

# Are science and faith in opposition to one another?

Linda Nicholls

THERE IS A GENERAL PERCEPTION that science and religious faith are opposites and cannot be reconciled. Science is perceived as representing objective truth while faith is perceived as unprovable by objective criteria and therefore untrustworthy. Recent public statements from people such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens offer fuel to this perception. Dawkins wrote:

“Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.”

– *Richard Dawkins, Lecture from ‘The Nullifidian’ (Dec 94)*

Yet both science and religious faith seek to understand the inner logic of our world and our lives, to understand the organizing principles on which the world exists and operates and thus find our place within it. Throughout recorded history we see the efforts of human beings to explore, examine, describe and correlate the world around them. In each era we do this through the lenses of understanding discerned in the past, the current experiences of the world and new insights that renew or reorient that understanding. There are elements of testing, experience, reflection, receiving the wisdom of the past and intuitive discovery in each.

When we think about our world we need and use a framework or lens with which we begin to see, understand and organize our thoughts. Since the beginning of the modern era that framework is built on the belief that human endeavour can analyze, test and correlate information to find the principles within which the world operates and exists. We have all benefitted from the results of medical science, mechanics, and engineering that

have resulted from that endeavour. For Christian faith the framework begins from our belief that we are part of God’s creation and that all principles, within which the world operates and exists, originate in God. These frameworks are part of the same whole viewed from different perspectives.

Often science and faith are described as opposites on the basis of scripture, for example, questioning the possibility of miracles and the stories of Genesis. The bible records the relationships between God, humanity and the created world using narrative, history, poetry, letters, testaments of faith and apocalyptic visions. It is not a scientific textbook and was not intended to be. It is the story of the living relationship as recorded in different times, cultures and by different people inspired by faith in God and grounds us in the purpose for existence. For example, in Psalm 104, the psalmist writes:

<sup>1</sup>Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honor and majesty, <sup>2</sup>wrapped in light as with a garment. You stretch out the heavens like a tent, <sup>3</sup>you set the beams of your chambers on the waters, you make the clouds your chariot, you ride on the wings of the wind, <sup>4</sup>you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers. <sup>5</sup>You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken.

It is possible to have a proper confidence in both science and religious faith. Albert Einstein commented, “Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.” Each approaches the mystery of existence seeking understanding. John Polkinghorne, an Anglican priest and Cambridge professor of mathematics and physics, compares them as follows:

"The poverty of an objectivistic account is made only too clear when we consider the mystery of music. From a scientific point of view, it is nothing but vibrations in the air, impinging on the eardrums and stimulating neural currents in the brain. How does it come about that this banal sequence of temporal activity has the power to speak to our hearts of an eternal beauty? The whole range of subjective experience, from perceiving a patch of pink to being enthralled by a performance of the Mass in B Minor, and on to the mystic's encounter with the ineffable reality of the One, all these truly human experiences are at the center of our encounter with reality, and they are not to be dismissed as epiphenomenal froth on the surface of a universe whose true nature is impersonal and lifeless." (Belief in God in an Age of Science, 1998)

The emergence of quantum physics in the last century has opened the door to exploration of the relational aspects of reality that belies the strict objectivity presumed in much of the arguments of science against religion. We and our world are more than just the sum of our parts. We find

the purpose and meaning of our existence through the revelation of God in the world and most particularly in Jesus as the human incarnation of God with us.

Dr. Francis Collins, head of the Human Genome Project and a Christian, sees no ultimate conflict between science and faith. In asking rhetorically whether we can turn our backs on either he replies:

"Both of these choices are profoundly dangerous. Both deny truth. Both will diminish the nobility of humankind. Both will be devastating to our future. And both are unnecessary. The God of the Bible is also the God of the genome. He can be worshipped in the cathedral or in the laboratory. His creation is majestic, awesome, intricate, and beautiful – and it cannot be at war with itself. Only we imperfect humans can start such battles. And only we can end them."  
– *The Language of God, 2007*

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## Questions for discussion

1. Discuss when you have felt as though you had to choose between your faith and science and why.
2. Describe when your faith and science both have given you important perspectives on an aspect of the world.