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Reformed Approach to the Interactions of Science and Religion

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Reformed Approach to the Interactions of Science and Religion

Abstract

"Sometimes, despite our best theological and scientific study, religion and science still seem to be in conflict."

Posting about the interactions between religion and science from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/a-reformed-approach-to-the-interactions-of-science-and-religion>

Keywords

In All Things, religion and science, God, human beings, animals

Disciplines

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

A Reformed Approach to the Interactions of Science and Religion

 inallthings.org/a-reformed-approach-to-the-interactions-of-science-and-religion/

Tony Jelsma

This is post #2 of 2 in the series *“Religion and Science - A Reformed Perspective”*

1. [Models of the Interaction of Science and Religion](#)
2. A Reformed Approach to the Interactions of Science and Religion

A series exploring the interactions between religion and science.

The previous article described four models of the interaction of science and religion:

- Conflict: religion and science are mutually incompatible
- Independence: religion and science talk about different things so they don't interact
- Dialogue: religion and science are mostly separate but there are areas where they come in contact, from different perspectives
- Integration: religion and science are closely and inextricably intertwined

In this article I will critique them from a Reformed perspective.

Conflict

I feel that the conflict model should not be readily embraced by Reformed Christians. Since the same God is revealing his works both through the scientific study of the creation and through his Word, they should not conflict. However, since both science (the practice of studying the creation) and religion (the practice of living out one's faith life according to God's Word) are human activities, they are susceptible to misinterpretation. True, because creation speaks without words, Scripture speaks more clearly, but Scripture, too, can be misinterpreted. I agree that God's Word is infallible, but when one takes a particular interpretation without acknowledging that it is just that – an interpretation – we can run into difficulty. Moreover, interpretations can easily read current science into Scripture, which ignores the original context in which the text was written and forces Scripture to say what it never intended to say. Third, to deny the validity of science while at the same time reaping the benefits of that same science in one's daily life (e.g. dismissing radioactive dating while using the same science in medical treatments, or using a GPS unit, which relies on the same science used to measure the distance to stars) seems somewhat disingenuous. God's works are revealed both in the creation and in Scripture, and we must acknowledge them both.

Independence

As was mentioned in the previous article, the independence position seems naïve. True, the focus of general revelation is different from special revelation, but both speak of reality. Our religious beliefs cannot be simply personal in that they don't affect anyone else, because they speak about real persons and real events, such as the resurrection of Christ.

Another weakness of this position, pointed out by Barbour, is that science isn't as objective as it is often portrayed. In his book [The Structure of Scientific Revolutions](#), Thomas Kuhn showed how science works

within paradigms, or understandings of the world (examples of such paradigms include phlogiston theory and Newtonian physics). Such paradigms may not be correct but serve as frameworks for scientific study. Scientists continue to work within a paradigm until it becomes untenable and is replaced by a better paradigm.

Conversely, the study of religion is not as subjective as often portrayed. The Christian faith is based upon God's revelation in the Bible. While there are clearly differences in interpretation, the Bible provides a standard for evaluation and guidance in one's Christian faith and life.

Dialogue

The dialogue position seems intuitively attractive. Science and religion largely address different questions and serve different purposes. But since they both address reality, they occasionally speak to the same thing.

One particularly challenging example of dialogue is the nature of being human. How are humans different from animals? Clearly there are quantitative differences in intelligence and communication ability, to name just two. But do humans have aspects that are completely lacking in animals?

From a theological perspective we have a discontinuity between humans and animals – humans are created in the image of God and animals aren't. We have a covenant relationship with God that includes norms for behavior. Animals act on instinct and are not held responsible for their behavior. But does being made in the image of God include features possessed by humans that are lacking in animals? Is this a scientific or a theological question?

Whether or not there are qualitative differences between humans and animals is relevant to the creation/evolution debate. If humans gradually evolved from an apelike ancestor, when and how would these qualitative differences have arisen? Does an evolutionary/animal origin of humans preclude such a discontinuity between humans and animals? This question has both scientific and theological implications.¹

Integration

From a Reformational perspective, one would think that the integration position would be the most attractive. After all, we proclaim with Abraham Kuyper that there is no aspect of our human existence over which Christ does not claim authority. Thus, our scientific activities are also considered religious. However, while every scientific activity is done *Coram Deo*, before the face of God, and is an act of worship, scientific activities are done differently than religious activities. They use different approaches, in different communities. How can they be truly integrated? We need to be intentional and explicit on how it occurs.

The integration position allows for religion and science to mutually inform each other. Some people may be uncomfortable with such a statement. It is true that the Bible (or rather our faith, which is based on the Bible) shapes how we see the world, but does science shape how we read the Bible as well? In other words, does science shape our faith?

I would say that it does, on several levels. Nearly all Christians would agree that we need general revelation in order to understand what special revelation is saying; the Bible is translated into a language we understand; it refers to things and concepts that we know by general revelation. Moreover, understanding the context of a Scripture passage helps us to see better the nuances of a text. The imagery that is used in the Bible, e.g. the references to us as sheep, requires an understanding of the creation (or more precisely, the authors' understanding of the creation) for maximum impact. And on a different level, seeing the beauty and intricacy of creation, e.g. the interconnectedness and robustness of signaling pathways in a cell, helps us see God's power and wisdom more clearly.

But, while these uses of general revelation to understand special revelation are probably not too controversial, I suspect that many — including me — are uncomfortable when ‘science’ threatens to change our interpretation of Scripture. Sometimes, despite our best theological and scientific study, religion and science still seem to be in conflict. In the final installment of this series I will give examples of such apparent conflicts and how Reformed Christians might deal with them.

Footnotes

1. Interestingly, the Reformed philosopher Jacob Klapwijk in his book [Purpose in the Living World? Creation and Emergent Evolution](#) accepts an evolutionary origin of humans but also argues that humans have aspects that are not possessed by animals. These include religious, aesthetic, and economic senses. To account for this discontinuity, Klapwijk argues that these aspects emerged during the evolutionary process. However, the nature of that emergence is not clear. Emergence certainly occurs in embryonic development; an embryo cannot think or have an aesthetic sense. But such an emergence is teleological. The embryo has the instructions to ensure that these faculties will emerge in development. Does a similar teleology occur in evolutionary development? ↩