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Do Science and Faith Crystalize or Conflict in a Crisis?

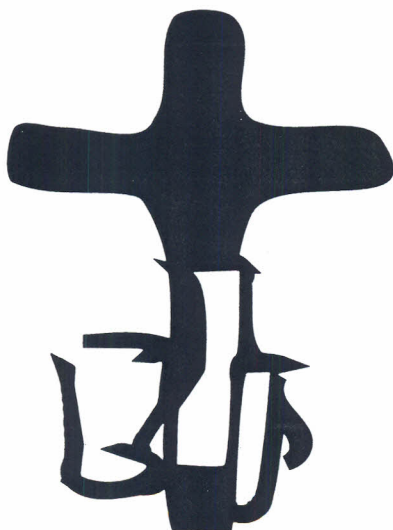
DAN G. BLAZER

We frequently and naturally question the relationship between faith and science in the midst of crises. Yet the questions we ask in large part depend upon our emotional distance from the crisis. For argument's sake, let's imagine a major earthquake that devastates a large city on another continent. Hundreds of people are killed. We feel a generic empathy with and sympathy for the families of persons killed, and we frequently mobilize relief efforts in service of the devastated area. Yet the questions we ask are more reflective than reactive.

For example, those of us who live in the United States and are not directly affected by the earthquake might ask, "Was this a natural occurrence or was it a divine act?" If we view the event from the perspective of the laws of science, we can easily account for the earthquake (the geologists have been telling us that a "big one" was just around the corner in this region of the world). On the other hand, if we view the event from the perspective of faith, we may see God's mighty hand once again reminding us that he is all-powerful and acts independent of our will. Thus our faith in the Almighty God is confirmed. We might even go so far as to suggest that the end of time is near, for "I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. . . . Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid . . ." (Rev 6:12–15, NIV).

We might generalize our questions even further by asking, "Does God have the will or power to hold back the laws that govern natural forces?" Or we might ask, "Why would an omnipotent God permit suffering if he is all-loving?" These questions may even extend into theological/philosophical musings regarding the ongoing relationship between God and the world. Perhaps such questions can be intellectually stimulating (and certainly capable of generating endless debate). But most of us never ponder such questions at length when the disaster is at a distance. Perhaps when a crisis or disaster is emotionally distant, we would prefer to deny that it ever happened. Perhaps we recognize up front that the likelihood of answering such questions definitively is unlikely. Regardless, such questions just don't seem to be relevant to our everyday lives.

Now let us imagine a different scenario (a real occurrence). A friend of mine directly witnessed the second plane as it crashed into the World Trade Center (WTC) on September 11. Close friends and one relative of his were killed during this tragic event. He was devastated personally and many questions arose regarding "ground zero"—questions which spawned a crisis for him between science and faith. For most of his adult life, my friend gazed daily upon the WTC from his office in upper Manhattan. He expected the WTC always to be there. The laws of nature and the advances of technology, specifically the laws of gravity and their application in architecture, suggested that



the towers were extremely sturdy (had they not survived a serious explosion ten years prior?) and provided my friend with a sense of subconscious security. Where could one find more safety than in an office located in one of those towers? Surely not walking the streets of Manhattan! Isn't air travel known to be much more safe per mile traveled than driving an automobile?

These questions were not only specific but also personal (he worked in a tall building and traveled frequently by air). He had placed his faith in science and technology, as virtually all of us do each day we board an airplane, work in our offices, and take reasonable precautions in making our daily decisions. September 11 changed that for him (and for many of us). Though he is a man of science, his faith in science and technology were greatly shaken. Should he give up science altogether as a basis for making decisions about his life? Should he fear for his safety every time he boards an airplane in the future? Should he give up his 50th-floor office in Manhattan? Should he adopt a life style that abhors the predictability of everyday existence (perhaps moving to a mountaintop to await the end of the world)? Of course not. Yet the events of September 11 have shaken his perspective on science and faith; they have created a crisis for him. He must work toward a new reconciliation, a new crystallization of that relationship.

A first step toward reconciling one's faith and science in the midst of a crisis is to recognize science for what it is. Science is based upon collecting data about the past and present, then forecasting the future based on those data, given certain contingencies.

A first step toward reconciling one's faith and science in the midst of a crisis is to recognize science for what it is. Science is based upon collecting data about the past and present, then forecasting the future based on those data, given certain contingencies. In other words, science is based on probabilities, not certainties. Those of us who are scientific investigators always (or should always) recognize that our "findings" are at best "successive approximations." We work toward the truth, but science never reaches truth. At best, science postulates reasonable mechanisms and makes predictions. Science predicts, quite accurately, that airplanes can fly, that air traffic control actually controls where airplanes travel, and that airplanes can take off and land safely. Science also predicts that people are protective of their lives and are in general protective of the lives of others. The behaviors of the hijackers and the airplanes they commandeered on September 11 did not follow the patterns science predicts. This was not the first time science has been wrong, though it was certainly one of the more dramatic times. If science and faith are to be reconciled, then the limitations of science must be accepted—not just at an intellectual level but at a personal level as well. A realization that the world is not as "predictable" (that is, safe) as we imagined is a most threatening realization.

Paradoxically, one of the problems that emerges with our faith when crises such as September 11 occur is that we too often expect God to behave predictably. "God moves in a mysterious way" we sing, but we are much more apt to believe that God is going to behave in ways that we can predict and influence. The recent popularity of *The Prayer of Jabez* is an example of our tendency to view God as a predictable force who will work good if we but ask for this good. A tragedy such as September 11 occurs that touches us personally, as it did my friend, and we begin to doubt God (perhaps analogous to the way we doubt science). It shakes the foundations of our expectations about what a good and graceful God should be and do. We may question the existence of God (or at least his infinite goodness). We may, like the friends of Job, find ourselves attempting to explain the behavior of God (putting God back in his box, if you will). We may even find ourselves turning from God to science or self. "We'll set up a security system where this can never happen again. We will take care of ourselves."

The tension between science and faith in a time of personal crisis frequently reduces our ability to accept uncertainty, our ability to predict the future, and our ability to control our fate. We may attempt to abandon

one and embrace the other. Yet we must remember that the true problem is uncertainty and how we as mortals approach it. Science has been a great friend to humankind, a friend given (in my view) by God. Science and its applications through technology have brought much more predictability into our lives, perhaps even a false sense of total comfort and security. Yet science, for the Christian, must be kept in its place. Many are concerned today about the potential abuses of an all-too-powerful science (such as cloning human embryos). We must also keep science in its place by recognizing its limitations, its virtual blindness to the unique, the miraculous, the mysteries of life, the transcendent God who revealed himself to us through his son in the very unscientific event of the incarnation. God is truly higher than our ability to understand him, as he revealed to Job.

Faith doesn't complement or fill in the gaps of science (a common misconception that has pushed faith to the periphery of our lives). Faith is the foundation of our lives, a foundation upon which we build

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true science, never to be replaced by science and technology. Let me return to the experience of my friend who witnessed the WTC disaster. He was devastated. His equilibrium was shaken to the core. How was he to cope with this experience? From the perspective of the medical science I practice, psychiatry, he suffered from a post-traumatic stress disorder. He easily fit the criteria—sleep loss, night-

mares, vivid and threatening images of the plane crashing into the WTC tower, difficulty performing his daily work, and loss of interest in many activities to which he had devoted himself in the past.

Medical science suggests interventions that can aid and assist such persons in recovering or at least partially resolving such a traumatic experience. For example, the use of certain medications, such as the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (drugs like Paxil and Prozac) have been demonstrated to be effective in reducing anxiety, improving sleep, decreasing nightmares, and alleviating the depression associated with the aftermath of such a traumatic experience. In addition, evidence suggests that talking out these problems with a professional counselor or, perhaps even better, a group of persons who have experienced similar traumas, can be most helpful. I believe that my friend should take full advantage of such proven interventions. Yet I would warn him that there is no guarantee that these approaches will be effective. Again, science is about probabilities. Our existing scientific knowledge suggests that these medical and psychotherapeutic approaches have a good probability of succeeding; but we cannot promise success.

My friend is a man of faith. Yet his faith has been greatly shaken. No scientific intervention will necessarily heal the spiritual wound he has experienced. I wish I could suggest to my friend, "Just get your life with God right and all things will work out for you. You will get over this crisis. You'll remember it a year from now but it won't bother you." If I truly believed that advice, I might even suggest that he forego medical and psychotherapeutic interventions and "just trust in God." But if I made such a suggestion, I fear that I, in my own way, would be attempting (albeit subconsciously) to play and therefore limit God. There are powers and characteristics of God and his ways of which I am totally confident. Unfortunately, the certainty that my friend will be rid of his suffering a year from now if he but goes to his knees each night limits rather than appreciates the power and control of God. God truly moves in mysterious ways, ways I cannot always forecast or understand.

So what advice should I give my friend about his faith in God and how that faith has been shaken? Perhaps the first "advice" that I should give him is that I don't have all or even most of the answers. I do not understand how September 11 fits into God's overall plan. I am not even certain it is a part of his overall plan. Therefore, the first thing I can do is listen to my friend, listen to his struggle with his faith. I can go a step further. I can share my faith, but I can also share my ignorance of God's ways and the ways of the

world. I am humbled by September 11. It shakes me (though not as personally as my friend). Can I go further?

If a crisis teaches me anything (if it teaches my friend anything), it teaches me that the only certainty in the world is that God is in charge, that he is the ground upon which events occur, that he is the ultimate source of all my knowledge. "For now we see in a mirror, dimly" (1 Cor 13:12), especially during a crisis; but I believe that a time will come when I will see clearly. God sees clearly today. He knows. I stand in awe, as did the men and women of faith in times past. I share with my friend his feelings of uncertainty, but I can share with him also my sense of God's almighty power.

Some have suggested that both faith and science are actually working to the same end, the end of truth. God defines truth. So on this view, faith and science should not conflict. Stephen Jay Gould has suggested that science and faith are two totally separate realms, and we live in both realms simultaneously. There exists no actual conflict, only the conflicts we create when we attempt to merge the realms.¹ This is a most convenient way to resolve the potential conflict between science and faith during a crisis (and at other times as well). Yet I find Gould's suggestion not only unreasonable but also unsettling. I just don't have enough trust in science to permit it such a wide berth. Even so, Gould does interject a proper caution for those who wish to turn our faith into a science in order to explain events such as September 11.

Rather, I view faith and science crystallizing during a crisis, especially a personal crisis. First, crises help us re-evaluate our science. Not only the facts of science but the scientific method itself is constantly evolving. Thomas Kuhn introduced the now popular concept of "paradigm shifts" to describe the history of scientific thought.² For example, the conflict of Einstein's theory of relativity with Newton's laws of gravity and motion led to a paradigm shift, a new way of thinking about science. Science is never certain and never static. Those of us who work as scientists must keep an open mind and, above all else, recognize our limitations (for it is in such recognition that we move to the next level). We must keep science and technology in their place if science and technology are to continue to serve us. There is no ultimate security in science. Crises continually remind the scientist and the non-scientist of this fact.

So where do we find ultimate security? We find it in the creator of the universe. That creator provides the ground from which science grows. Yet just as the farmers during the time of Jesus, knowing what they did about planting and harvesting, could not always predict and assume a bountiful harvest (though all harvests came from God), we cannot assume that science will provide for all our needs. We live in a world of uncertainty. Crises such as September 11 shake us to our core. Crises in our lives often precipitate crises in our faith in God and science, as well as conflicts in our understanding of the relationship between the two. But crises also provide the opportunity for us to crystallize our beliefs about faith and science. Our faith in the all-powerful God is the nidus (the breeding place) for crystallizing our views about science, history, human nature, and the future. We live in a time of uncertainty, yet God brings a foundation to all our human inquiries.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002).
- 2 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970).