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SCIENCE AND FAITH

Interview with Rev Dr Graham Buxton

“God's not against science. It's no good being ignorant of science. In the same way, I don't think scientists should be ignorant of faith.”

Interviewer: Graham, how do you see the relationship between science and faith?

Graham: A friend of mine once likened it to a marriage. I'm married and I have disagreements with my wife from time to time and sometimes we can be in a strong heated argument; but we're not headed for the divorce courts. The fact that science and faith have had tensions there, historically and even now, doesn't mean they're irreconcilable. I don't think science and faith are headed for the divorce courts. I don't think they ever will because science is a gift from God. We are created with this sense of discovery. I think curiosity is one of the gifts that God had given to us. I think imagination is one of the gifts that God has given to us. And all of these can be brought into service in the exploration of this wonderful world in which we live.

Interviewer: Can you give us a picture that illustrates the difference between science and faith?

Graham: Yes, when I listen to music - actually I had a musician in my office this morning, and he was talking about the technical aspects of a particular piece of music. And of course you can describe music in that sort of way. As an academic discipline, or understanding music in terms of its technical attributes and dimensions, but when I listen to a piece of music I don't look through those lenses at all. I listen to music and it does something for me. Sometimes I find myself weeping, and other times it give life to my spirit. It lifts me up and evokes all sorts of deep human feelings within me - and it was meant to do that because music is an artistic expression of the fullness of life. So, it's both and - it's not one or the other. If you have a given reality, say, a kettle is boiling. Why is the kettle boiling? Science says, well because there's burning gas underneath the kettle, but at a personal level, the kettle may be boiling because I want a cup of tea. If you want to get the whole picture, then both actually contribute to an answer, but they come from different angles. It's not that one is wrong and the other is right. It's not that one is unnecessary and the other is necessary. Both of them are valid responses to something that we encounter that's happening in the real world.

Interviewer: Do you think it's fair to summarise science and faith as: science is the how of things and faith is the why or the who behind things?

Graham: I think that's basically where the differences lie. Science, as John Polkinghorne once said, "science is in the business of testing, faith is in the business of trusting." But I actually think there's a convergence between the two. Scientific knowledge can broaden the horizons of religious faith, and the perspectives of a religious faith can deepen our understanding of the universe. They can each actually inform the other. I can remember holding my first born child in my arms, and breathing a prayer of thanksgiving to the god that I did not then know.

Subsequently, I began to start reflecting on this from a scientific perspective. How is it that seventy five trillion cells self organise into this life that I'm holding in my arms, emerging in a period of nine months out of just two? Now, to me, there is a wonder about that. You know, the scriptures talk about how we are fearfully and wonderfully made.

Science does not answer the significant 'why' questions that I think faith addresses. I think science is more about mechanism than meaning. And science is not a worldview. Science is a way of discovering something about the natural world in which we live, and therefore is limited. It operates very well within those boundaries, but science can't address some of the deeper questions about the purpose of life, and what life is all about. I think faith does have answers there, and therefore I think they do have something to contribute to one another. They're not on opposite sides. Faith and science aren't on opposite sides. I'm often reminded of what Pope John Paul II said. He once declared that science can purify religion from error and superstition, and religion can purify science from idolatry and forced absolutes. Each can draw each other into a wider world in which both can flourish. So we need to learn to listen to one another and I think if science is open, I think from faith, from theology, I think it has much to learn about some of the mysteries and it won't be able to penetrate them by its own investigative efforts.

Interviewer: Do you have any examples of people who are committed Christians, who are also respected scientists?

Graham: Well, think about Johannes Kepler, the sixteenth century German astronomer and a very committed Christian. He actually once said, "The world of nature, the world of man, the world of God - they all three fit together." And Galileo Galilei of course who was the great seventh century Italian mathematician. He actually once made this marvelous little quip which I think may be familiar to those who may be listening to this, "The Bible was written to show us how to go to heaven, not how the heaven's go." And Robert Boyle, the English chemist and a deeply humble Christian, said, "The vastness, beauty, the orderliness of heavenly bodies, the excellent structure of animals and other phenomenon of nature justly induce an intelligent unprejudiced observer to conclude a supreme, powerful, just and good author." So here are people, and there are people today like John Polkinghorne, people like Francis Collins, the human genome project, who once wrote a book, 'Science - the language of God'. People who are very articulate, very rational people, who can say I'm quite comfortable holding these two together, because I do not see them as being essentially in conflict. They actually can sit together at the same table and have something to say to one another. And it just does no good for people like the new atheists who in a sense have a faith position themselves and that is, that science is all there is, and science is the only way to truth.

Interviewer: So their belief is in science?

Graham: Their belief is in science. To say that faith is irrational - Dawkins once said it's a virus, in his book the God Delusion, I think he talks about it being a virus that's permeated the human race and so on. But I'm a Christian. I have thought through very carefully my position. Not irrationally I don't think. I've thought through the claims of the gospel upon my life, a lot of geological evidence. I've worked it through. I've read books, I've thought about it very carefully, and I hope intelligently, and therefore my faith is a rational faith. It's a different sort of rationality to which you attribute to science. Science based upon the rational scientific method. It's a different sort of rationality, and I think it's still a very robust sort of rationality, for me to come to terms with the fact that I believe there is a God, and he has a claim upon my life.

Interviewer: Can you explain more about that rationality?

Graham: I'm convinced by the textural reliability of the Bible, for example. I'm convinced by archaeological findings and by the testimony, by many people whom I've encountered I suppose over forty years of my Christian faith, let alone the remarkable internal consistency and beauty and intricacy of the universe that speaks to me of a creator whose brought it all into being. All those sort of converge together to make me feel hey you know it's not irrational to actually have faith. Now at the end of the day I'm a Christian because in the midst of all of that, God has spoken to me, and therefore it is a step of faith in believing that. But faith isn't I suppose quoting the white queen's words to Alice, believing six impossible things before breakfast. Nor is it a blind sort of leap in the dark. So my faith is based upon working through a whole lot of things which for me are reason-able. I just happen to believe that contemporary science gives a good fit in terms of how things came into being. That's not the ground of my salvation. The ground of my salvation is Jesus Christ and his resurrection from the dead. That's where I stand.

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