

If God exists... then can science and faith coexist?

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Text: Genesis 1:1-5; 26-31

Theme: Does science keep pushing God to the gaps of our understanding and knowledge with the end result that eventually there will be no need for God? Does belief in evolution mean that a person cannot believe in God? Can science and faith coexist? Yes if one looks at the bigger picture and doesn't lock God into a literal prison.

I would like to end the year with a bang. In light of the sermon I am preaching I should probably say "Big Bang" because today I am going to talk about creation, science, evolution, and faith. I would like to begin a new sermon series that will perhaps be the most controversial, thought-provoking, and significant to your faith journey of my sermon series so far. The series emerged from the New York Times Bestseller's list and a new energized and polarized debate between evangelical atheists and many believers in the major monotheistic religions.

Most specifically it is a response to Richard Dawkins' latest book, *"The God Delusion"* and Sam Harris' book *"Letter to a Christian Nation"* which are sustained and nasty attacks on religion, God, and those who are deluded and immature enough to believe. Dawkins, who believes that religion is the root of all evil, writes in the preface, "If this book works as I intend, religious leaders who open it will be atheists when they put it down."¹

Well in my case his book did not work as he intended. In fact it strengthened my faith but in the process it made me think. He revealed many problems with organized religion and radical fundamental theologies and at times seemed to be headed in the right direction but then veered wildly off course with great lapses of logic. In fact he became a nasty fundamentalist atheist and focused on the crazy things the characters on the fringe of religions do and made them into the norm. As a fundamentalist he set everything up in black versus white arguments that were unnecessarily polarizing, but they were thought provoking.

My series has been constructed as a rebuttal to many of his major points like his firm belief that science destroys faith and eliminates our need for God - which will be today's sermon topic. On future Sundays I will discuss why so many bad things are done in the name of religion, why belief in God has generated so much bloodshed throughout history, and what do we make of all those crazy passages in the Bible that make no sense today? One of the sermons you will not want to miss deals with question of suffering in a world cared for by a loving God.

This series will probably raise more questions than it answers but I hope that it gets you to thinking and reading on your own. I have enclosed in your packets for today a bibliography of good books to read and also some questions to consider.

Now some of you may be asking how can a preacher present a series with the title, "IF God Exists?" Or as one person put it, "How can a pastor who has dedicated his life to the church and has gone through seminary have doubts about God?" My response is simple. How can I not? How can you not? When you look at the headlines telling of assassinations, wars, ethnic cleansing, disease, and corruption don't you wonder where God is in the mix? Even the great spiritual leaders of the past acknowledged times they called the "dark night of the soul" where they questioned and doubted. The psalms are as full of doubts as they are of praise.

There are times when I thank God for the wise words of theologian Paul Tillich who said, “Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.”² Long before Tillich, Martin Luther once said, “Only God and certain madmen have no doubts.” I feel better already.

C.S. Lewis, one of the greatest Christian writers and theologians of modern times, believed that doubts were good in our faith development because they make us examine our faith. He writes, “If ours is an examined faith we should be unafraid to doubt. If doubt is eventually justified then we were believing that which was not worth believing, but if doubt is answered, our faith has grown stronger, it knows God more certainly, and can enjoy God more deeply.”³ This statement comes from a man who started his faith journey as an atheist and it was in the exploration of his doubts that he became a believer. Finally after years of searching and struggling he became one of the most powerful and insightful writers about Christianity and has helped many atheists and agnostics through to faith.

One more thing before I actually start today’s topic. I would like to define a few concepts that I will be using frequently in the sermon. In order to do that I would like to create a continuum of faith and start at the one end with atheism. Most simply stated atheism is the belief that there is no God or gods. Dawkins who is more generous in his descriptions states, “An atheist believes there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no supernatural creative intelligence lurking behind the observable universe, no soul that outlasts the body and no miracles.”⁴

Agnostics would occupy the next position and they are often referred to as people who don’t care if they believe or don’t believe or as some have labeled them “apathetic non-believers.” To be more charitable, we might define them as people who doubt whether it is possible at all to believe or disbelieve in God so they don’t waste their time in the pursuit.

The next position across the faith continuum would be occupied by deists. They are those folks who believe in a God who created the universe, set the gears in motion, and then went away because he had other things that were more important to do. At his best Einstein was a deist and so were the founding fathers of our nation.

Finally the last position on this continuum is the theist, or the one who believes in a God who not only created the universe and all of its inhabitants but continues to be intimately involved in caring for them. I would dare say that most of us sitting in this room today are theists. We believe in a God who loves us so much that he would send his only son to be with us. Sound familiar?

Of course there are all sorts of gradations of each of these four positions. For example there are some theists who believe that God rarely intervenes with miracles and would never change the rules that were set into motion at the beginning of time and there are some who think that God is so intimately involved that God finds them parking spots.

Now I can begin today’s question can science and religion coexist? It is an important question and should not be quickly pushed aside. We live in a highly technological society where there is a battle raging for the hearts and minds of humanity. Those folks on the atheistic end of the spectrum would note the great advances made by science and would triumphantly declare that science has filled in the gaps of understanding and that now belief in God is outmoded superstition. On the other end of the spectrum the theists would say truth is derived from putting your faith in God and all the advances of science and technology are threatening and dangerous. The voices are shrill from both camps.

Collisions between science and religion are not new to our generation. One only has to look back to the early 1600s when Galileo turned his telescope skyward and started making some calculations that concluded the sun was the center of the universe and not the earth. Religious leaders called his ideas

the work of the devil and “mathematicians should be banished as the authors of all heresies.”⁵ I had a bad math teacher once but I don’t know if I would have gone as far as to banish him.

Science and religion have battled for years. The battle lines are drawn on the issue of abortion and when does life actually begin, on stem cell research, on cloning, and on evolution or the newest theory Intelligent Design. For the sake of this sermon I would like to deal with evolution as one of those very contentious areas that seems to polarize the two camps and make discussions and agreement impossible.

Richard Dawkins is a scientist – more specifically an evolutionary biologist and professor at Oxford University in England. Standing on the principles of Darwinian natural selection he declares that God did not design or create the universe, but the universe randomly designed and created itself. The concept of God or gods came after this creation process when humankind was immature and was looking for an explanation to a process they could not understand. Now that science has explained it, then God should go away and with it religion.

Since he believes there is nothing that exists outside of the natural world then everything that is within the physical world can be tested and proven to exist or not. God therefore, or at least the “hypothesis of God” should be tested by science and in the process why don’t we throw in the creation stories of Genesis. Disproving the Genesis stories would go a long way to disproving God and would be a great blow to those Creationists who give him great headaches. So let’s look at creation again.

I confess I am a creationist. I am not a creationist with a capital “C” but a creationist none the less. Creationism is a word that was hijacked by the literalists and has lost its beauty and meaning. The smaller “c” creationists, like myself, believe that God had a hand in creation but didn’t do it along the literal roadmap of seven days. I will go gently here because at last count nearly 40% of Americans believe in what some call Young Earth Creationism. That means that the earth was created in 4004 BC and that all the evidence to the contrary can be explained away. That means the beautiful passages that were read in part today are literal rather than poetic. I believe the opposite. I believe they tell why God created the universe and humankind and not literally how.

Let me tell you another version of the story in which I can still be a creationist and acknowledge the wonders of science. The universe began 14 billion years ago as an infinitely dense and dimensionless point of pure energy and exploded spraying planets, suns, stars, and all sorts of debris across the emptiness. This idea of the Big Bang theory sounds like it is antithetical to the Genesis stories but it is not. Unlike Dawkins’ story of random evolution this story cries out for a divine explanation. Something initiated the bang, something outside of nature which means there was “supernatural involvement.” But the story continues and gets better.

Cosmologists speculate that over the next nine billion years galaxies are formed, nuclear fusion creates the energy to ignite stars and suns, those suns burned out and exploded sending out carbon based planets. Our sun was probably a third generation star formed 5 billion years ago. Our planet earth was formed 4.55 billion years ago, plus or minus a few million years. 550 million years ago our planet cooled enough to grow multi-celled organisms, followed by plants 150 million years later. Animals appeared 370 million years ago and dinosaurs roamed 230 million BC. Humankind appeared on the scene 195,000 years ago. When you put the creation story into a 24 hour day, humankind has only been around for the last second of the day⁶.

After spending days reading scientific theories that were way out of my field of expertise, I realized two things – the possibilities of creating a planet where humankind could exist are extremely remote and God or a supernatural power was very much involved. My reading of cosmology reinforced my belief that God exists outside of natural laws and launched a process of creation the end goal of

humankind. My reading illustrated the beauty and wonder of a story written 3,500 years ago trying to make sense of creation. It explains something scientists can't – the why.

But that brings us to the problem of evolution. To answer this I turn to Francis Collins who is one of the world's leading scientists and was the head of the Human Genome Project where more than 2,000 scientists from around the world mapped the secret of the elusive code of human DNA. This man who broke a code that is 3 billion characters long, this man who could have said now I unlocked the secrets to human life and there is no longer a need for God, this man said it reinforced his belief in a supernatural Creator and he called the DNA code the "Language of God."

I figured he would be a good one to go to for understanding of where science and faith come down on evolution. Collins is a firm believer in evolution and he says evolution presents no problems with his understanding of God or with his faith. He explains evolution as a process guided by a supernatural force but without all the contrivances of latest theory called "Intelligent Design."⁷ He and other scientists have come up with a concept of evolutionary theory call "theistic evolution" that is entirely compatible with everything science teaches in the natural world while also being entirely compatible with the great monotheistic religions of the world.⁸

Collins joins a number of top scientists who believe there doesn't have to be a war of worldviews. They understand that science is the best tool to explore and explain the natural, physical, and material world around us but is powerless to answer questions like "Why did the universe come into being?" "What is the meaning of life?" "What happens after we die?" Those are the questions of faith.

Science and faith can coexist as long as we don't look at them as enemies of each other. When we choose one worldview to the detriment of the other we deny truth and diminish the nobility of humankind. Collins states, "The God of the Bible is also the God of the genome. He can be worshiped in a cathedral as well as a 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."⁹

¹ Richard Dawkins, *"The God Delusion,"* Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, MA, 2006, p5.

² Paul Tillich, *"The Dynamics of Faith,"* Harper and Row, New York, NY, 1957, p20.

³ From sermon by Adam Hamilton, "God? Conversations with an Atheist."

⁴ Dawkins, p14

⁵ A.D. White, *"A History of the Warfare of Science and Theology in Christendom,"* New York, 1898) see www.santafe.edu/~shalizi/white

⁶ Francis Collins, *"The Language of God"* Free Press, New York, NY 2006

⁷ See *"Language of God"* pages 181-195 for more details

⁸ Collins, p200-201

⁹ Collins, 211