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A Letter to Christian Ministers

DONNA NORZIGER PLANK

As a scientist I have encountered numerous situations that have challenged me as a Christian and have inspired me to examine my underlying assumptions about God and his purpose for me. During my eleven years at Pepperdine University, I have taken part in numerous thoughtful discussions with students about important issues that lie at the intersection of science and faith. This past year, I had an interesting conversation with an aspiring minister attending Pepperdine. While discussing the different classes he had taken in college, he noted that he didn't believe he needed to take any science classes since he was going to be a minister. I was struck by his comment and once the flames stopped shooting out of my ears, I began to examine why it affected me so much. It wasn't that I was surprised by his attitude—it is one that I often encounter in people no matter what their career path. Unfortunately, it is socially acceptable to be scientifically illiterate in our culture. What struck me about his comment was the fact that he thought that, as a minister, he had no need of scientific knowledge. In my opinion, if any job requires a sound understanding of science and the natural world, it is that of a minister. In fact, a lack of scientific knowledge could actually impede one's effectiveness in ministry. For those of you whose science experience is based on an overwhelming (and boring) memorization of seemingly disconnected scientific terms and definitions, this may seem like an excessively bold, overreaching statement. I am not arguing that one must memorize an enormous amount of scientific facts to be an effective preacher. While important, it is not necessary for ministers to memorize the ten steps of glycolysis. However, I do believe a basic knowledge and appreciation of science is important to be an effective minister and meet the needs of congregations in the twenty-first century. Moreover, nature can be revelatory and the lack of scientific knowledge is a loss of an opportunity to gain insight into some of life's most interesting questions involving the character of God as well as our role in the universe.

PROVIDE INFORMED GUIDANCE ON SCIENCE-RELATED ISSUES

For a minister to provide proper pastoral care for his congregation in the twenty-first century, it is necessary to have a sound understanding of science and current technology. Increasingly, more and more people are having questions and concerns about new technologies and health care choices. For example, a couple struggling with infertility may seek advice from their minister on decisions regarding fertility treatments that raise various ethical issues. If that couple happens to have a family history of a certain genetic disease, they may need guidance on prenatal or preimplantation genetic testing. If you do not understand the science behind this technology, then how can you provide truly effective counseling on the health care and ethical issues related to these reproductive options? Other issues such as genetic counseling, vaccinations and end of life issues may also require a scientific background in order to fully understand their complexity. Future breakthroughs in medical care and technology will only increase the number of difficult decisions congregants must make as more and more treatment options are available. A basic understanding of these technologies could help properly address the ethical, and possibly even safety, issues raised by medical

technology. While this is perhaps not a minister's primary task, it is important for ministers to provide informed guidance on real life situations that challenge their flocks in an ever-changing technological world. They must stay informed in order to stay relevant in meeting the needs of their congregations.

DISPELLING THE MYTH OF CONFLICT BETWEEN SCIENCE AND RELIGION

Many in the United States have a mistrust of science and/or religion. While the reasons for this are complex, this mistrust can partially be traced to the perceived inevitable conflict between science and religion. In my classes, I often encounter students who hold the opinion that there is a scientific agenda that aims to replace a religious worldview with an atheistic one. Conversely, I also encounter the belief that the cultural influence of religion obstructs scientific progress and the benefits it brings to the world. The most commonly mentioned source these students cite for these beliefs are parents, Christian secondary schools, Sunday school teachers and ministers. Ignorance of science perpetuates this myth. The tragedy of this perceived conflict between science and religion is that it is so unnecessary and it prevents a productive partnership from which we all would benefit. Science and religion have a rich history of productive dialogue within the Christian tradition that is often overshadowed by the flashier historical examples where they seemed to clash. While examples of individual scientists and religious people belligerently attacking the "other side" in the media do occur, these individuals are not representative of science and religion as a whole. Ministers are seen as a voice of authority by many in their congregations; I believe it is an abuse of that authority to needlessly and ignorantly perpetuate this myth from the pulpit.

New breakthroughs in science can at times arouse both great hope and intense fear in the general public. Technological advances raise many important ethical questions, and an open dialogue between scientists and theologians can be very effective at providing answers. Perpetuation of the conflict analogy between science and religion can hinder this dialogue as well as sow distrust between scientists, theologians and the general public at a time where it is critical that we address these issues together. The attitude of ministers towards science can have an enormous influence on their congregations. In order for Christians to maintain their credibility in our scientific age, we must stay well informed. In the words of Stephen Jay Gould, "The understanding of science—one need hardly repeat the litany—becomes even more crucial in a world of biotechnology, computers, and bombs."¹ Now is not the time to perpetuate an erroneous myth when we should be working together seeking solutions and building relationships based on trust.

One common outcome of this conflict myth is the attitude that scientific explanations of natural phenomena somehow diminish God's role in the natural world and thus threaten a Christian worldview. In other words, God is only given credit for the mysterious—for things we cannot explain. The effect of this "god-of-the-gaps" mentality is that God's role in the world seemingly shrinks every time science produces a natural explanation of some previously unexplained phenomena. This feeds the fear (or hope, depending on your perspective) that scientific progress destroys religious belief. Christian adherents of this view, therefore, feel threatened by science and often feel the need to discredit scientific findings that explain events that had previously been attributed to God's actions and therefore should remain "supernatural." Limiting God's influence on the earth to only supernatural events marginalizes the role of God as an active agent in the world. Conversely, embracing science and what it reveals about the natural world results in a more mature view of God. As I always tell my students, I give God credit for both what we can and what we cannot explain. Thus, God becomes more worthy of worship with each scientific advancement, rather than less worthy.

1. Stephen Jay Gould, *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time* (Harvard University Press, 1987).

In the past few years, numerous books have topped the bestseller lists, claiming that science is the only way of knowing and that religious belief is incompatible with a modern, science-based society. A sound understanding of science allows a minister to address those assertions and provide reasonable answers to questions that their congregation may have about those books. In order for those answers to have credibility, they must be based upon a solid foundation of Christian *and* scientific truth.

KNOWLEDGE OF GOD'S CREATION CAN BE REVELATORY

In preparation for this article, I performed an Internet search on the topic of ministers and science. While many postings affirmed the importance of a solid understanding of science by ministers, others expressed suspicions about this idea. Many suggested that physical reality and scientific evidence could be somehow distorted and used by the forces of evil to lead us away from God. Others state that the Holy Spirit and the Bible alone will teach ministers everything they need to learn. These attitudes perplex me. If we believe that our God is a faithful God who would never deceive us, then we should be able to trust what the world, his creation, reveals to us through science. Galileo used the metaphor that God reveals Himself to us through two books—the book of Nature and the book of Scripture. Is it possible that a more complete understanding of God, our world and our role in it can come through a thorough examination of both books? Integrating our scientific understanding of the natural world with our Christian theology provides an enormous opportunity to look reflectively at the world and our faith. Exploration of issues at the intersection of science and religion uncovers a treasure trove of questions and insights that can aid us in our search for truth. While many of these questions are challenging, we are losing an opportunity to explore what we believe if we take the easy way out and ignore them.

Science has revealed that the universe we live in is not fixed and unchanging and that chance and randomness seem to play an important role in the inner workings of our world. Studies in biology have uncovered the role of genetic mutations and alterations in generating the diversity of life. Quantum mechanics also reveals indeterminacy on the subatomic level. The universe is not as predetermined as was previously thought and many events occur in an unpredictable way. What does the importance of chance and randomness reveal to us about the divine sovereignty of God over nature? What does this say about the ultimate purpose of God's creation? These are important questions because this randomness, while unpredictable, gives the universe the freedom to reach its full creative potential. Through these indeterminacies, God allows his creation the freedom to explore all potentialities and create this dynamic world that we live in.

Conversely, we must ask ourselves if the presence of chance and randomness means that there is no divine purpose in the universe? I would answer no because there is also an orderliness and intelligibility to the universe that is striking. Einstein once said, "The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible."² The laws that govern this order create the conditions necessary for matter and life to exist. It is this order and intelligibility that also make science possible, because they allow us to examine the natural world and make sense of it. Together, these findings reveal the complex relationship between chance and randomness and order and purpose. In reflecting on a world where both intelligibility and chance are prevalent, we can appreciate a God who is not only the creator of the order we see in the universe, but who is also the father of freedom and creativity. The order and randomness we see in nature can both be part of God's design and work together to realize God's divine purpose for his creation in a way that avoids rigid predetermination.

2. Einstein quoted in Des MacHale, *Wisdom* (London: The Mercier Press Ltd., 2002).

These questions are just some of the questions raised at the boundary of science and religion. There are many others. Information from numerous animal studies raises many intriguing questions about what it means to be made in God's image. Many of the simplistic answers to this question may be challenged by our scientific knowledge, leading us to a richer understanding of our role on earth. Additionally, in learning about the interrelatedness and interconnectedness of all things in the natural world, both living and nonliving, what does this teach us about our relationship to the rest of creation as well as our role on earth? As stewards of the earth, we have been entrusted with the great responsibility of caring for God's creation. As responsible stewards, we should make informed decisions, based on the best knowledge science has to offer. Many of these questions are interesting and challenging. Seeking out ways in which science and religion interact yields invaluable insights that while not necessarily providing all the answers, may draw us nearer to the truth.

Scientific research can very well be considered an act of worship if we envision it as a way to see God in the natural as well as the supernatural. When we get away from things made by humans we often experience the divine. Prophets went into the wilderness to find God. Anyone who visits a national park cannot help but be filled with wonder while gazing on the natural beauty of the world around us. This wonder can arise as one studies the macroscopic, microscopic and submicroscopic worlds as well. Our studies can yield insights and inspiration that draw us closer to God. Scientific results can also inspire in us a sense of religious awe as we give God credit for all the beauty and complexity found in the natural world.

In thinking back on that aspiring young ministerial student, I wish him well and hope he has a long and fruitful career as a minister. Since we live in the twenty-first century, in a scientific age, I hope he will provide leadership on these contemporary issues by embracing science and reflecting on the theological implications of our scientific knowledge. Maybe he can even engage the scientific community and collaboratively work with scientists on ethical issues related to technology. I hope he reads from both the book of scripture and the book of nature, because formation of a sound Christian worldview must take into account the many facets of knowledge God has made available to us. I hope he provides his congregation opportunities for growth through the examination of questions that lie at the intersection of science and theology, using the best scientific knowledge the world currently has to offer. I wish for him and his congregation all the joy and wonder that a life of introspection and inspection will bring. I have no doubt that if he embraces a dialogue between science and religion, it will be the beginning of a beautiful relationship.

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