

Science and Faith in Ecclesial Context

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The question of science and religion is unavoidable for Adventists largely because of our high view of education. No religious community gives education greater emphasis than we do. For Seventh-day Adventists, education is not just a preparation for Christian service or a single facet of Christian existence, it is the very heart of the Christian life. According to Ellen White's most emphatic statement on the topic, "the work of education and the work of redemption are one."¹ This union indicates that education serves a "salvific" purpose and salvation has an educational goal. On this exalted view of education, the purpose of Christian mission is to promote the development of all the soul's powers throughout this life in preparation for the life to come.²

The Seventh-day Adventist vision of Christian education includes several beliefs. Because all truth is God's truth, Christian educators must encourage students to pursue knowledge across the whole spectrum of human inquiry. "Let the youth advance as fast and as far as they can in the acquisition of knowledge. Let their field of study be as broad as their power can compass."³ And because they seek the development of all the soul's powers, they are concerned not

only with *what students believe*, but with *how they think*. Consequently, they encourage students not only to master information, but to do their own thinking—to learn to frame questions, weigh evidence, evaluate different points of view, and then formulate their own conclusions and defend them. The overall goal of the process, as Ellen White puts it, is to "train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's thoughts."⁴



A careful review of the church's history reveals that searching for truth is just as important to Adventists as defending the truth. Accordingly, religion teachers must do more than understand and articulate the Church's doctrinal positions. They must constantly seek a deeper understanding of truth and more effective ways of expressing it. From time to time this will involve raising questions about time-honored positions, and this can be disturbing to some in the Church. But without this openness to truth, this willingness to reconsider past positions and make important changes, Seventh-day Adventists

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would never have revised their understanding of the shut door, embraced the message of righteousness by faith, affirmed the full divinity of Jesus Christ, or developed a trinitarian understanding of God. In other words, Seventh-day Adventist doctrine would never have become fully Christian. As Ellen White insists, "The truth is an advancing truth, and we must walk in the increasing light."⁵ "The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people, is not a proof that our ideas are infallible. Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation."⁶

Because all truth is God's truth and because we seek to develop all the soul's powers, the goal of Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities is a comprehensive learning experience, "an education that is as high as heaven and as broad as the universe."⁷ Consequently, our institutions provide instruction across a wide spectrum of disciplines, including the sciences, as well as the humanities, the arts, and, of course, religion. The study of science is important to Adventists for two more specific reasons. Our high concept of creation leads us to believe that God is revealed in nature as well as in Scripture. So a knowledge of the natural world will contribute to our understanding of God. In addition, scientific knowledge has great practical benefit. It enables us to respond to human needs in concrete and helpful ways and thus to fulfill an important aspect of Christian mission.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, this appreciation for science, Adventists have long felt the sort of tensions between science and religion that Christians in general face. Perhaps we can learn from the different approaches of others ways to ease this tension in our midst.

Response 1: Reinterpret the Faith

Among those who believe that Christians must reinterpret their faith in response to the conclusions of science the best known is probably Rudolf Bultmann. As Bultmann describes it, the purpose of the Bible is not to communicate information about the phenomenal world, but to express a certain understanding of human existence. Accordingly, the central task of theology is to demythologize the New Testament, to distinguish its outdated mythical expressions from its kerygmatic content—its permanently valid message for human beings.⁸

Although many Christians share Bultmann's conviction that a scientific worldview requires us to reinterpret the biblical message, few find the results of his own program acceptable. When he itemizes the elements of the New Testament that cease to have factual significance, they include the entire realm of the supernatural and the miraculous. Perhaps chief among the "untenables" to go are traditional beliefs concerning Jesus, including not only his virgin birth, but also his atoning sacrifice, his resurrection from the dead and his return to the earth. In fact, when Bultmann has finished demythologizing the New Testament, many conclude, precious little remains of the biblical message.

Among those who believe that Bultmann's revisionary interpretation of Christianity goes way too far, a good number insist that the factual accuracy of the Bible is essential to its religious value. In their view, our knowledge of God, and ultimately our salvation, depends on a Bible that is just as reliable when it speaks of history, geography, and biology as when it speaks of God and his love for us. Conversely, they maintain, if the Bible is untrustworthy anywhere, it is untrustworthy everywhere. We could have no confidence in the promises of God or the plan of salvation if the statements of Scripture came up short in the arenas of science or history. And this reliability extends to everything the Bible contains. As one person put it, "If the Bible says the whale swallowed Jonah, I believe it. If the Bible said Jonah swallowed the whale, I'd believe that, too."

Those embracing this view of Scripture believe it is important to show that the Bible's claims are accurate when they speak of natural phenomena and historical events, and not just matters of obvious religious significance. Accordingly, such developments as the appearance of the names of

the ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah on the Eblah tablets and the discovery that rabbits and hares reingest fecal pellets and thus “chew the cud” as stated in Leviticus 11:6 and Deuteronomy 14:7 have theological significance.⁹ They confirm that the Bible is reliable when it speaks of historical and natural phenomena, no less than when it speaks of the ultimate meaning of human life.

According to those in both positions just described, Bultmannians and biblical inerrantists, we face a clear-cut choice. We cannot pick and choose among the claims of the Bible. We must either commit ourselves to the proposition that Scripture is completely reliable in all its parts, or accept the notion that the biblical worldview that meets us in the Bible, and everything connected to it, is irrelevant to its message.

Whatever their formal commitments, almost no one actually adheres to one of these all-or-nothing approaches to biblical reliability. For the most thoroughgoing demythologizer, the Gospel still contains a factual core.¹⁰ At least the sheer existence of Jesus is essential to Christian faith. And many inerrantists interpret the statements of the Bible in light of the rest of what we know about the world. Even Carl F. H. Henry, one of the most influential proponents of biblical inerrancy, does not construe Genesis 1 literally. He accepts the scientific evidence that supports the great age of the earth and a long succession of distinctive life-forms.

A great number of Christian thinkers occupy a position somewhere between these two views. They take the Bible seriously and hold fast to the doctrine of creation, yet they accept the conventional accounts of life history on earth. For some of them, there is no tension between these views at all. As they see it, creation and cosmology are entirely different issues. To confess faith in God as creator is not to entertain a specific theory of origins, it is to affirm confidence in God's relation to the world here and now and particularly to one's own life. Helmut Thielicke makes this point in the book *Man in God's World*, which drew from a series of lectures he delivered to people in Stuttgart, Germany, as the bombs fell during World War Two. Thielicke takes his thesis from Martin Luther's explanation of the first article of the creed, “I believe that God created me.”¹¹

Thielicke insists that creation and cosmology are quite independent. A cosmology, he explains, is “the attempt to pull together all our scientific experience that tells us something about the structure of our world and to construct from it a total picture of the origin, structure, and nature of our world.”¹² It is “the sum of all the scientific knowledge which combines to give us a concept of the total structure

of the world.”¹³ Consequently, a cosmology is dependent on the level to which science has developed at any particular point in history.

In contrast to cosmology, Thielicke maintains, the biblical doctrine of creation concerns the personal relationship between the Creator and the creature intended in God's plan.¹⁴ Consequently, Christian faith in the Creator is “independent of any cosmology that happens to be current.” And “the Christian faith itself never dictates what this cosmology should be.”¹⁵ This distinction between creation and cosmology is especially important when it comes to the question of human origins.

Thielicke rejects the dichotomy either creation or evolution. Evolution is concerned with the biological origins of human existence; creation is concerned with the personal relation of human beings to God. Pertaining as they do to different aspects of humanity, Thielicke argues, there is no essential conflict between them. If it makes no difference to faith in God the Creator whether we think of the earth as a disk floating on a vast ocean or as a sphere revolving around the sun,¹⁶ why should it make any difference whether we think of humanity as created directly by God, as formed from the dust of the ground, or as standing at the end of a series of prehuman developmental stages?¹⁷ Moreover, if knowing the physiology of conception and fetal development does not prevent us from believing that we are creatures of God on an individual level, why should the idea of human development from pre-human life forms pose any obstacle to believing that the human race as a whole is the object of God's creative activity?¹⁸

I don't know how widespread a position like Thielicke's is. But it seems representative of many Christian thinkers, including a large number who accept the miraculous and hold to a strong view of biblical inspiration. One of these is C. S. Lewis, the most influential apologist of the twentieth century, and a hero to many conservative Christians. Lewis believed that human beings originated with a divine creative act involving prehuman life-forms which had evolved within the animal kingdom. “For long centuries,” Lewis wrote in *The Problem of Pain*, “God perfected the animal form which was to become the vehicle of humanity and the image of Himself. ... Then in the fullness of time, God caused to descend upon this organism ... a new kind of consciousness.”¹⁹ Clearly, many thoughtful Christians believe that the biblical account of human origins describes our relationship to God but does not



provide a literal account of our arrival on the earth.

This approach obviously raises a lot of questions. Given the demonstrated success of science in so many areas, it is hard to ignore its conclusions about the history of life on this planet. But just how much can we, should we, and do we let science influence our reading of the Bible? If biblical accounts of human origins are largely figurative, you have to wonder if the same is true when it speaks of human destiny. Then there is the problem of consistency. If we aren't supposed to pick and choose among the contents of the Bible, what permits us to pick and choose among the con-

similarities between the essential presuppositions of science and the convictions of religion.²¹

Besides these intrascientific critiques, other developments raise serious questions about the expansive authority that people often attribute to science. Although the fruits of scientific inquiry are truly impressive, many thinkers are convinced that the scope of scientific knowledge is clearly limited, and they point to aspects of reality with which the empirical sciences are ill-equipped to deal. Several intellectual developments in the last century express the attempt to portray with greater fidelity than science can

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tents of science? How can someone rely on scientific inquiry to lead us to truth and then disregard its conclusions when they seem to conflict with the Bible? That would seem to call into question the value of all scientific endeavor.

Response 2: Expose the Limits of Science

Another way of easing the tension between science and faith involves looking at the nature of scientific inquiry. After careful examination, many people conclude that science is not the objective authority it is cracked up to be. A number of factors require us to lower science from the vaunted position it occupies in many minds.

The best known of these is Thomas Kuhn's book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, whose publication in 1962 was a watershed event in the history of science.²⁰ Scientific theories, Kuhn argued, are not the dispassionate accounts of objective reality the positivists took them to be. Science has a history, just like every other aspect of human culture. Scientists are human beings like the rest of us, and scientific theories are human constructs. They are interpretations of the world, and like all interpretations, they reflect the perspectives and biases of their authors. As Kuhn explained, the conventional view of science as the steady accumulation of information leading to more and more accurate portrayals of reality doesn't fit the actual course of scientific advance. Instead, science proceeds by fits and starts, and a truly dramatic scientific breakthrough, a scientific revolution, occurs not as the product of conventional science, but only when conventional science breaks down.

Other philosophers, too, have shown that science is not as "scientific" as most people think it is. As it turns out, scientific thinking contains a lot of "nonscientific" elements. In this connection, Michael Polanyi notes some significant

manage the richness of concrete experience.

One is phenomenology. According to a recent introduction to the movement, the object of phenomenological reflection is "prepredicative experience," experience *before* it has been formulated in judgments and expressed in outward linguistic form—experience before it becomes packaged for explicit consciousness. Phenomenology thus interrogates the supposedly objective view of the sciences, the God's eye perspective, the view from nowhere. It holds that the traditional ideal of knowledge, the one adopted in math and the exact sciences, is an *idealization*, a special construction of the theoretical attitude, remote from everyday experience.²²

Process thought represents another philosophical attempt to render more fully the richness of concrete experience. Science depends heavily on "perception in the mode of presentational immediacy," to use a slice of process jargon, perceptions that are characterized by clarity and distinctness, like vivid visual impressions. But there is another mode of perception, according to process thinkers, namely, "perception in the mode of causal efficacy." This mode of experience is vague and emotion-laden rather than clear and distinct, so it is more difficult to analyze, yet it is the most basic form of experience there is. A sense of bodily derivation, for example, and a sense of temporal passage are both permanent elements in our experience, and they are best understood as aspects of this type of perception. In the quest for a truly comprehensive view of reality, we must take into account the sort of experience that science doesn't reach.

Postmodernism provides yet another, more recent and more forthright, expression of dissatisfaction with science. As many critics now see it, modern science is the clearest

expression of the Enlightenment project, and we should be skeptical of its claims for a variety of reasons. For post-moderns, the modern world, that vision of reality produced by unqualified confidence in scientific inquiry and unqualified optimism for the fruits of technology, is a problematic abstraction. We can embrace it only ignoring the vast sweep of human experience past and present, which has always been open to ranges of meaning inaccessible to mere rational inquiry, and by overlooking the effects of our ceaseless manipulation of the environment.

Indeed, for postmodernism, the rational mind itself is an abstraction. There is no one way of looking at reality, no integrated program of intellectual operations, no “value-neutral or publicly accessible objective truth,” no “universally accessible foundation for public discourse.”²³ We privilege one perspective, the critique goes, only by ignoring others, specifically those outside the stream of thinkers who are Western, white, male, and straight.

Do these developments offer comfort to conservative Christians, whose inherited beliefs often conflict with accepted scientific theories? To a limited degree, perhaps. The recognition that science is a human construct and that it effectively ignores vast ranges of our experience allows us to question the validity of its conclusions, but only up to a point. Like it or not, the world delivered to us by scientific inquiry is the world in which we live and we cannot depart it by deliberate choice.²⁴ Moreover, there comes a time when certain beliefs enter the thought patterns of every thinking person, whether or not science has definitively established their truth. A good example of this is the belief that the earth rotates on its axis. The belief was controversial in the sixteenth century but came to be widely accepted in centuries following, even though incontrovertible proof did not arrive until Foucault’s pendulum swung from a church in Paris in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The point is also instructive because of the way in which Christianity accommodated this change. According to many accounts of the church’s response to early modern scientists, religious leaders resisted the idea of a heliocentric universe because it detracted from the central place this earth and its human inhabitants occupied in the great drama of salvation. Once the Copernican revolution won the day, however, Christians not only adjusted nicely to the notion that the earth revolved around the sun, they found positive theological significance in the astronomical insignificance of the earth. The fact that God was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for fallen humanity, inhabitants of a mere cosmic speck, a second-rate planet circling a third-rate star, only underscores the magnitude of God’s love.

Response 3: Uphold the Priority of Community

As we face the thorny nest of problems connected with the expression *science and faith*, only one thing seems clear. There is no consensus among Christians as to how these issues should be resolved, nor even as to how these problems should be defined. For some the question is simply whether we will take the Bible as it reads. For others, it is whether we will accept the overwhelming evidence that supports conventional scientific views of earth history.

What concerns me is the effect of these issues on the community we all represent. In recent years, I have had a growing appreciation for the importance of the church, understood as a community of faith, hope, and love, and I’ve come to the conclusion that belonging is more crucial to the life of this community than either believing or behaving, important though these elements certainly are.²⁵

My basic premise is that Christianity is inherently social. Although Christian faith affirms the tremendous value of the individual, it places even greater importance on the group. And although a personal relationship with God is essential to Christian existence, participation in the life of the community is just as important. To be Christians in the full, robust, biblical sense of the word, therefore, we cannot go it alone.

With this concern uppermost in mind, I have several suggestions to make for our response to the challenge of science and faith. The first is to consider carefully the role of doctrine in the life of the community. According to an influential notion, the contents of faith form a coherent network of propositions that are independently true yet logically interconnected. The believer is one who comprehends and assents to each of these propositions. The community of faith comprises those who have come to similar doctrinal conclusions through personal investigation. On this account, the religious community is very much like a scientific community. For both, the individual is the final arbiter of truth, truth is available to any thinking person, and truth can be formulated in a consistent set of propositions.

Although a concern for propositional expressions of the faith will always be important, it is a mistake to make it the one essential quality of the Christian community. Other expressions of truth are even more important and other



qualities account for its life. According to one of the most famous passages in Paul's writings, the Christian community lives by faith, hope, and love, rather than by knowledge—one of the things that “passes away.” Moreover, the life of faith is a life together, a life in which learning from, caring for, and growing with one another are essential.

Recent studies of Christian doctrine retrieve it from the sphere of intellectual abstraction and locate it squarely in the life of community. According to Ellen T. Charry, Christian doctrine has a pastoral function. The goal of “primary Christian doctrines” is to help people flourish through knowing and loving God. Theology thus has a “sapiential” purpose. As she explains it, “The norm of sapience claims that the truth to be known is for the well-being of the knower. While modern knowledge builds on a healthy dose of skepticism, sapience has trust built in from the very outset.”²⁶ Consequently, “the modern understanding of reason and truth constructed by Locke, Hume, and Kant is too narrow to be adequate for theological claims.”²⁷ If Charry is right, the role of doctrines is to upbuild and strengthen the community of faith. If we see them as a set of propositions to be proven, we could easily miss their point.

The most important issue before us as members of a community we care about is not, who's right about origins and why, but how we can affirm our collective confidence in God's sovereign love in ways that include and encourage all of us. In other words, whatever we say about creation, it should ultimately strengthen our faith, hope, and love.

A final thought on Christian community returns us to the social nature of belief. In the great triad that defines the Christian life, love is obviously social, but so are faith and hope. A high view of Christian community will place our quest for doctrinal clarity and unity in a new light. First, it means that various minds and various attitudes are important to the community's quest for truth. Some have the gift of quiet confidence. (Perhaps this is what Paul had in mind when he lists faith as one of the gifts of the Spirit to the church [1 Cor. 12:9]). Some have the gift of vigorous questioning. Each group needs the other and both belong equally to the body of Christ. Second, it means that the most basic expression of faith is not *I believe*, but *we believe*. Those whose disposition and training inclines them to doubt and question may find it difficult to say *I believe* in isolation, but bolstered by the confidence of others, they may find the strength to say within the community of faith, hope, and love, *we believe* in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

Notes and References

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4. White, *Education*, 17.
5. Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1948), 33.
6. *Ibid.*, 35.
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8. In *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), 1–44.
9. Gerhard F. Hasel, *Understanding the Living Word of God* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1980), 135, 60–61.
10. Schubert M. Ogden detects a mythological residue in Bultmann's demythologized version of the Gospel. See *Christ Without Myth: A Study Based on the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).
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13. *Ibid.*, 35.
14. *Ibid.*, 26.
15. *Ibid.*, 34.
16. *Ibid.*, 79.
17. *Ibid.*, 85.
18. *Ibid.*, 86–87.
19. *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 77.
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21. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 286.
22. Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2000), 12.
23. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, “The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals,” in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 18, 15.
24. As John Herman Randall, Jr., notes in his classic study, nothing has done more than science has to shape the modern mind (*The Making of the Modern Mind* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1977], 164).
25. See my development of these ideas in *Believing, Behaving, Belonging: Finding New Love for the Church* (Roseville, Calif.: Association of Adventist Forums, 2002).
26. *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 6–7.
27. *Ibid.*, 10.

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