

How Religious Beliefs are Compatible with Scientific Thought

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Opening Words

Science, as you all probably know, is the foundation of my career. And to me it coexists with my spirituality. I am but one example which demonstrates that faith and science can live in harmony. But that is not that case for many people in this country. Both science and religion can help one's personal development as well as improve a society. What happens to a society when a large portion of the population rejects science, for any reason? It becomes stagnant and gives way to competing societies which place a higher significance on science.

Conversely, what happens to a society that promotes scientific and technological advancement without respect for morality or faith? That is when the worst of human-caused atrocities occur. Societies that are able to promote science AND a consistent set of compassionate and guiding morals are the societies which thrive. On an individual level, there is significant benefit to being both at peace with your spirituality, and understanding of how science influences our perspective.

Children's Story: the story of Galileo Galilei

Galileo Galilei, was born in the city of Pisa, Italy in the year 1564. And he is now known as the father of modern science.

He liked to do experiments with anything he could get his hands on. He was the first person to show that heavy objects, like bowling balls, and light objects, like golf balls, fall to the ground at the same speed.

He also liked to tinker with telescopes and make them better and better to look up at the stars and planets.

But he noticed something funny about the planets. They seemed to move around the sun! He wanted to tell everybody about his new discovery, but there was a problem.

Back then, everybody thought that the earth was the center of the universe. They thought the sun, the moon, the planets and even all of the stars were angels that flew around the Earth, because the bible said so. Galileo's research made the Roman Catholic Church very angry.

The church was also in charge of making sure everybody followed the laws. They thought that Galileo was breaking the law because he was arguing with what the bible said.

But Galileo stood by his science. He kept on telling people that the planets move around the sun. He saw it happen with his telescopes! The church was worried that if they let Galileo break the law by questioning the bible, other people would start questioning it for other reasons. So they put him on trial for, *blasphemy* and found him guilty. His punishment was to stay in his house for the rest of his life, he couldn't go outside and see his friends or tell anybody about science. It was like being in a time out, *forever*

Many many years, over 350 years, passed. It wasn't until 1992, the year after I was born, that the church apologized for punishing Galileo and said that he was right. Because, the planets DO go around the sun. Thankfully, he wrote down *everything*, so we can learn about his important discoveries today.

Reading: [Dr. Neil deGrasse Tyson on Discovery and Religion. From an interview with Bill Moyers](#) (Adapted for brevity and clarity)

The history of scientific discovery, is one where at any given moment, there's a frontier. There tends to be an urge for people, especially religious people, to assert across that boundary: into the unknown lies the handiwork of God. Isaac Newton himself even said it. He had his laws of gravity and motion and he was explaining the moon and the planets. He doesn't mention God for any of that. And then he gets to the limits of what his equations can calculate. And he says, "I can't quite figure this out. Maybe God steps in and makes it right every now and then."

It was this point of natural mystery where God was invoked. This, over time, has been described by philosophers as the God of the gaps. If that's where you're going to put your God in this world, then God is an ever-receding pocket of scientific ignorance. If God is the unknown mysteries of the universe, scientists are tackling these mysteries every day, one by one. If you're going to stay religious at the end of the conversation, God should mean more to you than just where science has yet to tread.

Sermon

My inspiration for this service came from a session at a conference on science policy I attended in February. The session by a neuroscientist at Arizona State University, Dr. Sarah Brownell was entitled, "How Can We Teach Evolution to Religious Students Who May Be Resistant?" [The session was also related to a peer-reviewed scientific article](#). She said that students who do not accept the basis of evolution have significant detriments to their continued education in biology. Dr. Brownell found that directly addressing the perceived conflict between evolution and religion during a series of lectures resulted in 50% fewer students who perceived such a conflict, including both religious and nonreligious students. The most important aspect of this new method was highlighting the different questions that are addressed by science and religion.

The reason why science and religion can coexist is because they are different methods of finding *different* truths. The questions that each address are vastly different. But, there is one similarity: curiosity. Sparrow (the

director of religious education) told me that the focus of Spirit Play classes for children of this congregation is the phrase “I wonder.” One must be curious enough to ask questions in the first place in order to find answers. I think it is apparent the children of this congregation are quite curious.

Science, addresses questions related to how our world functions: What are the forces of nature? How do they affect our world? And, how can we control them? These are all questions where we can design experiments to document observations and generate new questions about why we got that particular result. Science uncovers the truth about things that have already existed in a physical form, we just did not understand them before the experiment. On the other hand, religion addresses philosophical questions to guide morality: What is the purpose of life? What does it mean to be a good person? How did existence begin? Is there an afterlife? Is there a God or other supernatural power directing the forces of nature? These questions are not testable. There is no physical evidence to point towards one answer or another. That is where religion and *faith* come into play.

Going back to the evolution example. Evolution is a natural phenomenon that is demonstrated to occur. We have a whole planet’s worth of evidence to support it. We can design experiments to better understand how it functions. I have personally performed such experiments. However, science cannot say whether evolution was created or influenced by a supernatural power. Science cannot say what the PURPOSE of evolution is. But as a spiritual scientist, I have faith that there is one.

Closing Words

I believe that, yes, life does have a greater purpose. But, before I touch on that, I think a bigger issue must be addressed. My question to you all is: If there were no living things to observe the universe, does the universe still exist?My answer is a universe devoid of life is functionally the same as not existing, because there is nobody around to experience it. Life was brought into this universe with one goal: pass on genetic information to the next generation, to propagate life. Essentially, the goal of life is to evolve and expand the concept of what the universe IS. I believe the purpose of life is to be the entity which observes, understands, and expands the complexity of the universe.

Our species has evolved to be intelligent enough to understand the basic forces of nature and escape confines of our home planet. We have also developed several technologies which pose potentially existential threats to all of known life, and therefore, the universe. However, we have the means to sustain life on this planet in near perpetuity. Additionally, we may soon have the means to sustain life in distant solar systems, thus significantly increasing the footprint of life in this universe. But, in order to colonize the stars, we must find the moral and political will to this planet remains habitable for generations to come; we must convince our society to stop burning fossil fuels and avoid nuclear warfare. We must take care of all forms of life for our species to thrive. All living things are interconnected and co-beneficial, because all living things have the same goal. But most importantly, all living things have a unique strategy of being, a unique perspective of the universe. Who are we to say that our way is best?