

Are Science and Faith in Conflict?

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Science is allegedly based upon reason. Scientists gather evidence, organize their data, and interpret that data according to logical principles. But the conclusions drawn by secular scientists do not always agree with the truths revealed in God’s revelation. This has caused some to question the proper relationship of faith and reason in general, and whether science and Christianity specifically are in conflict with one another. However, when both faith and reason are accorded their proper place, and when we have an appropriate understanding of science, the alleged tension between them disappears.

At times certain elements within the church have unfortunately been too reactionary to the culture’s over-reliance upon rationalism, to the point where they have adopted short-sighted arguments leading to a diminished role of reason in the Christian faith. According to Brian K. Morley, John Duns Scotus (1265-1308), for example, argued that God can do whatever he wills, including the irrational. Scotus even applied this to the realm of ethics, arguing that God “does not will something because it is good; it is good because he wills it”¹ (which would make Christian ethics fall victim to the Euthyphro dilemma). Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) argued that God is “above our rationality” and therefore we must make “a mystical and suprarational connection to the divine,”² apparently not realizing that his statement failed its own test because it in itself is a rational claim to know something about God.

Scripture, however, supports the conclusion that faith and reason, if used properly, are complementary, not in conflict with one another. Romans 1:20 assumes the propriety of using reason to discover truths about God, stating, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from

¹ Brian K. Morley, *Mapping Apologetics: Comparing Contemporary Apologetic Approaches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 46-47.

² *Ibid.*, 46.

what has been made, so that people are without excuse.”³ Also, there are numerous examples of Jesus and the apostles using reason when responding to objections. For example, Morley argues that one of Paul’s purposes in emphasizing the reunification of the body and soul was to challenge the Stoic’s notion that the body was a prison for the soul.⁴ Luke provided historical facts to refute the prevailing thought at his time that Christians were troublemakers and to explain why the Jews would have rejected their own Messiah.⁵ Matthew gives a rational defense to the accusation that the disciples stole Jesus’ body.⁶ In his first epistle, John affirms Jesus’ physical resurrection in response to an early form of Gnosticism which claimed that only the spiritual was good while the physical was evil.⁷ Both Morley and Douglas Groothuis took note that Jesus Himself utilized *reductio ad absurdum* when pointing out how ridiculous it would be for Satan to fight against his own forces.⁸

Knowing that faith and reason are compatible, though, still begs the question of *how* they should be integrated. For Anselm, James Hannam notes that “faith was prior to understanding and based on the mystical experience of God through meditation and prayer.”⁹ In other words, God bestowed our reasoning abilities upon us, so it is proper to use them in bringing greater

³ Rom 1:20 (NIV).

⁴ Morley, *Mapping Apologetics*, 34.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 37; Mt 28:11-15.

⁷ Morley, *Mapping Apologetics*, 37.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 33; Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 31-32; Mt 12:24-28; Lk 11:15-20.

⁹ James Hannam, *The Genesis of Science: How the Christian Middle Ages Launched the Scientific Revolution* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2011), 38.

understanding to our faith. But faith is always primary.¹⁰ Abelard was a bit more inconsistent. Like Anselm, he also stated that reason was a gift from God, and if there appeared to be a conflict between reason and faith, then a mistake of reasoning must have occurred while working through the argument.¹¹ However, his students claim that he also stated, “nothing can be believed unless it is first understood,” which would seem to place reason before faith.¹²

If our reasoning abilities are a gift given to us by God, then faith in that same God must be prioritized higher than the use of a gift from Him. It makes no sense to say that the use of a tool given by God should be elevated to a higher position than the direct revelation from the God who gave us that tool. Thus, Anselm was correct in placing faith prior to understanding. If the dictates of our faith, as revealed to us by God through His special revelation, state something that appears contrary to the current consensus of scientists, then God’s revelation must be preeminent. After all, if God gave us our reasoning abilities, then the proper use of those abilities (whether in the scientific arena or elsewhere) will not lead to results that contradict Him. If we believe we have arrived at a contradictory conclusion, then there must be something wrong with the manner in which we arrived at it. There could be a flaw in our reasoning, or an incorrect result borne from insufficient or inaccurate data. History is replete with instances in which the general consensus of the scientific community has turned out, upon the discovery of new evidence, to be incorrect. God, however, is never wrong. It is never wise to elevate a discipline that is inherently subject to ebbs and flows above the One who is the firm, unmoving foundation for all Creation.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 49.

¹² Ibid., 43.

The prioritization of God's revelation over the conclusions of reason is not one shared by naturalistic scientists, so a note of caution is warranted when evaluating conclusions drawn by secular experts. However, (as noted above) Romans 1:20 assumes that even non-believers have at least some ability to rationally evaluate the world around them (and see how it points to God). Thus, we have no reason to *per se* distrust all conclusions drawn from secular science. We must, though, recognize that the interpretation of data gathered from the natural world will inevitably be painted by the worldview through which it is seen. A naturalistic scientist will only be open to naturalistic conclusions. When we evaluate those conclusions, we must not allow ourselves to be similarly limited, and we must be open to re-interpreting the data, where appropriate, given the additional options available under a Christian worldview.

In the end, any tension felt between science and faith is only present where there is an overly prestigious view given to scientific conclusions. When people view the scientific community as the "be all and end all" of truth, almost elevating it to a level of infallibility, then naturally they will see tension between science and faith. After all, science is carried out by scientists, and scientists are fallible humans. Inevitably, conclusions drawn by fallible humans will sometimes be wrong, and when they are they will be in conflict with the infallible revelation of God. But if science is viewed properly, as a way of discovering how God's creation operates, always with a healthy dose of humility to acknowledge what we do not know and that we may be mistaken, and if we accord God His proper place of sovereignty, then there is no reason science and faith need to be in conflict.