

Twinning Faith and Reason

Last week I was invited to speak to our keenest Year 9 Science classes on the topic of 'Evolution, the Big Bang and Catholicism'. And they were not backward in popping the penetrating questions! It always interests me that the boys at first can think it strange that someone could have a background in science, yet still be a priest. It seems the ghost of fundamentalism still walks. As if one had something like two cerebral hemispheres in the brain that didn't speak to each other, or had mutually exclusive frames of reference – one to do with science and the other to do with 'God business'. But it would be a very fickle God who revealed to me something in the scriptures and then had me arriving at an entirely different conclusion through that same God's gift of reason. Not my God.

Unlike the fundamentalists, informed Catholics have to understand that the Bible is not a history book, a geography handbook, a geology manual, an astronomy guide or a biology text. Put simply, it is the love story between God and his people. Those who would try to teach science from a biblical text are deserving of the same response given by St Augustine of Hippo (a Doctor of the Church), as long ago as the early fifth century:

It is abominable and pernicious and intolerable that any well-informed unbeliever should hear a Christian claiming to prove from the Christian Bible concerning matters of science, statements so absurd that he cannot help from laughing – so diametrically opposed are those babblings to the genuine facts of the case.

There should be no conflict between reason and faith. Science asks the 'How?' questions of life. Religion asks the 'Why?' questions. The scholarly Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks (now Lord Sacks), makes a fine distinction: "Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean." They are complementary domains. So, what is the Church's position on biblical truth and the relationship between science and the Scriptures? It was put clearly and succinctly in the Second Vatican Council: "The Scriptures are without error when they teach us what is necessary for our salvation." Belief in whether the earth was made in seven days, or whether the sun revolves around the earth, are not necessary for my salvation.

Our Year 9 gathering considered how many Jesuits over the centuries had 'found God in all things' in their twin vocation as both scientist and priest. For example, Ferdinand Verbeest SJ, was a 17th Century Belgian Jesuit missionary to China, an astronomer and musician, who built the first-ever steam-driven car for the Emperor (long before James Watt). And Roger Boscovich SJ, an 18th Century Croatian physicist who discovered the absence of atmosphere on the moon and also proposed atomic theory way before John Dalton. Or Teilhard de Chardin SJ, the 20th Century French Jesuit, philosopher, palaeontologist and evolutionary theorist. He was exiled to the foreign missions because of his controversial theological ideas, but whilst in China, he discovered Peking Man. All of them integrated faith and science.

The Church did have an embarrassing blind spot in dealing with Galileo concerning the sun, and not the earth, being the centre of orbit (heliocentrism). But in Galileo's first encounter with the Church, he was questioned by the more open-minded Cardinal Robert Bellarmine SJ who suggested Galileo treat his theory as just that – a theory, a hypothetical. He should wait for more proof. Heliocentrism seemed to contradict Scriptures and so may be a threat to the faith, but if it were demonstrated to be absolutely true, then, said Bellarmine, the Church would have to reinterpret the Scriptures. However, 16 years later, the Inquisition saw things differently, with the result that Galileo lived the rest of his life under house arrest. Three and a half centuries later, in 1992, Pope John Paul II apologised for the Church's condemnation and persecution of Galileo.

Concerning evolution, many Catholics are surprised to learn that, in 1950, Pope Pius XII declared that Catholics can hold a theory of evolution, provided they believed that, at some point, God created the soul and gifted humankind with it. And concerning the Big Bang Theory of the origin of the universe, many are

also surprised to learn that it was proposed by a Catholic priest, Fr Georges Lemaître, himself an Old Boy of the Jesuit Sacred Heart College in Charleroi, Belgium. Lemaître was a great colleague of Albert Einstein. Lemaître's theory was endorsed, once again, by Pope Pius in 1951. Three years ago, addressing the Pontifical Academy of Science, Pope Francis also advocated the Big Bang Theory: "The Big Bang, which is today posited as the origin of the world, does not contradict the divine act of creation; rather, it requires it." At the same time, Francis was critical of creationism and the theory of intelligent design.

Alexei Nesteruk, a Russian Orthodox Deacon, mathematician and theologian, believes that "The dialogue between theology and science is not a dialogue at all; it is a drama of the human spirit." Others call it mystery. Mystery here is not in the sense of a solvable crime mystery (a 'whodunnit'), or a Rubik's cube, or sudoku. No, mystery is inexhaustible depth. It is the understanding that when you find an answer, it leads to the next question. It is a horizon you move toward, but never arrive at. In fact, it has the stamp of the *magis* about it.

This relationship between faith and reason (or between God and science), this dialogue, this drama, this mystery, is a restlessness that the reflective believer is drawn into. But with no certainties. And if you were to ask me, "Did God create the universe?" I have to say, "I don't know."

But I believe God did.