



Photo courtesy of Joe Unander.

Science and Christian Faith at Eastern

By Dr. David Unander, Chair, Department of Biology

Thirty years ago, I entered college through the back door. While working an unskilled job, I took some night classes as a diversion and discovered an aptitude for biology. I read *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* by Eastern's own Ron Sider, and it contributed to a prayerful decision to study plant breeding as a type of Christian service to the world. Fourteen years ago, I left full-time research to teach biology at Eastern. It's been exciting to watch all the science programs growing stronger.

Faith in Jesus Christ and Work in Science – Why No Conflict?

When people discover I'm a Christian geneticist, some are surprised. I think there are some misconceptions at work. Some Christians suspect science is anti-Christian. A few scientists are eager to oblige. Andrew Dickson White, founding President of Cornell University in the late

1800s, helped create the myth of "warfare" between science and Christianity. He planned Cornell as a model for universities with all Christian influence removed. Today, the biologist Richard Dawkins is making a career promoting a militant atheism as the foundation of science.

Some Christians accept this view. The great Chinese evangelist Watchman Nee drew a sharp distinction between "soul" and "spirit" in the Bible, warning against being "soulish." Some Christians interpret this to mean that university education must hinder the spirit's relation with God.

While Paul, Luke, Daniel, Moses and some other writers of the Bible were well-educated, Jesus and the 12 apostles, while clearly literate, never had advanced formal education. Paul once addressed the original "Academy" the Athens Areopagus, and most turned away (Acts 17).

Other skeptics worry that science itself

is anti-human, dangerous to our planet, and Christians, of all people, should stay away from it. Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* created the image of the "mad scientist," mastering godlike powers over nature but lacking moral vision. Jurassic Park is one well-known retelling of the Frankenstein myth, substituting a genetic engineering corporation for the deranged man among the tombs. Existentialist and post-modernist critics of science desperately seek meaning in the face of the bleak universe proclaimed to be all there is by materialist scientists such as Richard Dawkins.

Science is a Process

Science is a process for getting relative answers about measurable things, not a philosophy. Science cannot study what cannot be measured, and it can only measure by comparisons. Thus, science

must be silent about God and the spiritual world, moral decisions, meaning, beauty, even though these are essential parts of being human.

The process of science is to test explanations of our observations. A genuine test requires that an explanation might be proven wrong (the "falsifiable hypothesis" named by the philosopher Karl Popper). At various times, both "Creation Science" – the belief of some Christians that the universe is less than 10,000 years old – and Freud's model of human personality have been criticized as non-scientific, despite using scientific language, because they cannot or will not submit a falsifiable hypothesis.

Because science measures by comparisons, it produces no absolutes. Scientists are also part of the experiment; the observer is part of the observation. Although scientific truth is no illusion, it is always relatively true approximations, never fully complete or objective.

The Sovereignty of God and Science

The worldview of the Bible is radically different from both Western materialism, and from the varieties of pantheism/monism among many human cultures – that there is no Creator separate from Creation, all is one force, and perhaps all we perceive is an illusion. The Bible reveals God as distinct from His works, and as a personality – the only utterly good personality. The physical world is good in God's eyes, not evil for being material rather than spiritual. When Christians study God's works, we know they're real and they're good.

The Bible also reveals God working in miracles, such as the Virgin Birth of Jesus or his Resurrection, but also through providence, events subject to cause and effect, yet simultaneously directed by God. Psalm 104 praises God for sustaining Creation – such as making grass grow (v.14). Now a good microscope and a plant physiology course might profoundly induce a awe even about lawn

grass, but grass growing hardly seems miraculous. Nonetheless, the Bible reveals a continuum of God's action from overt miracles through the providential, even apparently sustaining the humblest plants in some way.

As the Creator distinct from Creation, God is revealed as sovereign, capable of delegating, but always the final authority. This high view of God was a foundation of modern science during the Renaissance, a break with the ancient Greeks who trusted more in their own reasoning to understand nature. If God made the universe as He saw fit, not as we might idealize it, our study must begin with what He made, not our preconceptions.

The absence of a miracle is thus not the absence of God. In unlimited time, God could direct natural evolutionary process as easily as making creatures directly from dust. This eliminates the conflict between interpreting the first chapters of Genesis as poetry or scientific prose. Understanding God's sovereignty also eliminates conflict between praying for miraculous healing and using scientific medicine; God can work through both.

Study of Science is Essential

First, science is study of God's works, and it truly is humbling. Secondly, the whole world is being molded by modern science. We're answering questions right now that no one knew enough to ask 50 or even 25 years ago. Scientific advances sometimes surpass even recent science fiction. Yet, even well-educated people are sometimes only dimly aware of the scope of the

scientific revolution we are living in right now. Eastern's science courses, immersed in Christian meaning, are an essential ministry for the 21st century.

Understanding what science is – and isn't – reveals the error in the attempt to graft atheism onto science. Such "scientism" is really only a secular fundamentalism using science

as an icon. Good science also aids in discerning pseudo-science, such as astrology, scientology, and numerous New Age techniques.

Finally, to love our neighbor locally and globally, science better informs our options. For example, I'm able to apply that training in agricultural

research in a number of countries through several Christian missions. Floresta (floresta.org) combines reforestation, community development and evangelism. In 20 years, Floresta has expanded from one valley to plant 25 million trees in five countries. Its work is coordinated through local churches, which we also aid in developing evangelistic and Bible study materials. My part has included seminars for pastors and extension workers in ecologically sound agriculture and a Christian perspective on science. I regularly teach about sustainable agriculture at the Educational Concerns for Hunger Organization ECHO (echoe.org), a Christian service mission that provides training and problem solving worldwide. It's quite a road from a junior college night class, but I thank God for His providence in leading me to know Christ, and study science, and use science in the service of Christ.

Contact Dr. David Unander at duander@eastern.edu

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