

The importance of faith for science

Claudio Bonito

Diploma Specializzazione in Studi Sindonici, anno 2011

Ateneo Pontificio Regina Apostolorum, Roma

Since Galileo, the relationship between faith and science has been characterized to considerable extent as one of conflict.

The history of the relationship between faith and science is instructive. The discussion, for example, about Christian faith and science usually centered on faith and natural philosophy or faith and natural history.

Generally, the view held by natural theologians and philosophers was not one of conflict but rather complementary occasioned by some tension.

Galileo, the 17th century astronomer and philosopher, appealed to the metaphor of the “two books.” What the Christians should do, he contended, is study both the Bible and nature. Both proceed from the same God, he said, in one case the written word and in the other the working of natural phenomena.

A major aspect of this shift was the development of science independent of religion and other forms of knowledge. Science is science, proceeding according to its own purposes and by its own standards and methods. Thus, the study of nature was no longer conceived in relation to other forms of knowledge, but within the context of discreet specializations, such as biology, chemistry, geology and physics.

The tipping point was the work of Charles Darwin in his famous book, the *Origin of Species*, published in 1859. Through a wealth of observation, Darwin showed that existing species came about not by miraculous creation, but by a form “creation” arising from nature itself.

Thus, without intending, Darwin led to the further independence of science from other knowledge and helped foster the development of scientific disciplines.

The “theory of evolution” came to stand entirely on its own, even though Darwin never used the word “evolution” in his book and was himself a theist for much of his life. Today confusion exists between “the Evolution” and the “theory of evolution” that tries to explain evolution itself. There is more than one theory, there are a lot hypotheses often in contradiction one with the other. The “Evolution” is the fact, shown by science, biology and archeology, but the “Creation” remains a mystery that nobody can explain without the help of faith. And the same thing is true for the “jump of species” and many other aspects of theories of evolution.

In other words, science has a limit. It cannot reach the truth if it is not in evidence with our senses. Without the “laboratory,” science loses power and when physics became meta-physics we only have one possibility of knowledge: the Faith.

Science requires substantive philosophical presuppositions in discovering truth. Science and faith are two partial descriptions of the same word.

It also is possible for science and faith to be mutually reinforcing. For example the delicate balance of various constants of nature (gravity) needed for any life to appear in the universe, systematic gaps in the fossil record, the information content in DNA, and the nature of human language. In each case, the theological beliefs were already reasonable without science, but scientific discoveries have given further support to them.

Science is defined as “observation, identification, description, experimental investigation, and theoretical explanation of phenomena.”

Science is a method that mankind can use to gain a greater understanding of the natural universe. It is a search for knowledge through observation. But it never can become religious. We can count on science to do many great things, but we can also count on science to make mistakes. In fact, throughout history science has been wrong about many things.

Through the pursuit of scientific understanding of the universe, something of the Creator of the universe is discovered.

Faith and science are not irreconcilable. Pope John Paul II said this, and Pope Benedict XVI has reaffirmed it.

Faith and reason are the two wings on which the human spirit takes flight.

There is no contradiction between what we know through our faith and what we can learn through science.

In fact, the sciences, especially astronomy, cosmology and biology make tremendous contributions to faith and theology. Our knowledge of the universe and of nature enriches and nourishes faith and our understanding of God.

So, the faith does not fear science and its discovery. Pope John Paul II pointed this out in a letter to F. George Coyne, then Director of Vatican Observatory:

*Only a dynamic relationship between theology and science can reveal those limits
Which support the integrity of either disciplines, so that theology does not profess
a pseudo- science and science does not become an unconscious theology.
our knowledge of each other can lead us to be more authentically ourselves.... We
need each other to be what we must be, what we are called to be."*