

Faith Exploration: A Discussion of Faith and Science from a Scientist's Perspective

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16 August 2026

Do religion and science provide approaches to finding Truth that are contradictory/incompatible, independent and mutually irrelevant or complimentary?

My approach to answering this question is based on 60 years of experience practicing and teaching scientific methods to undergraduate and graduate students and practicing wildlife biologists and a similar length of time contemplating theology as an amateur/interested outsider.

I propose that the **scientific method and theology are complimentary approaches to understanding and knowledge**. The scientific method is an iterative (repeated, recursive) approach to truth about facts, patterns and relationships in the natural world based on hundreds of thousands of “scientist’s” (thinker’s) observations and ideas developed through time by improving on other thinkers’ ideas. Christian theology also is the result of an iterative approach to truth about human relations and socially uplifting behavior derived from thousands of years of thinking recorded first in Jewish scriptures followed successfully by early “Christian” writers, both Jewish, Greek, Roman and other ethnicities who were inspired by Jesus, a singular 1st century Jewish thinker from outside official Jewish hierarchy who conceived and taught that the Jewish God was really a God based on love, not the historic Jewish conquering King. This Christian thinking continues iteratively through the thinking and writings of modern theologians such as Marcus Borg and John Polkinghorne.

Marcus Borg, in his book Days of Awe and Wonder (2017 Harper and Row), suggests “the image of God as lover” as the central image of Christianity. “To image God as lover changes the dynamics of the Christian life dramatically. God is ‘in love’ with us. We are precious in God’s sight and honored. We are the beloved of God. That’s who we are in relationship to God as lover. God yearns for us” (p 155).

John Polkinghorne in his book Belief in God in an Age of Science (1998 Yale Univ. Press) starts out by saying “the fundamental content of belief in God is that there is a Mind and a Purpose behind the history of the universe and that One whose veiled presence is intimated in this way is worthy of worship and the ground of hope... there are two locations where general hints of the divine presence might be expected to be seen most clearly. One is the vast cosmos itself, with its fifteen-billion-year history of evolving development following the big bang. The other is the “thinking reed” of humanity, so insignificant in physical scale, but as Pascal said, superior to all the stars because it alone knows them and itself.”

Scientists and theologians like Borg and Polkinghorne pursue Truth by developing theories and moral principles that elucidate (explain) underlying patterns that produce the disparate and often confusing observations we make of nature and human behavioral history. How can the sun rise from the eastern horizon and travel hundreds of thousands of miles overhead to set in

the western horizon in 8 to 16 hours? Early scientists discerned hundreds of years ago that it only looks that way to us glued by gravity to our rapidly spinning Earth. The trick in both science and religion is to discern the underlying patterns (theories or principles) that produce these sometimes confusing observations. Polkinghorne illustrated the joy of discovering these underlying principles with Einstein's discovery of general relativity in 1915 and its proof through applying it to precisely explain a discrepancy in relation to Newton's theory that had baffled astronomers for 60 years. "This discovery was, I believe, by far the strongest emotional experience of Einstein's scientific life".

Stephen J. Gould, in his 1999 book, Rock of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life (Random House) proposed in contrast "I do not see how science and religion could be unified, or even synthesized, under any common scheme of explanation or analysis: but I do not understand why the two enterprises should experience any conflict. Science tries to document the factual character of the natural world, and to develop theories that coordinate and explain these facts. Religion, on the other hand, operates in the equally important, but utterly different, realm of human purposes, meaning, and values—subjects that the factual domain of science might illuminate, but can never resolve...I propose that we encapsulate this central principle of noninterference—accompanied by intense dialogue between two subjects each covering a central facet of humane existence—by enunciating the Principle of ... Non-Overlapping Magisteria (domains)."

One of the great thinkers and writers in my area of biological science is **Edward O. Wilson**, emeritus professor at Harvard University and author of more than 20 books on natural science and evolution including his 2014 The Meaning of Human Existence (Norton & Company). He takes a no-holds-barred approach to the ancient tribal approach to religion based on "faith" which he identifies as the root of much evil and as "The true cause of hatred and violence is rather faith versus faith, an outward expression of the ancient instinct of tribalism. Faith is the one thing that makes otherwise good people do bad things" (p.154). I suppose he is responding partially to all the attacks on his evolutionary science by simple-minded religious leaders who can't conceive of a God who creates and improves our magnificent universe and all of life's diverse and complex organisms and their relationships through His evolutionary mechanisms and processes. Wilson looks at the history of religious bigotry as demonstrating that "faith has hijacked religious spirituality" (p. 155) by supporting a tribal approach to human relations. "The best way to live in this real world is to free ourselves of demons and tribal gods (p 159)."

E. O. Wilson concludes "Science and the humanities, it is true, are fundamentally different from each other in what they say and do. But they are complementary to each other in origin and they arise from the same creative processes in the human brain. If the heuristic and analytic power of science can be joined with introspective creativity of the humanities, human existence will rise to an infinitely more productive and interesting meaning" (p 187).

Are we at UCM striving to go beyond tribalism to find the Truth beneath religious belief in how to treat others? Can we let go of false creation myths and tribalism while sifting through

Christian beliefs about human relations to identify true knowledge there? Isn't God our personification of correct human behaviors? Isn't the Bible the history of the Judeo-Christian evolving understanding of his Truth? Are modern theologians, like Marcus Borg, continuing this quest to find True understanding of emotions and superlative human behavior?

Why can't religion be joined with science? Couldn't it be if religion was taken to mean a pursuit of understanding the truth of human relations that leads to the greatest good for each and all? Doesn't the bible attempt to present these truths in the form of a collection of stories, poems (psalms), writings of great leaders (prophets and disciples) which are serving as a record of their evolving nature from old-testament agrarian feudalism to Greek and Roman "enlightenment" thought? And doesn't it provide a useful foundation for more modern theological thinking and our evolving understanding? Let's hope so.

I conclude: God is earlier thinkers' and progressives' (prophets' and theologians') conception, or personification, of what is required to be good: to act rightly and justly in human relations for various situations. Jesus life and sermons provides the superlative example of how to do this! A church provides a community of people to consider these questions of right and wrong together, to discuss, debate and think about them together! Not to impose a leader's views, but to develop an understanding together. Without a church community we don't do this. We don't think about and discuss these ethical questions on a daily or weekly basis. Couldn't this function in a manner analogous to the scientific world where professional societies provide forums for this process with journals, conference talks, published books, white pages and professional reference manuals? I believe our Evergreen Baptist and Disciples denominations actually do already. One of the reasons we chose Hannah as our new minister is because she participates and excels in this process fully. We depend on her to keep us informed through her developing insights.

So where do I stand? I think science and religion are complementary, not contradictory. Science doesn't require removing God from the mystery of life. And religion should describe God's plan for acting justly and rightly with our fellow humans and our natural world. We should view science as providing a pathway illustrating God's loving plans for us to care for each other and our bounteous natural world that our belief in Christianity calls us to do.

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