

**January 16, 2011**

Living And Talking With Atheists  
How Does Science Fit With Religion?  
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(Genesis 1:1-4 NRSV) In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, {2} the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. {3} Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. {4} And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.

Most Christians live in a bubble. We surround ourselves with people who look like us and think like us.

We prefer people who think the same politically as well as religiously as we do.

The truth is most of our friends are just like us.

But the world is filled with lots of people who aren't just like us.

People who view the world through very different sets of eyes.

We can ignore them → or we can try to learn from them.

Most scientists see the world very differently than most religious people do. And that doesn't matter whether we are talking about Christians, Jews, Muslims, or most other religious traditions.

Scientists just view the world differently.

They operate with a different set of assumptions.

Assumptions that at time, appear to be totally contradictory from the Christian, or religious viewpoint.

Is there any common ground that we share?  
Can science and religion coexist together?

That's a tough question, and is the first one we are going to try and tackle over the next few weeks as I explore with you how we can live and be in conversation with Atheists.

Over the next few weeks we are going to be in dialog with some of the issues that seem to always come up when we talk with our friends who are atheists.

Issues such as:

- When Christianity seems full of hate
- When religion has been used to justify killing
- Some of the truly bizarre passages that are found in scripture
- The issue of suffering

I will then conclude by sharing with you why, despite all of these issues, I continue to be a follower of the way of Jesus and why I believe that way is important.

So we are going to be busy!

But today, I want to start at the beginning.  
Can religion and science coexist?

In order to prepare for this sermon and series, I started by reading a couple of interesting and provocative books. I don't know if any of you have read any of them, but if you have, I would love to sit down and engage in a dialog about them.

The first, is one that I might not recommend, because he is at times difficult to read and sustain his logic. That is a book that came out a few years ago by Richard Dawkins who is a British evolutionary biologist. He is unabashedly and really evangelically an atheist, and has created a foundation with:

The mission of the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science is to support scientific education, critical thinking and evidence-based understanding of the natural world in the quest to overcome religious fundamentalism, superstition, intolerance and human suffering.

Dawkins book, **THE GOD DELUSION** is fascinating. He states that his goal, is for any believer to become an atheist by the time they are finished reading the book.

Well, I am still a follower of Jesus, but Dawkins is correct in much of what he says.

The other book I read was one that Dawkins recommended, and it is by Sam Harris. It is a much easier (and smaller) book and if you are interested in exploring this subject more, I would highly recommend it.

Sam Harris is a philosopher and has a PHD in neuroscience and in 2006 wrote: **A Letter to A Christian Nation**. In this book he basically argues that God is no longer necessary and it is time for religious people to get over it and move on.

I want to start today with a simple question → one that Dawkins and Harris would both answer with a resounding NO to, and that is → Can one be an intelligent, thinking person and still believe in God?

Interesting question → isn't it?

But I want to start with the whole issue of DOUBT.

Somewhere along the line, we have been taught that doubt and faith don't go together.

You cannot be a person of faith and doubt.

But that is just wrong.

Let me share with you some great quotes about doubt:

There is a great Chinese proverb that says: "With great doubts come great understanding; with little doubts come little understanding."

OK, but that's not from a Christian perspective.

Martin Luther, once said: "Knowledge and doubt are inseparable to man. The sole alternative to 'knowledge-with-doubt' is no knowledge at all. Only God and certain madmen have no doubts!"

Alfred Lord Tennyson - "There lives more faith in honest doubt, Believe me, than in half the creeds."

C. S. Lewis - "If ours is an examined faith, we should be unafraid to doubt."

There is nothing wrong with wrestling with our faith. The examined life is something we should strive for.

I don't believe that God gave us brains and then wants us to check them at the door.

So, doubt, questioning, isn't a bad thing → I would tell you that it is a good thing!

As you look at the issues, that so often seem to come to the forefront, it isn't surprising that there is a movement in science to distance itself from religion.

There is a strong push in the United States to support the idea that the world is only about 6000 years old. We read about this battle all the time in the news. In 2007 we saw the building to the creation museum in Kentucky. This museum cost \$27 million to build, and last year received its 1 millionth visitor. The whole purpose of this museum is to prove that the story that is found in Genesis is the actual way the world was created.

We know better!

We understand that Genesis was written almost 4,000 years ago, and at that time it was how people could explain where they came from. And while it was accurate to their understanding of the world → it may not be "accurate."

We understand that Genesis is not meant to be taken literally, but is a poetic way of understanding the world.

Virtually every scientist, when they hear the call to push for the teaching of creationism in school would tell you that it is like fingernails on a chalkboard.

Professor Robert Winston remarked about the museum:

"I admit I was dismayed by what I saw at the Ken Ham museum. It was alarming to see so much time, money and effort being spent on making a mockery of hard won scientific knowledge. And the fact that it was being done with such obvious sincerity, somehow made it all the worse."

The National Center for Science Education submitted a petition by scientists in Indiana, Kentucky and Ohio (the states closest to the museum). Over 800 signed saying:

"We, the undersigned scientists at universities and colleges in Kentucky, Ohio, and Indiana, are concerned about scientifically inaccurate materials at the Answers in Genesis museum. Students who accept this material as scientifically valid are unlikely to succeed in science courses at the college level. These students will need remedial instruction in the nature of science, as well as in the specific areas of science misrepresented by Answers in Genesis."

When you look at the data in recent polls that show that 40% of Americans believe that

"God created man pretty much in his present form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so."

I don't know about you → but that shocks me.

When I see a statistic like that it is easy to understand how somebody like Richard Dawkins would argue that religion and science can never come to an accommodation.

He says in his book:

Why any circles worthy of the name of sophisticated remain within the church is a mystery

And while he might argue that it can't → I believe that it can.

One of the big issues, where we may find some level of accommodation is in the understanding of the Big Bang Theory.

The Big Bang theory was first proposed by Georges Lemaitre, a Priest and physicist, in 1927.

The Big Bang theory, states that the universe and everything in it began initially with a big bang. What caused the big bang is unknown at this time. Some would argue, it is the hand of God.

The reality is God cannot be proved. At least not with the knowledge that we have right now.

But at the same time, God cannot be disproved.

The way that I have come to understand God, would not be far from how Albert Einstein defined God.

Einstein said:

A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty - it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude; in this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man.

This understanding of God, of Einstein's is not all that different than the self revelation we have of God in the Bible.

When God encountered Moses at the burning bush, Moses asked God who he was. And God's answer was profound:

(Exodus 3:14 NRSV) God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

God defines God as existence → or in the words of the great theologian, Paul Tillich, "The ground of all being."

God is

God is everything

God is creation

But I need to be careful to say, that Einstein did not believe in a personal God.

He did not believe in God, as God has been traditionally understood by the church.

- A god who performed miracles
- A god who could bend or break the laws of nature

The challenge for us as Christians is to be open.

Open to inquiry

Open to science

Open to doubt

If we are, then I believe that we can be in dialog with our friends who are atheists.

But if we refuse to be open.

If we believe that the Bible is the blueprint for how the world was created, and has all the answers to the scientific questions → then we will be at a logger head with our scientific and atheistic friends.

And we will never be able to share the Way of Jesus with them in a meaningful way.

May God give us the courage to inquire and the willingness to learn.