



St Anne's Church Wandsworth

UNDERSTANDING CREATION

Science and religion in harmony

Most Christians find no conflict between their faith and the findings of modern science. For example the physicist and Anglican priest John Polkinghorne (in *Quarks, Chaos and Christianity*) says this about science and religion:

“When I left the full-time practice of science and became a clergyman, my life changed in all sorts of ways. One important thing did not change, however, for, in both my careers, I have been concerned with the search for truth.

Religion is not just a technique for keeping our spirits up, a pious anaesthetic to dull some of the pain of real life. The central religious question is the question of truth. Of course, religion can sustain us in life, or at the approach of death, but it can only do so if it is about the way things really are ... in the investigations of the different aspects of experience that concern [science and religion] share a common desire to learn what is true. Neither will attain absolute certainty in this pursuit; both will call for a belief that is motivated but not unquestionable.”

He goes on to point out that he believes in quarks (the smallest unit of matter, whose existence is a recent scientific suggestion or idea) even though they cannot be seen because they are too tightly bound to each other inside other units of matter called protons and neutrons. He believes in quarks because they “make sense of a lot of direct physical experience” observed by physicists when they study matter (e.g. electrons bounce back from collisions with protons and neutrons “just as if there were some tough and tiny constituents sitting inside”). Similarly, belief in “the unseen reality of God ... makes sense of many aspects of our knowledge and experience: the order and fruitfulness of the physical world; the multilayered character of reality; the almost universal experiences of worship and hope”

He concludes: “in their search for truth, science and religion are cousins under the skin.”

Science and religion opposed?

A clash comes about between science and religion when (conservative) Christians suggest that the scientific community's ideas about how things are, specifically about how the world was created, are categorically wrong. On the other side some atheists try to claim that science has 'proved the Bible to be wrong' and so Christianity to be false. However both views misunderstand the different ways in which faith and science approach the world.

Although the Bible was written before the study of science had developed, its writers are concerned with questions such as, what sort of universe do we live in; and the picture they have of this is that it is an orderly universe. They then infer that its order is meaningful. Science may be similar – it too observes that there is order and asks is orderliness meaningful. But religion, unlike science, places order and meaning in relation to God. The Genesis 1 narrative sees the completion of creation to be the Sabbath Rest – not something you would discover scientifically!

But what sort of picture of the universe?

Today we are all familiar with Darwin's theory of evolution, often described as the survival of the fittest. In one sense humans are no different from other species in this respect. However we, like many other species, depend as much on co-operation as on competition. We have evolved not just as individuals but as a society. Human beings do not prosper on their own. Sometimes different species work together – you may have seen leaf-cutter ants which farm a fungus on which they feed: neither can live without the other. Or there are the fish which clean the mouths of other fish. Evolution is not just competition! Very often 'survival of the fittest' means 'survival of the most co-operative'.

What picture of the world does the Bible present?

There are several different pictures of the origin of the world in the Bible but pride of place goes to the one in the first chapter of Genesis. It presents the world as flat (see day two) and made in seven days, through eight distinct steps (two steps each on days three and six), culminating on the seventh day when God rested. It is less about what (scientifically) happened and more about what the world *should* be like.

What other ideas were available to the writer of Genesis?

Compare Genesis 1 with a creation story from ancient Babylon, in which there is a battle between Marduk (the supreme god) and Tiamat, a monster god of chaos:

So they came together - Tiamat, and Marduk, Sage of the gods:
They advanced into conflict, they joined forces in battle.
He spread wide his net, the lord, and enveloped her,
The Evil Wind, the rearmost, unleashed in her face.

As Tiamat opened her mouth to devour him,
He made the Evil Wind to enter that she closed not her lips:
The Storm Winds, the furious, then filling her belly,
Her inwards became distended, she opened fully wide her belly.

He shot there-through an arrow, it pierced her stomach,
Clave through her bowels, tore into her womb:
Thereat he strangled her, made her life-breath ebb away,
Cast her body to the ground, standing over it in triumph. ...

He rested, the lord, examining her body:
He would divide up the monster, create a wonder of wonders!
He slit her in two like a fish of the drying yards,
The one half he positioned and secured as the sky ...

Therein he traced lines for the mighty gods,
Stars, star-groups and constellations he appointed for them:
He determined the year, marked out its divisions,
For each of the twelve months appointed three rising stars.

The great gates of the Sun he opened in both sides of her ribs,
Made strong the lock-fastening to left and right ...
He placed her head in position, heaped the mountains upon it,
Made the Euphrates and Tigris to flow through her eyes ...

*In this version the world is not a planned place but the remains of a battleground between a supreme (male) God and the (female) monster of chaos. By contrast the contemporary writer of Genesis portrays God as supreme, unruffled, and the world as a good place. **You can see here both what Genesis was promoting and what world view it was rejecting.***

How are we influenced by pictures of competition or co-operation?

How we behave is influenced by how we see the world.

A recent study explored the effect of playing video games and watching films with high violence content on people's behaviour towards others in need. Just after playing a video game, the people in the experiment were presented with a (mocked up) situation in which someone clearly needed their help – actors in the corridor outside the room in which the experiment took place acted out a fight. The people who'd been playing the violent video game took nearly five times longer to go and see if they could help stop the fight than those who had played a non-violent game, and they also rated how serious the fight sounded more lightly than those who'd played a non-violent game.

<http://www.newscientist.com/blogs/shortsharpscience/2009/02/violent-films-and-video-games.html#more>

Do you think that we've become anaesthetised to the needs of others, like the volunteers in the study who played a violent game, and if so what are the "anaesthetisers", the video- game equivalents? Is it money or power, or just a tendency only ever to look inwards to our own circle of family and friends? And if we are told all the time about 'survival of the fittest', do we feel that justifies competition and a merciless attitude to others: the 'losers' in society? Do we find ourselves behaving (or at least thinking) like that?

Or is it the case that we don't behave in any such competitive, self-promoting ways, and that that we don't is one of the things which distinguishes the human race? We sometimes see people carrying out heroic acts which are entirely unselfish and also entirely unmeditated and spontaneous – e.g. jumping into a river or the sea in order to save someone else, even though the person in need may be a total stranger.

Which side do we identify as the truly human? Why?

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