Science: Faith and Science

What if science raised big issues about faith and values?

Larry's science class was looking at DNA, and he wanted to raise some important values issues and big questions about faith for his students to think about.

"As well as teaching about the structure of DNA, I told them about Crick and Watson and the Human Genome Project led by Francis Collins. Then I put up a series of statements and questions.

1. Francis Crick was an atheist, as is James Watson. Francis Collins is a Christian. How do you think their differing attitudes to faith might influence them as scientists in their work and their response to their findings?

2. Scientists working on the genome project, such as Francis Collins, wanted the mapping of the human genome to be accessible to all and not to remain the property of the funders. Why might they want this? Do you think this was right? Did their reasons for this come from science itself or from outside science?

3. Do you think that mapping the human genome can tell us everything about how human beings work? Can everything be reduced to our genetic makeup?

"I asked the class to think about these questions as they researched the Human Genome Project further, and place their written responses in a box. Then I went through these and typed up some to add to the display board and to share with the class the next day. We talked about how science raises questions that draw in faith and ethics. I checked the display about DNA and added pictures of Crick, Watson, and Collins."

What's going on here?

Larry encouraged his students to see science as a place for debate about big questions concerning faith and values, and he challenged reductionist views of people.

He engaged students in reflecting on and researching questions about how faith connects to the work of scientists.

Larry reshaped his practice by choosing the questions, using history, checking his display, and planning for student reflection.

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

For the believer, there is no neutral ground. All life is God's, and faith affects everything. The Bible sees the entire world as God's, which can reveal him to those who view it with the eye of faith. All of life can be lived to the glory of God, be it as a scientist or parent, an artist or factory worker. Both the theologian and the geneticist are engaged in the same work — exploring God's world — even if they do not know it. The material world is a door to the sacred, and we experience God through the things of this world, including through science. This view of the world means that faith and values are seen as an integral part of any subject.

What difference does it me?

By raising issues of faith and values, Larry signaled that this was a legitimate thing to do in science. It is part of breaking down the sacred-secular divide. He also challenged reductionism by pointing to how work in genetics raises questions that concern faith and ethics.

Where could we go from here?

Other issues of faith and values could be raised in science, such as whether the source of funding for scientific research matters, or why we research some diseases more than others.

Digging deeper

Larry discussed issues of values and belief in science, which signaled that science was not a realm free of faith and values. He implied an integration of the sacred and the secular. This sacred-secular divide is the idea that there is a secular world that is the setting for our public lives and is guided by reason, and then there is personal religious belief, which is a private hobby. This view implies that religious belief does not affect public life or any parts of the curriculum except religion classes. Biblical perspectives are different; the Bible sees the whole world as God's (Psalm 24:1). It is not now as God intended, for it is marred by sin (Romans 8:21-22), but it still bears the stamp of a good creator. Scientists such as John Polkinghorne (priest and former professor of mathematical physics at Cambridge University in the UK) and Francis Collins (former head of the Human Genome Project) do not divorce faith, values, and science.

> ***Science is the only reliable way to understand the natural world [but] is powerless to answer questions such as "what is the meaning of human existence." … We need to bring all the power of both scientific and spiritual perspectives to bear on understanding what is both seen and unseen. Francis Collins, quoted in the Time Magazinearticle "Reconciling God and Science," by David Van Biema, July 10, 2006***

To accept no divide between sacred and secular means faith is integral to all subjects and all areas of life. It is seeing a whole subject differently, not just tacking something religious onto a basically secular subject. Exploring a subject from a Christian perspective might involve exploring the big issues, asking ethical and religious questions, and making connections across a range of areas. This holistic view of the world means that not only religious jobs are holy; science, parenting, and computing can all be "holy" jobs. In St. Augustine's terms, all truth is God's truth, for there is a deep interconnectedness in the world.

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