

Where We Come From

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The question of the appropriate relationship between science and religion has existed about as long as the church has.

At some moments in our history, the Christian church was nearly the sole patron of scientific inquiry, funding explorations of nature and astronomy on a scale that made first exposed us to some of our most basic knowledge of the cosmos.

Of course, the church has also been an enemy of scientific inquiry, famously condemning Galileo for his discovery that the Earth was indeed not the center of the universe.

In more recent history, one of the core points of conflict between the church and science has centered around the story that we just heard. The story of creation.

In 1925, John Scopes, a substitute teacher in Tennessee was convicted criminally for teaching evolutionary biology in his public school classroom. The trial was intended to be a spectacle, and William Jennings Bryan the prosecutor became a celebrity among a new and emerging group of Christians in the United States who resisted the insights of Darwin's theory of evolution.

These conflicts persist today. According to recent surveys American adults are pretty close to evenly split on the question of creation vs. evolution.

The framing of religion and science as competing views of the world is unfortunate and reductive.

When new scientific knowledge emerges, too many people feel like we have only two choices: either we reject it in favor of faith, or accept it at the expense of our faith.

But it does not need to be like this.

You can be a Christian, and worship God with your whole heart, without checking your brain at the door.

And you can be as scientifically curious and exploratory as you wish, without needing to forfeit your faith in the process.

The denomination that our church belongs to is called the United Church of Christ. As a movement, we trace all the way back to John Calvin who was along with Luther one of the two reformers who led the break off of the Protestants from the Catholic Church in the 15 and 1600's.

John Calvin wrote a four volume set of books called the Institutes of the Christian Religion, in which he laid out the theology that we largely hold to this day, including most importantly the idea that humans are

saved by the free grace of God and not by earning their salvation through earthly works.

But Calvin also wrote extensively about science. It was a time when the Catholic Church was making one of its generational turns against the insights of scientists, Calvin's institutes were published only a few years before Galileo was convicted of heresy.

In book 2, Calvin refers to science as one of God's gifts. But he goes even further, he writes: "If we believe that God is the source of all truth, we shall neither reject the truth nor despise it no matter where it is found. That is unless we want to dishonor God."

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Calvin's understanding of science has informed the Protestant movement for generations since, in this country one of the first things the European settlers did when they arrived was build colleges and universities, a great, great many of the colleges and universities in this country were first founded by protestant christians.

Why? Because, like John Calvin, they believed that God was the source of all true knowledge and so whenever you discovered something that was true, you learned something about God.

For their part, the Catholic Church has also come to this position, Pope John Paul II wrote: "faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth."

We are always at our worst when we act defensively. And the church is no different. In so many moments in human history the church, and

its teachings, have served as a sort of fortress into which people retreat during moments of profound change in human understanding.

On the other hand, the church is at its best when it is a place of curiosity and wonder. A place where we embrace all truth and knowledge with excitement and wonder together what it might teach us about God that we did not yet know.

Our strand of Christianity came from people hundreds of years ago who were curious about the world and about God. And their hearts and their minds stretched as far as they could to understand as much as they could, because they believed that in that seeking, they would encounter more and more of what is Holy.

Seeking, searching, and inquiring minds, have in the many years since, probed the mysteries of our more ancient origins and discovered that the world and the universe was older than anyone had

dared imagine, and that the complexity and variety of life on our planet could be accounted for through the natural process of evolution.

If our faith inspires us to wonder and curiosity, we might ask, what does this tell us about who we are and who God is? One thing I learn from evolutionary biology is that we are more intimately connected to the rest of creation than we had been tempted to think. We are related to, and part of, the same process of development and change that made pine trees and koalas. Which gives me a heightened sense of my responsibility not just to my fellow humans, but to my fellow creatures.

That is something that the science brings to my faith.

But my faith brings something to the science too. The story of creation that we heard this morning to me gives meaning to the unfolding process. It reminds me that at each stage of creation, whether it was tiny creatures in the ocean, or animals walking on land, or plants

stringing toward the sky, or the stars themselves, God saw each thing and called it good. Everything in all of creation is known by God, blessed by God, and called good.

When approached with curiosity and wonder, science opens me to a deeper sense of my connection with creation, and faith imbues profound meaning into what might otherwise look like the random collision of atoms and cells.

This is just one example. And over the coming weeks in my sermons I will approach others, exploring what our faith brings to the science, and what science brings to our faith.

Undertaking this reflection together will be a way of honoring God. Or praising God with our minds as well as our hearts.

Our faith is not a place to hide from change. It offers no quarter to those who would prefer to unlearn new discoveries and insights.

Faith is not a fortress.

Faith should inspire us to wonder more, not less.

It should fill us with better and better questions, not just rigid answers.

It should be an adventure, always calling us outward, and onward.

The part of the church where you are sitting is called the nave. It comes from the same Latin root as naval.

This is not our fortress, this is our ship, our platform from which to explore all that is ever shifting and changing around us.

Our way to press out further and further against the mysterious, trusting that as we do we are journeying closer and closer to the heart of God.