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## God vs. Science

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Physicist, theologian, and Anglican priest John Polkinghorne.  
(Photo courtesy Dean Nelson)

John Polkinghorne remembers the day when some of his colleagues thought he had lost his mind. He was already famous as a physicist at Cambridge University for his work in explaining the existence of quarks and gluons, the world's smallest known particles. He had won heaps of awards in his 27 years

there, including membership in Britain's Royal Society, one of the highest honors that can be bestowed on a scientist.

It was the end of the academic year, and he had invited some colleagues to his office for a meeting. At the conclusion, they gathered their papers, ready to leave. "Before you go," Polkinghorne said, "I have something to tell you."

The audience settled back into their chairs. "I am leaving the university to enter the Anglican priesthood. I will be enrolling in seminary next year." Stunned silence filled the room for several seconds until one of his colleagues, an atheist, finally uttered what was probably on everyone's mind: "You don't know what you're doing."

A few others were supportive of his personal choice, but there was a muttered consensus that this beacon of the scientific world had just committed intellectual suicide.

Can religion and science co-exist? Many would say no. Science, after all, deals with what can be measured, tested, and verified. Religion deals with things that can, by definition, only be taken on faith. Today, John Polkinghorne inhabits both worlds, but he understands why this is confusing to some.

"When you say that you're a scientist and a Christian, people sometimes give you a funny look, as if you'd said, 'I'm a vegetarian butcher.' Many people out there think science and religion are actually at war with each other, but I believe that science and religion are friends, not foes."

Science and religion are not mutually exclusive, Polkinghorne argues. In fact, both are necessary to our understanding of the world. "Science asks how things happen. But there are questions of meaning and value and purpose which science does not address. Religion asks why. And it is my belief that we can and should ask both questions about the same event."

As a for-instance, Polkinghorne points to the homey phenomenon of a tea kettle boiling merrily on the stove.

"Science tells us that burning gas heats the water and makes the kettle boil," he says.

But science doesn't explain the "why" question. "The kettle is boiling because I want to make a cup of tea; would you like some?"

"I don't have to choose between the answers to those questions," declares Polkinghorne. "In fact, in order to understand the mysterious event of the boiling kettle, I need both those kinds of answers to tell me what's going on. So I need the insights of science and the insights of religion if I'm to understand the rich and many-layered world in which we live."

Seeing the world from both the perspective of science and the perspective of religion is something Polkinghorne describes as seeing the world with "two eyes instead of one." He explains: "Seeing the

world with two eyes—having binocular vision—enables me to understand more than I could with either eye on its own.”

Polkinghorne was just 47 when he left Cambridge to become a priest in the Anglican Church. The year was 1979. The reason he left his physics post was multi-faceted. He had been part of a neighborhood Bible study and wanted to participate more in the sacraments at his church. Plus, he was ready to move on. “I had done my bit for physics,” he asserts, “and, unlike some other things in life, one doesn’t necessarily get better at physics the older one gets.”

After being ordained, he first served in the village of Blean, just up the hill from Canterbury Cathedral. At first parishioners were leery that this towering intellect would be difficult to understand. But Polkinghorne soon won them over with clarity and reason (that metaphor about the boiling teapot is recalled by one church member), and so his presence was welcomed into the community. In 1986, he returned to Cambridge, first as a chaplain to one of the colleges and eventually as president of Queens’ College, a position he held until he retired in 1996.

Over the years he has preached his unique “binocular vision” theory to explain how a person committed to scientific inquiry could also be committed to the teachings of the Bible. He’s written many books on the harmony of religion and science, served on boards concerned with ethical standards for medical research, and received numerous honors. For his contributions, Polkinghorne was knighted by The Queen. (As a priest, however, he cannot be addressed as “Sir Polkinghorne.”) He’s also a highly regarded public speaker, putting into words a philosophy that is so moderate and reasonable that it was bound to make enemies on both ends of the religious spectrum.

Religious fundamentalists—those who believe in a six-day creation, a literal Adam and Eve, and an earth that is 6,000 years old—tend to repudiate Polkinghorne’s acceptance of evolution, the Big Bang, and a universe that is billions of years old. Bill Hoesch, curator of the Creation and Earth History Museum in Santee, California, derides Polkinghorne’s beliefs as “idol worship.”

Hoesch doesn’t see how scientific theory can enter the picture when the subject is the miracle of creation. “Is [Polkinghorne] just wrong? Yeah. He’s been deluded,” says Hoesch. (Polkinghorne actually toured Hoesch’s museum last November. While there, he stopped at a poster that claimed there was no suggestion of death in the Bible until the sin of Adam and Eve. “It may not be in the Bible, but the evidence is everywhere else,” Polkinghorne said, shaking his head.)



The debate about God’s existence is “the single most important question we face about the nature of reality,” says Polkinghorne. (Photo courtesy Dean Nelson)

On the other extreme, atheists don't exactly cotton to his ideas either. "In the very difficult context of theoretical mathematical physics, John made a real contribution," allows Steven Weinberg, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist from the University of Texas who is also Polkinghorne's friend and debating partner. "As for his religious interests, I'm sure he means well, but I don't find his search for common ground a good thing. There is a relationship between science and faith, I suppose, but science tends to weaken faith.

"I don't want to see John go away," Weinberg adds, laughing. "Just his beliefs."

Religion doesn't have all the answers, Polkinghorne agrees. He points out that magical Biblical explanations for lightning and plague were long ago debunked by science—and that the problems were solved with lightning rods and rat poison. "That's one of the ways science has been helpful to religion," notes Polkinghorne. "Religious explanations make mistakes, and science helps us see that some things are a natural phenomenon. That's helpful to religion. Truth is very beneficial to both sides and helps both see more clearly. It helps and corrects some mistakes. But that doesn't mean all religious belief is a mistake."

And therein lies the key to Polkinghorne's uniqueness: He addresses challenges—even rude ones—from both sides with such grace that it's nearly impossible to be angry with the man, whatever your point of view. "There is no one else in the world like him," said Darrel Falk, biologist, president of the BioLogos Foundation, and author of the book *Coming to Peace with Science*. "He is the best representative of the dialogue between faith and science because he has struggled with—and achieved so much in—both fields. He's the most respected voice out there."

As to the question of which has the clearer view of reality—faith or science?—Polkinghorne answers that it's a false question. "You have to be two-eyed about it. If we had only one eye, then we could say it's religion, because it relates to the deepest value of being human. Science doesn't plumb the depths that religion does. Atheists aren't stupid—they just explain less."

Polkinghorne thinks atheists fail to consider the possibility that there might be more to life than what we can see and test and verify—that life might have transcendent and ultimate meaning. In addition, Polkinghorne argues, atheists have faiths of their own—beliefs that aren't visible, testable, or verifiable any more than religion is, yet they inform one's point of view in a manner similar to religious faith.

Ultimately, people of faith should not be afraid of science because both pursue truth. "Because people of faith worship the God of Truth, they should welcome truth from whatever source it comes," Polkinghorne says. "Not all truth comes from science, but some does. It grieves me when I see Christian people turning their backs on science in a willful way, not taking seriously the insights it has to offer. All truth interacts with each other, and all truth is helpful."

Likewise, people of science do not need to be afraid of faith. "Science doesn't tell you everything. Those who think it does take a very diminished and arid form or view of life."

For Polkinghorne, science made his faith stronger, and that faith made him a better scientist. Both approaches fulfill one of his favorite verses in scripture, I Thessalonians 5:21, which the esteemed physicist paraphrases: Test everything. Hold fast to what is true.

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