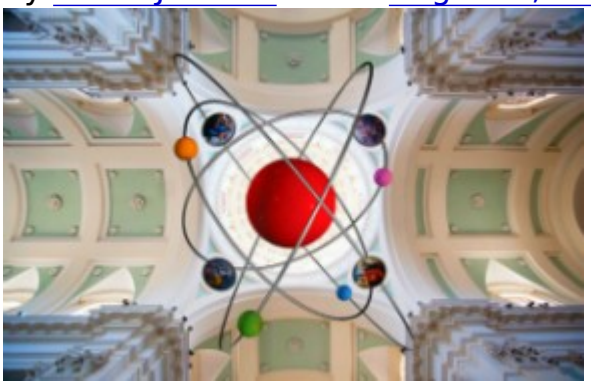
Scientists welcome: A challenge for congregations

by David J. Wood in the August 5, 2015 issue



Daniel Richardson (church photo © Hemera; atom rendering © iStock)

By and large mainline congregations have situated themselves outside the debates over religion and science, leaving it to the young earth creationists and the militant atheists to fight it out. Unfortunately, the rationale for disengagement from that shrill debate has resulted in a disengagement from science altogether. The congregations that claim they are at peace with science do little to articulate why or how that is possible. An alternative narrative to that of hostility between religion and science remains ambiguous and inarticulate within the church and in the public imagination.

While in England recently I had the opportunity to visit the site of the historic Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge, founded in 1874. It was at this site that J. J. Thomson discovered the electron (1897), Ernest Rutherford split the atom (1932), and Francis Crick and James Watson identified the structure of DNA (1953). Twenty-nine researchers associated with the Cavendish Laboratory have won Nobel prizes.

Our tour guide pointed out the words carved in Latin across the top of the great wooden doors: “Magna opera Domini esquisira in ornnes coluntares ejrts.” It was a quote from Psalm 111:2, “Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them.” Our guide went on to note that when the lab was relocated in the 1970s to West Cambridge, the faculty insisted that the new doors be inscribed with the same words—in English.

One biblical inscription at one scientific lab does not resolve the tensions between religion and science, but it does call into question the standard narrative of inevitable conflict and warfare between religion and science that holds sway in the public imagination. At a minimum it suggests that even in Cambridge devotion to God is by no means antithetical to scientific inquiry.

Interestingly, it was also in 1874 that John William Draper published his *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*. According to historians David C. Linberg and Ronald L. Numbers, Draper's volume, along with Andrew Dickson White's *The Warfare of Science* (1876) and his two-volume *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896), served to "instill in the public mind a sense of the adversarial relationship between science and religion." His military rhetoric "captured the imagination of generations of readers."

Sadly, the war metaphor has proven difficult to dislodge. That difficulty is intensified by the antiscience rhetoric streaming from the likes of Ken Ham, president of the young earth creationist ministry Answers in Genesis, which operates the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky.

As long as the relationship between religion and science turns on the question of the interpretation of Genesis, mainline pastors and congregations can justifiably opt out of the conversation. Having essentially accepted the validity of evolution and a more nuanced reading of Genesis, they do not have a dog in that fight. However, when the issue is religious belief in the 21st century, the absence in the church of a conversation about science raises serious concerns.

At the beginning of *A Secular Age*, philosopher Charles Taylor poses the following question: "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?" In the 700-plus pages that follow, Taylor takes the reader on a fascinating historical, philosophical, and—to a surprising degree—theological exploration of that question. As one would expect, the rise of science is no small part of that exploration.

Taylor is critical of the view that the decline of religion is directly proportional to the rise of science. The story is far more complicated and intertwined. Neither religion nor science can be understood from the standpoint of triumph or defeat.

> The salient feature of Western societies is not so much a decline of religious faith and practice, though there has been lots of that, more in some societies than in others, but rather a mutual fragilization of different religious positions, as well as of the outlooks both of belief and unbelief.

We cannot live in the 21st century and not be aware that our take on the world is one take among many. Whether believing or unbelieving, we cannot help experiencing what Taylor calls “cross-pressure.” No one escapes the experience of cross-pressure no matter how loudly they shout down the legitimacy of the other.

The experience of cross-pressure Taylor elaborates is not identified as something one escapes or resolves. Rather it is the condition in which we all live—believer and nonbeliever alike. In this understanding, science is not at one pole and religion at the other. The tension is far more interesting: between experiences of immanence and transcendence, incarnation and excarnation, enchantment and disenchantment. These are just a few of the ways Taylor names the experience of religious believing in our time.

Engaging science is not all that is needed to bring these tensions to the surface and into creative, constructive relationship. However, it is impossible for the tensions to be named or understood if science and its multifaceted impact are not part of the conversation. To ignore the power of science to interpret the world is to impoverish theological reflection and leave unaddressed the lived experience of congregants.

The position of nonengagement has been especially challenged in recent years with the rise of the New Atheists—a number of whom are highly revered scientists—who claim that, from a scientific viewpoint, religion is at best stupid and delusional and at worst poisonous and destructive.

Judging from the Scientists in Congregations project, which ran from 2011 to 2014 and issued grants ranging from $10,000 to $30,000, many scientists have felt marginalized within their congregations. It is striking to hear so many of them speak of how life-changing it is for them to be recognized by the church for their work. Though the church has not silenced them in any explicit way, they rarely hear themselves addressed or their world taken seriously. When scientific work is noted, it tends to be in a pejorative tone. Scientists have gotten the message that their domain of knowledge is not at home in the life of the church.

Pastors who have engaged issues of science are surprised by how responsive their congregants are. It is as if they have stumbled across a hunger they never realized existed.

In my own congregation, highlighting the scientists in our midst—all of whom happened to be physicians—resulted in the largest attendance in the history of adult education events. We also brought in some outside speakers dealing with neuroscience, the history of religion and science, cosmology, the Bible and science, evolution, and geophysics. Those gatherings were just as successful in terms of attendance and energy. People were not so much gaining new knowledge as entering into an appreciative inquiry of the interaction between science and faith.

Physicians talked openly of their frustrations over being called upon to do what is beyond their powers. They talked about the limits of medicine, about what a difference their faith makes in their practice, and about how they endeavor to be faithful persons.

One of our presenters was Xavier Le Pichon, a geophysicist who was instrumental in establishing the field of plate tectonics. He talked about his experience descending to the floor of the Pacific Ocean in the early 1980s. At the time, it was the deepest depth attempted by a human being. He described the experience of descending to where the earth's crust is being constantly renewed as akin to being present at the moment of creation. The creatures that came into view, never before observed by a human being, exemplified their evolutionary character. Because of the intense darkness, there was no need for them to hide from predators: their colors were brilliant. Their bizarre shapes were adapted to the unique environment.

For Le Pichon, the encounter was evocative: "I felt like Adam. For me, all I could do was pray and give thanks."

The audience was riveted by his account. What gave his testimony such power was that it was a story of faith inextricably bound up with the passion of a scientist. His account had none of the triumphalist tone of efforts to show how science proves the existence of God. Rather, it was the testimony of a scientist experiencing God in the course of his discovery of nature. And it was unequivocal doxology.

Congregants were surprised by how impressed those outside the congregations were by the church's appreciative engagement with science. They saw the degree to which those outside the church assume that churches must come down on the

antiscience end of the spectrum. While congregation members may have understood themselves to be noncombatants in the war between science and faith, outsiders presumed they were fully invested.

Churches ought to be sites for the intelligent, lively, convivial engagement between religion and science. Such conversations will not be the kind that set out to prove somehow that God fills the narrowing gaps of unexplained territory which science will never be able to fill. Rather, they will seek to engage the world that science discloses as evocative of God's manifold creative Spirit. Science with its manifold discoveries and descriptions does not threaten the existence of God. More often than not, science discloses how thoroughly mystery interpenetrates all things.

The English physicist Sir William Bragg did groundbreaking work with X-rays, for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1915. On one occasion he remarked, "Sometimes people ask if religion and science are opposed to one another. They are—in the sense that the thumb and fingers of my hand are opposed to one another. It is an opposition by means of which anything can be grasped."

We live in a culture that assumes religion is not a subject to be taken up in public schools. By default, mainline congregations have sent the message that science is not a subject to be taken up in religious communities.

It is no wonder, then, that children grow up assuming that religion and science do not mix—or worse, that scientific understanding equates with an intellectual maturity and that faith represents a lack of courage to see the world as it truly is. It is no wonder that many adults think religious life belongs in that diminishing cognitive space reserved for a sentimental loyalty to things learned before one grows up. "If our faith has remained at the stage of the immature," Taylor warns, "then the story that materialism equals maturity can seem plausible."

Read the sidebar list of resources on religion & science.