

Science and religion: Pursuing a common goal?

By **Mart de Groot**

*In answering life's great
questions, can religion and
science complement each
other?*

The debate between religion and science is as old as they are. Religion, claiming to possess a special revelation from God, has often soared to dizzy heights and at times opposed science in its quest for truth and an understanding of the mysteries of life. Science, pretending to be humble by dealing only with what can be perceived through the physical senses, has also at times become arrogant, denying any role or even value for religious faith in human life.

And the battle rages on. But as we approach the dawn of a new millennium, is there a possibility that the matter of faith and faith in matter can have some talking point? What are the aims of Christianity and those of science? Can we conceive of common goals for both? Where lies the final answer to human queries?

Right at the outset, let me state where I'm coming from. I am a practicing Seventh-day Adventist Christian, affirming biblical revelation of truth, with a special interest in prophecy. I am also a professional astronomer, with a lively interest in cosmology, its order and beauty. My faith and my profession have not posed to me any unsurmountable problems. Out of that conviction I approach the questions outlined above.

What Christianity is about

The Christian faith is anchored in God as disclosed in the Bible. The Bible reveals God as One who created human beings (Genesis 1:26, 27; 2:18, 21-23); who instructed them in how they ought to live (Exodus 20:1-17; Micah 6:8; Matthew 22:36-40); who saves them out of the predicament of sin (Ezekiel 36:26,

27; Romans 7:24, 25; Ephesians 5:25-27); and who promises to give them a future of eternal happiness and fulfillment (John 14:1-3; Revelation 21, 22).

Though the Bible was written by human beings, it claims God as its real author (2 Timothy 3:16, 17). This God invites us to get acquainted with Him (John 17:3). To enter into that special relationship that fosters the full development of our potential is the principal purpose of the written Word.

John pursues this theme, linking it with two other aspects of our relationship with Him (1 John 2:13, 14). First, to know God as One "who is from the beginning"—the Creator.* Second, to relate to God as those who "have overcome the evil one"—a victory rooted in God's disclosure through His Son Jesus Christ (1 John 5:4, 5). Thus, the Bible calls on us to have faith in God as Creator and Redeemer, the kind of faith without which it is impossible to please Him (Hebrews 11:6).

What science is about

Science attempts, first, to satisfy human curiosity. God created us with an innate desire to inquire and to know. Consider astronomy, for example, which seeks to answer questions that men and women have asked since they started looking up at the skies. What are the stars? How did they come about? Do they affect our existence here on earth? But, apart from satisfying our natural curiosity, science also desires to probe and subdue nature for the benefit of humanity—a strong argument for supporting scientific research.

When God commanded Adam and Eve to "rule over" His creation (Genesis

1:26), it was with the clear idea that they would assume responsibility for the well-being of their environment— atmospheric, mineral, vegetable, and animal. In fact, God placed them in the Garden of Eden “to work it and take care of it” (Genesis 2:15). So, from the beginning there was to be beneficial and responsible interaction between human beings and nature.

Nature and faith

If Christianity emphasizes the need to believe, and if science affirms the need to understand the world around us, is there a link between faith and nature? I believe there is, and to discover it we should look at God’s revelation in the written Word and in nature as His two books. When David stated, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Psalm 19:1), he was not merely giving expression to poetry bursting forth from his musical heart. He was also expressing a fundamental concept of the biblical worldview: One cannot look at the wonders of nature without affirming faith in God. Since the glory of God is His character,¹ we can understand this passage as saying, “Nature declares the character of God.”

However, there is a potential problem. It may have been relatively easy for Adam and Eve to understand God when walking through the perfect Garden of Eden, but it must have been much more difficult for their children to have the same clear understanding, growing up in the midst of “thorns and thistles,” pain and tears. God’s handiwork in nature is so marred by the intrusion of sin that the reflection of His character in nature cannot be discerned as clearly as it was before the entrance of evil. This immediately raises the question: Has sin affected only the Earth, the human abode, or also our space environment?

Before space became the object of scientific inquiry and research, Christians

generally believed that humans would never be able to travel into space and contaminate the wider environment with sin. Psalm 115:16 (“The highest heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth he has given to man”) was taken quite literally to mean just that. Today we know better: We have left our footprints on the moon and the vastness of space has come under the continuous scrutiny of science. Thus, one may legitimately ask, Is there any place in God’s creation where sin has not entered or where its influence is not felt?

While we need not speculate on that which is not known or revealed, we still have this assurance: “The earth, marred and defiled by sin, reflects but dimly the Creator’s glory. It is true that His object lessons are not obliterated. Upon every page of the great volume of His created works may still be traced His handwriting. Nature still speaks of her Creator. Yet these revelations are partial and imperfect.”² “The heavens may be to them [the youth] a study-book, from which they may learn lessons of intense interest. The moon and the stars may be their companions, speaking to them in the most eloquent language of the love of God.”³ Thus, nature continues to speak of God. And then, of course, we have the written Word that proclaims the nature and glory of God.

Many see the two books of God as addressing different questions. One book tells us about nature, while the other tells us about nature’s Maker. However, though the two books are different, they both are examples of how God communicates with us. Through the one He speaks to us about His works—what is called the general revelation of nature. In the other, He speaks to us about Himself—what is known as special revelation.

General revelation answers questions about the physical universe: How does nature work? How is one thing related to another? How do we explain order and rhythm, chaos and decay, space and

time? These questions can be answered by observing the natural world and using the methods of the natural sciences.

Special revelation answers the questions that probe beyond the physical world: Why is nature as it is? What is the meaning and purpose of life? Are we answerable to a higher being? How do we relate to God? How can the issue of sin and its destructive power be resolved? Is there life beyond death? Answers to these questions presuppose the existence of a higher power or being, and fall outside the scope of natural science. That higher power—whom we call God—has revealed Himself through the Bible. There we can find answers to some of life’s great questions.

Since both nature and the Bible have the same Author who cannot and does not lie (Numbers 23:19; Titus 1:2), the answers obtained from the Bible cannot be in contradiction to those obtained from nature in those areas where both books have something to communicate. This does not mean that students of nature and students of the Bible always agree on how the information should be interpreted. The Bible itself makes it clear that it can only be understood by those who have spiritual discernment, that is those who, in their studies, take account of God’s Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:6-16). This truth had already been proclaimed in Old Testament times and seems to extend the condition of spirituality beyond biblical studies to the investigation of nature. Thus, a knowledge of God and a recognition of His existence and wisdom are necessary for a deeper understanding of the problems posed by nature.

In striving to know God through the study of His two books, we must remember that we cannot obtain satisfactory answers by studying the one to the neglect of the other. Albert Einstein understood this principle of complementarity when he said, “Science without religion is lame; and religion without science is blind.”⁴

Common goals for science and Christianity

But we need not be lame or blind. Are there common goals for Christian faith and science to agree upon and common pursuits in which to engage? If nature and the Bible are two ways God has chosen to communicate important information to us, and if our pursuit of physical and spiritual endeavors can be assisted by these two books, then is it not logical that both science and the Bible, both reason and faith, should find a role in our intellectual and spiritual lives? In other words, should not our origin, purpose, and future be informed and guided by what faith and reason reveal to us?

Consider the call of Isaiah: "Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing" (Isaiah 40:26). Here we have God's invitation to study His handiwork in the planets, stars, and galaxies. Why do we need such a study? First, to obtain a personal knowledge of God. Second, to discover that our Creator is great in power and that He is eternal. Third, to find out why God created this great universe. God does not want all of us to be astronomers, but He does want us to study and meditate upon His marvelous

creation. Both the study of this earth and the study of the extraterrestrial are given to us in order that we may not only know the greatness of our God but also the responsibility of being His stewards.

This raises important questions. Is stewardship the only reason for scientific research? Or do we have additional reasons? Scientific study of the physical universe and its more spiritual study with the purpose of knowing its Maker should go hand in hand. Therefore, I regret any separation between these two disciplines.

Note a recent trend in cosmology. Some 70 years ago, cosmology embarked on a course that has led to a seemingly satisfactory physical explanation of the origin of the universe. Although there are many details yet to be completely understood, the Big Bang model of the origin of the universe has been accepted by the large majority of scientists as a suitable framework within which it is hoped further progress can be made.⁵ The collaboration between astrophysics, particle physics and theoretical physics has led to great insight into the very first moments of the universe's existence. However, it has also led to a recognition that there is a barrier in time beyond which even our best theories cannot reach. The first microseconds of the universe remain shrouded

in mystery. Moreover, cosmologists have come to recognize that many aspects of the universe require a very fine tuning of initial conditions and of the values of physical constants. This time-barrier and the fine tuning have led to a renewed interest in the old questions about design in the universe, the possible designer, and what happened in that very first fraction of a second or even before.

While scientific investigations have provided many answers about how nature works, they have also raised more profound questions. Many of these relate to our deepest concerns about life, its origin, purpose, and future. No wonder, then, that some scientists suggest that only God can provide real answers to these questions.⁶ Others, however, have refused to admit any role for God, hoping that the continuing progress of science would some day answer our troubling questions. Still others claim that the deeper questions fall outside the scope of the natural sciences and are better left to philosophers and theologians. Let us look at these three attitudes.

Three attitudes about unanswered questions

First, God is the answer to all our questions, communicating truth either through the Bible or the church. While to many

Christians this may seem an attractive option, we must realize the dangers therein. Imagine a 16th-century person who is unable to understand why the planets revolve around the sun. Most scientists and theologians of the time were teaching, supposedly on the basis of God's revelation in the Scriptures, that the Earth is the center of our planetary system. But one century later, Isaac Newton comes along and explains this mystery through the law of gravitation. The advance of science has offered numerous occasions in which earlier claims of God's miraculous and direct involvement had to be abandoned. This "God of the gaps" approach, which seeks to assign to Him all unexplained phenomena in the universe, is misguided and runs the risk of eventually making this "God" unnecessary. Those who believe that God plays an active role in our universe do so because they find in it many evidences of intelligent design and have established a personal relationship with Him.

Second, science is the answer to all our questions. Because of recent scientific breakthroughs, some believe that, given enough time, science will be able to answer all our questions. They ignore the obvious limitations of science and its tentative nature. Moreover, science is better able to answer the "how" than the "why" questions. God, who created us as inquisitive individuals, has chosen to disclose or make accessible to us certain things and not others. (See Deuteronomy 29:29.) Those that have been revealed are vital for our relationship with Him. When we enter into His eternal presence, we will be able to ask all those other questions whose answers are now shrouded in mystery. This is no licence

for being slothful or despondent in our current scientific endeavors. Rather, it should lead us to acknowledge that there are many aspects of God and His creation that are still hidden from us.

Third, philosophy or theology can provide the answers to our questions. Depending on one's individual mental makeup, one may choose between philosophy (metaphysics) and theology for finding answers to extra-scientific questions or try to combine them in some way. Christians will realize that, insofar as these disciplines are based on human reasoning and logic, they will always fall short of the mark when they fail to take into account the existence and power of the Creator of all things. This is precisely the weakness of all non-Christian philosophy and theology.

But even Christian theology cannot answer all questions. As our interpretation of natural phenomena is hampered by the barriers of space, time, and understanding, so our interpretation of the Word is imperfect. In addition, we are finite creatures whose mental capacity cannot fully comprehend the mind of the Creator. (See Isaiah 55: 8, 9; Romans 11:33.)

Conclusion

Human curiosity is not confined to the physical aspects of nature alone. It has also led to deeper questions on the origin, purpose, and destiny of human beings. God's intention in creating the universe and populating it with intelligent creatures was not only to provide us with many interesting fields of study, but also to lead us to Him as the Creator and, thereby, to a deeper insight into our existence as wholly dependent on Him.

One of Satan's most successful permutations is that he has managed to separate science from religion, and in the process has corrupted our understanding of our Creator and His saving relationship with us. Thus, philosophy divested from Christianity cannot answer difficult questions because it ignores the One who is the answer. Neither can theology by itself answer these questions if it limits itself to a study of special revelation alone. Nor can science alone provide the needed answers, especially if it ignores the legitimate role of God the Creator. Only when science, theology, and Christian philosophy collaborate—giving priority to God's revealed Word, the Bible—will we arrive at satisfactory answers. When we recognize God's omniscience and our limitations, and express our respect and love for Him, we will fulfill His original purpose when He invited us to behold His power to create and to save.

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Notes and references

- All Bible passages are quoted from the New International Version.
- 1. Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1915), p. 417.
- 2. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 17.
- 3. White, *The Youth's Instructor*, October 25, 1900.
- 4. In P. Frank, *Einstein: His Life and Times* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947).
- 5. See my article, "The Big Bang Model: An Appraisal," *Dialogue* 10:1 (1998), pp. 9-12.
- 6. Robert Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978), p. 116.