

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Science and religions, learning from each other



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Last week's celebration of Earth Day, and the hundreds of cities which held March for Science events, put the spotlight on the role of science in our society. There can be no doubt that science and technology have had a profound impact on how we live. The developments in just the past few decades in communication and transportation have created a world where we can travel nearly anywhere in hours and know what is happening around the world in seconds.

In the health fields alone, we have conquered many infectious diseases and created therapies for many forms of cancer and heart disease. There can be no question about the information and power science has given us. Yet do we have the wisdom to use what we have learned for the benefit of our environment and the good of all people?

The wisdom to use our power properly requires shared values, and religion often is seen as the best source of developing and transmitting values. A few years ago, the famous biologist and secular humanist, E. O. Wilson, addressed the religious community in his book, "The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth." Calling on religious

leaders for help, he said, "The Creation is the glory of the Earth. Let's see if we can't get together on saving it, because science and religion are the most powerful social forces on Earth. We can do it."

More recently, in a similar vein the Muslim philosopher Seyyed Nasr said, "the environmental crisis is fundamentally a crisis of values." He went on to add that the religions are a primary source of values in any culture, and are thus critical to the decisions we make regarding the environment.

For decades, I have been involved in science and religion dialogue and find many similarities to our interfaith dialogue.

Some people insist science and religion are incompatible and pursuing one necessarily involves rejecting the other. On the contrary, those of us who have been involved in science and religion dialogue find much benefit in looking at the ways in which these two ways of knowing can be mutually beneficial. Just because the two pursuits ask different questions does not mean they cannot engage in fruitful dialogue and learn from each other.

In fact, the various disciplines of science themselves ask different questions and yet often learn from each other. Physics is interested in the fundamental concepts of matter, energy, force and motion; biology is concerned with life and living organisms;

If you go

What: Grand Dialogue in Science and Religion annual conference

When: Saturday, May 13

Where: Cook-DeVos Center for Health Sciences, 301 Michigan St. NE, Grand Rapids

Online: Information and free registration at GrandDialogue.org

psychology seeks to understand mind and behavior; formal sciences like logic and mathematics look at the processes and conclusions from formal reasoning.

Likewise, the distinction among religions involves the different questions they ask: Judaism is primarily concerned with how one should live; Christianity seeks salvation from the results of sin; Islam teaches submission and obedience as the response to the problem of pride. Perhaps religions can affirm their own insights while at the same time learning from the questions and practices of other faith traditions.

Science and religion seek to explain, but there are different and yet not incompatible ways of explaining. I could ask why a candle burns and give a scientific explanation involving the breakdown of complex hydrocarbons into molecules of hydrogen and

carbon, which vaporize and react with oxygen from the air to create heat, light, water vapor and carbon dioxide. Or I could give a practical explanation: It's burning because I just lit it. Or a purposeful explanation: It's burning because we are celebrating a birthday or a baptism or it is a part of a menorah.

While the scientific explanation might be precise and noncontroversial, the purposeful explanation might be more relevant in a given situation. All of the explanations can be true while not in opposition.

As I explore the diverse ways in which our scientific and religious languages function, I also am aware of the differences among the religious traditions and how religious explanation is much more complex and nuanced.

Our various religious perspectives provide their own lens through which we seek to make sense of the world. We can learn from each other in the sciences and in the faith traditions that take seriously the questions of life, purpose and meaning.

No one view can claim the whole of understanding. We are enriched by interacting and being in dialogue, both in the sciences and in interfaith efforts, with those whose experiences and questions differ from our own.

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