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Science for All Christians

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Science for All Christians

Abstract

"What questions should we endeavor to answer as we work out the relationship between our faith commitments and our scientific insight?"

Posting about a Reformed worldview on the complexities of creation from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/science-for-all-christians/>

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Science for All Christians

 inallthings.org/science-for-all-christians/

Jeff Ploegstra

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There is no denying that there is a growing push from multiple perspectives to deepen a divide between faith communities and mainstream science.¹ As a Christian and as a scientist, I find this incredibly disturbing. As a scientist, I find the blithe dismissal of scientific insight and the naïve condescension of “common sense” baffling. The incongruity of implicitly accepting scientific expertise in the daily use of technologies enabled by science, while explicitly condemning its validity, feels incredibly disingenuous. As a Christian, the minimal attention to God’s created revelation, poor theology of creation, and abrogation of responsibility for the well-being of the creation (including people) both scare and sadden me. We need the conversation to turn in a new direction.

The AAAS developed an initiative in 1985 called Project 2061: Science for All Americans. Their driving vision was and remains,

“Education has no higher purpose than preparing people to lead personally fulfilling and responsible lives. For its part, science education—meaning education in science, mathematics, and technology—should help students to develop the understandings and habits of mind they need to become compassionate human beings able to think for themselves and to face life head on. It should equip them also to participate thoughtfully with fellow citizens in building and protecting a society that is open, decent, and vital.”

It is hard to argue with such a statement. However, “Science for All Americans” is incomplete in important ways for a Christian—I would argue legitimately so. But, what then of our vision as Christians for how science *legitimately* coheres with our worldview? How do we avoid the temptation to pit science against faith and, in so doing, risk diminishing faith to nothing more than a series of propositions and claims and distorting science into an endeavor to prove or disprove the existence of God?

What broad understandings should we as Christians strive to develop regarding science? What questions should we endeavor to answer as we work out the relationship between our faith commitments and our scientific insight? I offer the following:

Understanding Our Creator God

God reveals himself through His creation (Romans 1:19-21). There is great joy to be found in seeking God through this revelation; attending to the infinite complexity and creativity of the world God has given us to care for (Psalm 8). Developing and understanding our relationship with the non-human creation represents an opportunity to worship our Creator and Sustainer (Psalm 104). We step more deeply into our roles as image bearers when we declare “very good” what God declares “very good” (Genesis 1:31)—when we love what God loves.

Understanding Stewardship

Our power to shape creation is increasing. Responsible tending is one way that we bear the image of God. It is a source of joy to act out our creative capacities in loving service to others and to all God has called good. However, making direct and indirect choices about the shaping of creation in willful ignorance of its underlying structure and function is irresponsible.

Understanding Scientific Truth

Scientific and technological paradigms are pervasive throughout western culture, claiming access to absolute truth and promoting progress through efficiency. The way we understand the material world and develop it has profound implications for human and creational flourishing. Consider the many questions being raised regarding food systems, water quality, population dynamics, disease, air quality, medicine, and energy systems. The capacity to critically engage these issues depends on a deeply contextualized and critically developed understanding of the nature of science and technology and their relationship to other kinds of meaning-making. Science, broadly speaking, represents a unique way of attending to the world that is important for skillful engagement with contemporary ideologies and issues as individuals and communities.

Building the Scientific Lens as Part of a Holistic, Reformed Worldview

With the above understandings in mind, what knowledge, skills, dispositions, and perspectives do we hope every college student will have the chance to develop? What experiences do we hope they will have to shape their desires, habits, and imagination? What *relationships* with other aspects of the creation do we hope they will develop and enrich? Science is an inherently inductive process which relies on both qualitative and quantitative descriptions of the creation, typically addressing the increasing levels of complexity from the physical/chemical to the biological to the ecological aspects of the creation. Science relies on evidence and the construction of theories (explanatory frameworks) to make sense of observable phenomena. The process of science demands that our explanatory frameworks are coherent, consistent across diverse fields of evidence, and make accurate predictions about as-yet unexplored phenomena. The validity of this approach to understanding the world can be seen in the technology-soaked landscape that we currently inhabit. Intentionally engaging the physical, biological, and ecological aspects of reality in this way helps us to enjoy God more fully, address and prevent problems more fruitfully, and find opportunities to participate more intentionally in the flourishing of all creation.

Shaping Questions:

How do we think about God’s relationship with and sustaining work in/through the creation, broadly speaking? What are the prevalent cultural attitudes toward the creation and humanity’s responsibility to it? What are the limits of scientific knowing? In what ways does our culture worship scientific knowing, technological/economic progress? How does science relate to our religious orientation to the world?

What is our understanding of the universe from a physical/biotic perspective? What are the primary operational paradigms used to explain physical, biological, and ecological phenomena? What subject area knowledge is necessary to deeply engage important cultural, theological, ethical, and practical issues? How do science and our broader understanding of the structure of creation shape each other?

How have we come to know, understand, and describe the creation through these lenses? What methodologies do we employ to examine the world around us and make sense of it? What historical baggage do our paradigms carry with them? How do we see science as part of the unfolding of the creation through history and into the future?

What does it mean to love God and love our neighbor within the context of the natural sciences? Has our “knowing” compelled us to action? How do we serve God by enabling our neighbor and the rest of creation to flourish? In the words of Steven Garber, “Knowing what we know about the world, with all its wonder and wounds, what will we do? Do we see ourselves implicated, for love’s sake, in the way the world turns out?”

I would hope that these understandings and questions would point us in an appropriate direction and reorient our intentions rather than serve as a comprehensive map of the landscape for future discussion. We need to leave behind the contentious territoriality of the current faith/science dialogue. Instead, let us move into a more fruitful and less fearful era of deeply engaging the joys and challenges of this complex creation with humility, attention, and love.

Footnotes

1. From the Pew Research Center- Religion and Science: Highly religious Americans are less likely than other to see conflict between faith and science.
http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2015/10/PI_2015-10-22_religion-and-science_FINAL.pdf ↵