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Wednesday October 1, 2014

Science and the Bible

By Jim Taylor

The signboard for a local church asked, “Are Science and the Bible compatible?”

Well, of course they are. If you cherry-pick the right verses, you can show that the Bible knew about everything from DNA to autism long before science discovered them.

After all, the Bible contains around 780,000 words, in 66 books, credited to 40 different authors. But the book of Isaiah had at least three authors. Several of Paul’s letters were written by someone who wasn’t Paul. Tradition says that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible, but a careful examination reveals that at least four groups shaped sections of the narrative to suit their own priorities. The Psalms identify more than a dozen different writers, plus another 47 by that prolific author, Anonymous. And the Proverbs are a collection of folk wisdom, by who knows how many people.

Total, up to 100 authors.

If you took any library shelf containing the writings of 100 different authors, you could almost certainly find in those texts at least one sentence that would support any idea at all.

So yes, science and the Bible can be compatible.

But using the same process, you could pick texts to prove that the Bible and science are hopelessly incompatible.

Why does it matter?

I wonder, though, why it’s so important to prove that the Bible and science can be compatible. Is there an underlying assumption that if they

aren't compatible, one of them must be rejected?

Given the stated theology of this particular denomination, I bet it wouldn't be the Bible. The Bible, they would insist, is a complete and inerrant revelation of God's intentions. And God cannot be wrong.

But the Bible is not God's only word.

As letter writer to a Christian Reformed Church periodical argued, several decades ago, he saw no conflict between science and the Bible. He called the Bible God's faith textbook; he called the world God's science textbook.

Artificial distinctions

I would go farther. I would argue that God IS science.

God is the laws of physics that enabled the universe to explode into existence. God is the laws of chemistry that allowed certain atoms to bond with other atoms, forming new materials. God is the principles of biology by which individual cells cluster together to function more effectively – including becoming human bodies. God is the social sciences that explore how we human beings relate to each other, and to all other beings. God is the immutable, unchanging laws of mathematics that ensure two and two will always make four.

When the Bible disagrees with science, it doesn't mean that God was wrong. It means simply that the people trying to discern ultimate truths grasped only part of the picture. Just as Ptolemy got only part of the solar system right, Einstein missed quantum theory, and Newton had flaws in his calculus.

Later generations of scientists corrected those mistakes.

Bible writers did the same. The prophets revised earlier understandings of a vengeful God; the New Testament records a shift to a loving God.

But in one sense, I suppose, the Bible and science are not compatible. Science acknowledges and corrects its errors; true believers seem unwilling to do the same with the Bible.

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column on silence (and the reduction of distractions) prompted

quite a few words. But perhaps they were at least written in silence.

Bill Peterson commented, “With my hearing loss I have a lot of silence -- especially if I remove my hearing aid. I still get distracted with my AAADD (age activated attention deficit disorder) which can be dangerous when crossing a street.

“I too wake up with solutions to problems or answers to questions.”

Laurna Tallman has done a lot of study and writing about the positive effects of sounds on brain function. But she also recognizes the benefits of quiet: “Your teaching echoes the scripture, ‘Be still, and know that I am God.’ I live in the type of quiet you describe that is only rarely broken by the sound of a plane too low overhead, or a noisy tractor grinding from a field to its homestead farm, or a chainsaw or an ATV accomplishing some task. Before we moved here from the Toronto area, I had a sense that I was moving into a ‘pre-WW-II peace.’ In many ways, I felt I had stepped backwards in time.

“I have made profound discoveries about sound in this place. Only here could I have done so and perhaps you have pointed to the reason. Even in this generally quiet place, I had to be isolated in a winter of deep snow and ice at my sister's house nearby to be deprived of distractions so that I would truly listen to my son's schizophrenic speech, which was the key to my becoming able to define his illness. If I hear the Divine voice more often than some people, again, perhaps that is why.

“Thank you for drawing my attention to the silence that fulfills that prophetic awareness and to its value that I have failed to appreciate.”

Jean Hamilton suggested, “It would be interesting to have a discussion about silence in worship. If you want to know how uncomfortable people are with silence, try dropping a couple of minutes silence into the average Sunday morning service. People begin to cough and shift in their seats in a very short time.

“Why is this? Is it because silence in the midst of the busyness of our worship services is meaningless, and/or we have no idea what to do with it? Is it because silence in worship must be an individual practice? Is it because there is no preparation? Must it be ‘guided’ meditation? And if so, is that silence?

“Elie Weisel spoke about ‘the silence between the words.’ And yesterday, a musician friend told me about discovering that the silence between the

notes was as important as the notes.

“An ordained friend left the United Church and attended Quaker services because she needed the silence. I wonder if she is alone in this.”

Steph Wakelin and Barb Taft sent short comments. From Steph “An excellent true point! I enjoyed reading this.” And from Barb, “Thank you for both 'Sharp ' and 'Soft' Edges.”

Isabel Gibson saw another side to silence: “Well, I guess everything in moderation and all those things in their place, to mix a few platitudes.

“When I go on the bird walks at a county park in Phoenix, the leader is clear that we shouldn’t be talking -- it scares away the birds and makes it hard for her to hear their calls.

“Yet as someone who works mostly at home, alone, I find it pretty damn...quiet...sometimes.”

Charles Hill mused on our fear of silence: “I have 17 college students in an 8:00 a.m. class. At 7:55, 16 of them are on their electronics, frantically texting. Only a threat of being boiled in oil gets them to put them away. What I think is creating the problem is our desperate search for constant stimulation. When something is ‘going on,’ we don’t so easily think about our responsibilities and problems.

“There is a reason why prisons use solitary confinement, cut off from human visual or auditory contact, except for an occasional guard, as the ultimate punishment for rule infractions.

“In the silence, we might even ‘hear’ God.”

The theme of our connectedness to trees seems to want to carry on. John Shaffer wrote about his sadness at the death of a tree: “Lightning struck an 80-foot sequoia, 20 feet from our home. The strike split the top of the tree for 30-40 feet. We could see daylight in the crack.

“The decision was made to have the tree taken down by professionals. Many friends urged us to put a bandaid on the tree, but they don’t live next to the tree, so it came down. Fifty years old; 17 feet around at the base, and 6 ½ feet across.

“In the course of taking it down, we discovered that a family of raccoons lived in the tree. We have lived in this neighborhood for eight years and never saw a raccoon. They left, so we didn’t have the opportunity to apologize to

them.

“We went through a period of grief, for we thought it was beautiful and we learned that many long term residents considered it the most beautiful tree in our town. I don’t talk to trees, but it is a beautiful concept. Now as we adjust to an empty place in the sky and in our hearts, we will see some adjustments to our lifestyle and home.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

If I ever attempted to list the truly great psalms, I’m sure Psalm 19 would be in that list. As a child, I had to memorize it – most of it still comes back. So I’m nervous about losing some of its grandeur in a paraphrase.

- 1 Quarks and electrons, crystals and cells;
stems and trunks and limbs and bodies--
- 2 on the land, in the water, in the air--
the elements of the universe wait to expand our understanding.
- 3 Rocks have no words, nor do cells have syllables,
- 4 yet their message can be read anywhere.
Even the fiery stars,
- 5 racing at unimaginable speeds through space,
- 6 yield their secrets to those willing to probe the limits of God's universe.
- 7 And what do they find?
An underlying harmony, a delicate equilibrium
built on the value of every thing,
living or inanimate, past, present, and future.
- 8 There are no exceptions.
No one is above the law of interdependence.
- 9 Life dies and becomes new life;
spirit and flesh are one.
My fate is inextricably linked to yours,
and our fate to the trees and insects.
- 10 This is the beginning of wisdom.
It is better than wealth, more valuable than possessions.
- 11 Awareness of it will change us forever.
- 12 But we are too often blind;
we close our ears to the voices of the winds and the waves, to the wisdom of the rocks and the plants.

- 13 God, keep us from thinking we know it all;
human minds cannot encompass eternity;
an assembly of facts does not equal truth.
- 14 Keep us always open to wonder, to beauty, to mystery,
O greatest of mysteries.

**For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the Revised Common
Lectionary, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake
Publishing, info@woodlake.com.**

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
