

Living the Questions: **Does Faith Make Sense in a World of Science?**

Genesis 1:1–5, 26–2:3 • Matthew 22:15–22

Matt. 22:15 Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. **16** They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. **17** Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

Matt. 22:18 But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? **19** Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, **20** and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?"

Matt. 22:21 "Caesar's," they replied.

Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

Matt. 22:22 When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

A woman was trying to raise her daughter as a Christian. However, she was getting very little support from her husband who thought Christianity was ridiculous. In fact, he often tried to undermine her efforts. One Sunday, the mother and her daughter were coming home from worship and the daughter was excited about learning about creation. God created Adam. Then God created Eve. And it was pretty exciting to think that God had done all this and that both of them were created by God in God's image. The daughter got home and with grand excitement told her father all that she had learned. When she was finished, he said, "Honey, I know you are very excited about this but I need to tell that what the church is teaching is just a story. There may be some lessons to be learned about being a good person. But it is a story that is just not supported by science." So he told her about evolution and how humans were descendants from apes. The little girl took it all in with a somber face and said that she understood. The father thought he understood too. He said, "I know that you are disappointed but it is better for you to learn the facts than to grow up believing a story is true." The little girl went to her mother and told her everything that her dad had told and said, "How could they both be true? Daddy says these are the facts." The mother replied, "Oh those are the facts all right. He was telling you about his side of the family." I think this is very funny, but I also find it very sad. I think it shows the kind of antagonism that has grown up between science and religion. The conflict in many people's minds has gotten to the point where many ask, "Does faith even make sense in a world of science?"

This morning I would like to pose three questions to help us think about this, but before we get to the questions, let me get two pet peeves off my chest. **Pet peeve #1: Believers who say, "Faith doesn't have to make sense. Just believe."** It reminds me of my mom. I'd ask her why, and she would say "Because I said so." Of course, she was my mom so... but I can't imagine why God would give us minds that can think and reason and make sense of

things if we weren't supposed to use our minds. One of the things I love about most of the Congregationalists I have ever known is that we don't have to check our brains at the door.

Pet Peeve #2: Scientists who ridicule anyone who believes in something beyond what they can prove. Why does that bug me? Because so much of science rests in having faith in the work of other scientists. Does a biologist understand all the physics behind a car's design? Of course not! They get in, turn the key and go. Scientists have faith in things too. Indeed, some scientists talk about science in almost religious terms. If we are going to have a conversation about faith, then let us keep in mind that faith is something we all use, even if we don't all believe in all the same things. There...I feel better already! So back to our questions...

Question #1: Do science and faith have to be on opposing teams? It hasn't always been so. For many thousands of years, science and faith were two ways of asking questions about life, the universe and everything. This idea of the split seems to harken back to the way the Catholic Church in the late Middle Ages responded to Copernicus' discovery that the earth revolved around the sun. Science yielded information, and as science was trying to wrap its head around a new idea, and the Catholic Church tried to deny it. But I think it also has to do with Darwin's theory of evolution, which seemed to make the Bible's version of Creation not possible. What these two episodes highlight is that really no one is served when science sneers at faith, or when faith refuses to think about what science is learning. Both are interested in knowing the truth, and letting the truth guide us.

Question #2: Are science and religion mutually exclusive? There's an idea out there that people should let science answer the questions it is best at—anything that is physical, things that can be tested and studied—and let religion answer the questions it is best at—anything science can't study. This idea that "God is in the gaps" of scientific knowledge sounds good at first—peaceful co-existence—science will keep its nose out of religion, and religion won't try to teach science. But on closer inspection, it's kind of like when my brother cut a small piece of cake and gave it to me, and then took the rest of the cake for himself. Wait a minute! It turns out that science is asking really interesting questions about how the universe began and how it will end, how life begins and what life is, what it means to be human and how do we relate to each other and many more. If God is the Maker of the universe, then didn't God make the physical stuff too? So why should we cut God out of the physical and empirical pieces? Also, science seems to be really good at figuring out *what* can be done, but not so good at whether something *should* be done. I agree with Albert Einstein, neither a conventional thinker nor a conventional believer, who once famously said, "Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind."¹

Question #3: What do we do in the face of mystery? One of my favorite stories of a door is the story of the Amish boy and his father who went to the big city for the very first time. They were amazed by everything they saw. Having grown up and lived all their lives on a rural farm everything was completely new to them. The Father and son left Ma in the horse buggy and went into this huge skyscraper. As the boy and father entered the building two shiny doors that could move apart and back together again left them spellbound. They stood watching these doors until the son asked his father, "What is this, Father?" The father, never having seen an elevator before, responded, "Son, I have never seen anything like this in my

¹Quoted in Barbara Brown Taylor's *The Luminous Web: Essays on Science and Religion* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 2000), p. 18.

life, I don't know what it is." While the boy and his father were watching wide-eyed, an old lady in a wheel chair rolled up to the moving doors and pressed a button. The doors opened and the lady rolled between them into a small room. The doors closed and the boy and his father watched small circles with numbers in them light up above the doors. They continued to watch the circles light up in the reverse direction. The doors opened up again and a beautiful 24-year-old woman stepped out. The father said to his son, "Boy, go get your mother!"² I think a great response to mystery is to call someone over to see it for themselves. Another great response is to mystery is to test it out and see if it works and how. I suspect the Amish guys will have to reassess their understanding of this small room with the sliding doors. But that's how we learn! Try it. Did it work? Science offers a wonderfully robust way to explore mystery. The deeper science goes into questions, the more impenetrable the mysteries get: why do cells work? what holds atoms together? how can you have chaos and order at the same time? Why is the world of quantum physics so different? In the face of mystery, faith responds with awe. In the face of mystery, faith encourages us to hold onto our questions for which we have no answers, until the answers unfold. Both science and faith delight in mystery—they both recognize that mystery means real questions are at hand.

Do science and faith have to be on opposing teams? Are science and religion mutually exclusive? What do we do in the face of mystery? Does faith make sense in a world of science? I guess you and I will have to make up our own minds. But let me leave you with this thought, the one suggested by Jesus in our passage for today. Someone asked Jesus, "Should people pay taxes?" Jesus calls for a coin. "Whose image is on it?" "Caesar's" they reply. Jesus says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." Is it just about taxes, or is there a deeper, broader meaning? And if so, then the question for us is what bears the image of God?

²www.SermonCentral.com