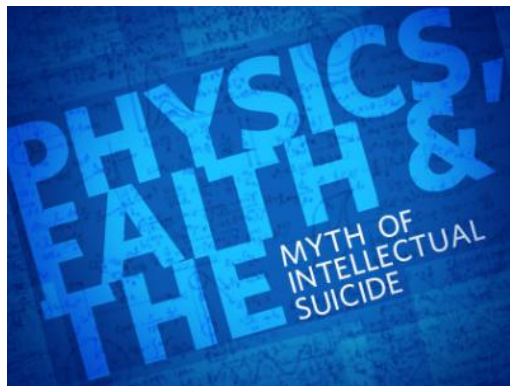


Physics, Faith and the Myth of Intellectual Suicide

By Dean Nelson • 11/11/2013

A world-renowned physicist who taught at Cambridge University in the United Kingdom, John Polkinghorne stepped away from physics midcareer to study theology and became a parish priest in the Anglican Church. Eventually he returned to Cambridge as president of Queens' College until he retired. A member of the Royal Society and knighted by the queen for his work on medical ethics standards, he is one of the world's leading voices on the relationship between faith and science. Here, he tells his story.



Renowned physicist and Anglican priest John Polkinghorne: "You don't have to commit intellectual suicide to be a religious believer; otherwise I wouldn't be one."

Some people in the scientific world think that if you're a scientist and you are a Christian, then at some point in your life, you have committed intellectual suicide. And some people in the religion world think that if you're a Christian and you believe in science, then at some point you don't believe the Bible. As both a Christian and a scientist, people think I'm something like a vegetarian butcher. I have devoted my life to the pursuit of truth. That pursuit has made me a better scientist and a more devout believer in God. Choosing science or religion is like being one-eyed. You can see with one eye, but you don't see everything. We have two eyes and can see much more when we have them both open.

People in the science world questioned my decision to leave physics when I was in my 40s to attend seminary and become a priest in the Anglican Church. One of my colleagues at Cambridge even said to me in private, "John, do you know what you're doing?" But I felt that I had done my bit for physics. Explaining the properties of quarks

was gratifying, but there was another dimension of my life that I had been wanting to pursue, and that was the theological dimension. I wanted to study theology, and I wanted to participate in the activities of the clergy. The Eucharist is very meaningful to me, and being a priest meant I could administer it to others and, hopefully, make it meaningful to them.

My early experience in believing in God came from my parents. I cannot recall a time when I was not a member of the worshipping and believing community of the church. I absorbed Christianity through my pores, growing up. But during my first year at Trinity College at Cambridge, in a Sunday service, the priest told the story of Zacchaeus and how Jesus called out to him as He passed by. Zacchaeus' life was transformed when he responded to the call of Jesus, and I desired something similar. I felt a call for a change and moved to the front of the church when the priest invited us to come forward to pray. It wasn't a devil-to-saint conversion that could be turned into a novel or road show, but a deepening or intensifying experience that built on what had begun at home. It was a moment of commitment—a course correction.

I began to study Scripture rigorously, prayed and attended worship services regularly, but the organization of Christian students, called the Christian Union, took on an atmosphere of rigidity. Instead of being liberating, the Christian faith seemed narrow-minded, fearful of other points of view, including other Christian traditions, and inhibiting. There was a certain bleakness that seemed to be expected of the faithful, which cast something of a shadow.

Years later I found liberation from those shackles by practicing the spiritual disciplines of the Anglican Church, especially the Eucharist.

Two things became key to my wanting to pursue theology in addition to science. One was a retreat I went on where, with the exception of the worship services, silence was the rule. I soon learned how positive the experience of silence was, and how genuinely related I became to the others sharing the silence with me.

The other was a neighborhood Bible study, where the leader showed how Scripture can actually expand one's understanding rather than narrow it.

I didn't have a Damascus Road experience that led me out of the physics world. I saw no handwriting on the wall. I simply prayed about it with my wife and close friends and sought counsel where I could.

When I told my church I wanted to become a priest, they did a very wise thing. They had me attend a retreat so that I could have my vocation tested by the church. These elders were not impressed with my degrees, my research or even my membership in the Royal Society. After a period devoted to discerning whether this move was ordained by God, I was able to move forward. As with any significant change, there are ups and downs where you wonder whether you did the right thing. At such times, it was encouraging to remember that careful thought had been given by others to the wisdom and appropriateness of the move I had made.

Within a few years I was given my own parish, in a village called Blean, which had about 3,000 people in it. Approximately 200 people attended the church. I knocked on a lot of doors, engaged just about everyone in the village in a conversation, conducted weddings, funerals and baptisms. While I was in Blean, I started writing books about science and religion and how the two could be friends, not foes. I thoroughly enjoyed writing about the relationship between the two because I think they have some significant things in common. Science involves an act of faith. We are taught skills and end up knowing more than we can tell. Religious belief isn't shutting your eyes, gritting your teeth, believing six impossible things before breakfast because the Bible tells you that's what you must do. It's a search for a motivated belief—a difficult search—and different people will reach different conclusions about it. But you don't have to commit intellectual suicide to be a religious believer; otherwise I wouldn't be one.

At times I wonder if the Christian faith is too good to be true. When I ask that, then I say to myself, *Then dismiss it and turn away from it.* But I know that I can't. It's not because it's all serenity, either, because it's not. It's more like Psalm 13, where we lament, yet we trust in God. People who have periods of doubt have a deeper commitment. I have never gone to the depths of disbelief, but I have had plenty of doubts. I quiver with the notion that I may be mistaken. But I choose to stand with Christ.

As told to Dean Nelson, founder and director of the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego. His book about Polkinghorne, Quantum Leap: How John Polkinghorne Found God in Science and Religion, was released in 2011.

