the opportunity to catch up with current technology and to enjoy life’s simple pleasures (Bowler 316-17). For certainly, “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven” (Holy Bible, Eccl. 3:1). Additionally, scientists will be better equipped to make appropriate choices for what is worthwhile research that will serve to help humankind more directly than other possibilities.

Throughout this path to reconciliation one must remember that questions are inherently different than doubts. Whether those seeking answers are scientists, the faithful, or anyone else, they must remember the commandment, “Doubt not, fear not” (Doctrine and Covenants 6:36). The consistent effort of the great minds of our day
has the potential to reconcile faith and science and to understand not only how things work but for what purpose.
Works Cited


