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The Shared Virtues of Science and Faith: A Review of Why Science and Faith Need Each Other

Abstract

"The reality is that areas of conflict and tension between science and religion *do* exist, even if the relationship is not defined by them."

Posting about the book *Why Science and Faith Need Each Other* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/the-shared-virtues-of-science-and-faith-a-review-of-why-science-and-faith-need-each-other/>

Keywords

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Comments

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in things

March 11, 2021

The Shared Virtues of Science and Faith: A Review of *Why Science and Faith Need Each Other*

Channon Visscher

Title: *Why Science and Faith Need Each Other: Eight Shared Values That Move Us beyond Fear*

Author: Elaine Howard Ecklund

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In his opening to the collection of essays *Galileo Goes to Jail (and Other myths about Science and Religion)*, science historian Ronald Numbers shares the view that “the greatest myth in the history of science and religion is that they have been in a state of constant conflict.”¹ According to this narrative myth, science and religion have been locked in a perpetual zero-sum struggle, punctuated by dramatic battles from the Galileo affair (1610-1633), to “The Great Debate” at Oxford (1860) and the Scopes Trial (1925), to the modern cultural clashes of the late 20th century and early 21st century.

But if the prevailing perception of constant conflict is incorrect, what is (or should be) the model for interaction?² What do people *actually* think about science and religion? More specifically, how do scientists and people of faith view this relationship? Over the past several years, Dr. Elaine Howard Ecklund, a sociologist and director of the Religion and Public Life Program at Rice University, has sought to answer these questions through extensive social science research.³ In her latest book, *Why Science and Faith*

Need Each Other: Eight Shared Values That Move Us Beyond Fear, Dr. Ecklund reflects upon her past work and seeks to demonstrate that science and religion can, in fact, find common ground to complement each other in constructive and beautiful ways.

This is no small claim in light of the persistent (if inaccurate) cultural narrative of conflict noted above. Moreover, the reality is that areas of conflict and tension between science and religion *do* exist, even if the relationship is not defined by them. In such areas of tension, how might people of faith respond in ways that are not driven by fear that leads to conflict? The book begins with an exploration of this motivating question, recognizing that we are dealing with fundamental questions of Christian identity: what it means to be human created *imago Dei*, what science and religion say about a divine creator and our place in the cosmos, and how faith and science inform the way we address modern ethical concerns surrounding new technologies such as genetic therapy, *in-vitro* fertilization, and embryonic stem cell research.

The central proposition of the book is that a recognition of the *virtues* that are shared and valued by both the scientific community and by religious communities can lead to mutual understanding and constructive dialog, even (or especially) where there may be areas of disagreement. As Ecklund writes,

I see science and faith not just sets of ideas but as groups of people, and I am convinced that scientists and Christians share common virtues that, if brought to light, will lead to common ground. I am also convinced that by recognizing the common virtues between our faith and science, and where our values differ, we Christians can begin to develop a more effective and meaningful relationship with science and scientists (21).

This approach is refreshing! It recognizes the value of a dynamic *posture* toward our neighbor and toward creation that goes beyond simple intellectual assent to the “correct” set of propositions about the world. Indeed, the cultural demand for uncritical endorsement of “bundled sets” of beliefs creates a dogmatic filter that divides into us/them tribes. Yet, as Ecklund demonstrates throughout her book, a general either/or approach is too simplistic for how people actually integrate science and religion, and Christians often inhabit *both* communities. A starting posture of humility and curiosity is thus better equipped to address, without fear, the challenging questions that will continue to rise in the relationship between science and religion.

An example of this generous, yet faithful approach is found in the third chapter’s exploration of evolution—often seen as *the* point of contention in science and religion. Yet, even here, Ecklund’s own survey methods show the insufficiency of an either/or paradigm. Instead of a binary choice between “creation” or “evolution”, survey respondents could choose from among six different scenarios. This dramatically

changed the picture that emerged in the survey results: even as most scientists accept evolution, many also allow that a divine creator may have played some role. Moreover, many religious believers also accept some evolutionary scenario, provided that God plays a central role and that humans in some way represent *imago Dei*. This range of views fundamentally shifts the conversation around evolution.⁴ It also demonstrates that religious belief need not be contingent upon the success—*nor the failure*—of particular scientific theories of origin.

With some building blocks in place, the rest of the book identifies and explores eight shared values (or virtues) in detail. Loosely reflecting a pattern of work and worship, these values are further organized into those of *process*: curiosity, doubt, humility, and creativity—that are essential for the *practice* of science and vibrant faith, and those of *redemption*: healing, awe, shalom, and gratitude—that explore the possible ways in which science and religion might *respond* and work together in the same direction.

These chapters represent the heart of the book and are full of stories of people that dwell in both communities, including scientists who “share their experiences with integrating science and faith. Some have reconciled science and religion as systems of ideas. Others have reconciled science and religion in a more personal way.” The strength of Ecklund’s approach is in its presentation of these personal stories among the broader context of her extensive social science research. This keeps the personal stories from reduction into mere anecdotes, and the empirical survey results from reduction into mere data points. The result is a narrative that is inviting, engaging, and informative. Through its personal stories, along with its articulation of shared virtues, the book is especially recommended for those seeking an alternative to the conflict model of science and religion, or those who wonder if they can be a scientist *and* a Christian (as Ecklund sadly relates, the false choice between science *or* faith is one that too many young Christians have been asked to make). The book may also serve as a valuable resource for pastors and ministry leaders who may be hearing such questions from parents and parishioners, and each chapter includes questions for further discussion. For the reader more interested in the empirical survey results, Ecklund’s previous books (*Science vs. Religion: What Scientists Really Think*, and *Religion vs. Science: What Religious People Really Think*) provide rigorous yet accessible summaries.

Finally, Ecklund’s present work provides an always-welcome reminder of the motivating values for scientific study, born out of humble curiosity and even a love built upon a shared human experience of the world. The cultivation of these shared virtues can move us away from a self-fulfilling conflict narrative and instead toward a posture of wonder and *gratitude* (Ecklund’s closing virtue) as together we explore and enjoy the beauty of a good creation.

FOOTNOTES

1. Historians of science and religion lay much of the blame upon the early and lasting influences of J.W. Draper's *History of the conflict between religion and science* (1875) and A.D. White's *A history of the warfare of science with theology in Christendom* (1895). For a comprehensive history of the relationship between science and religion, see *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives*, by John Hedley Brooke.
2. A commonly cited typology for the relationship between science and religion was summarized by Ian Barbour, who identified four main models of interaction: conflict, independence, dialog, and integration.
3. As noted in Ecklund's book, this research is built upon over 1300 interviews and data collected from over 41,000 survey respondents over a number of studies including in the Religious Understandings of Science (RUS) study, the Religion among Academic Scientists (RAAS) study, the Religion Among Scientists in International Contexts (RASIC) study, the Real Change (RC) study, and the interview-based Religion, Inequality, and Science Education (RISE) study.
4. A report of the RUS study results can be found [here](#). These results also show that a large majorities of Christians (including over two-thirds of evangelical Protestants) do not personally view conflict as the prevailing model of interaction between science and religion.