

SCIENCE AND SALVATION

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*Star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright;
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light.* (Refrain of "We Three Kings of Orient Are")

The star of Bethlehem is one of the brightest images in the story of the birth of Jesus. It is a star we sing about on Epiphany, the day each year we remember the discovery of Jesus by the wise men from the East. Jesus has already appeared to the Jewish community in Bethlehem, and on Epiphany he is revealed to the non-Jewish world — a world represented by a group of wise men from a foreign land.

The wise men found Jesus by following a star. This makes sense, since they were astrologers — the Greek word is *magi*. You might say that they were the scientists of their day. And so, on the Day of Epiphany, the world of science discovers the world of salvation.

This is an important topic for me, personally, and for all of us in 21st century America. On so many fronts, the world of science is locked in a battle with the world of religion, and this fight is terribly destructive for people on both sides. One of the gifts that the Presbyterian Church can give the world is an appreciation for the complementary truths revealed by science and religion. In fact, many of our churches will be addressing this issue on the weekend of February 8-10, which has been designated "Evolution Weekend." Resources are available online at http://www.butler.edu/clergyproject/rel_evol_sun.htm

The wise men followed a natural light in the sky (probably an unusual alignment of planets) to a place where they could see the supernatural light of Jesus the Savior. Their primitive science taught them about the mechanics of the planets. But their discovery of Jesus taught them about the meaning of salvation.

We can learn some lessons from these magi — wise men who appreciated both science and religion. We need to come to understand how faith and science can work together to answer the most pressing questions about human life. Whether the questions revolve around the movement of the planets or the meaning of life, science and religion answer two different sets of questions about creation — science answers the "how" questions, while religion answers the "why" ones. Since they approach the truth from different points of view, science and faith can complement rather than contradict each other.

I've been thinking about this issue since I pursued a double major in religion and biology as an undergraduate at Duke University. I'm convinced that the stories of the Bible answer the "why" questions of life, providing a faith-based explanation of why life exists, and how humans are to care for it. Science, on the other hand, has never answered the question of why life exists, even through endless proofs based on observation and investigation. Instead, science answers the "how" questions, telling us how things work — whether the things be plants and insects, lungs or muscles, planets or stars. Science is great at providing information about mechanical matters, but it can never answer questions such as why the Big Bang occurred, or why the first bacterium appeared.

It's fine to learn about different schools of thought, as long as we recognize just that — they're different. Some are scientific, and some are religious. The wise men used their

science to get to Bethlehem, but once they got there they fell down and worshiped. They realized that the meaning of life was somehow connected to Jesus the Savior, so they opened their treasure chests and “offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (Matthew 2: 11).

Their observations of the light in the sky helped them to answer the “how” question — how can we find “the child who has been born king of the Jews”? (v. 2). But it was their faith that helped them to answer the “why” question — why have we been put on this earth? Why do we worship? Why do we believe that God loves us, and wants to save us?

When the wise men came into the presence of Jesus, they discovered exactly why they had been put on earth — to bring gifts to the Son of God. When they “were overwhelmed with joy” (v. 10), they discovered a deep need to worship. When they saw God’s gift of his only Son, they discovered that God loves us and wants to offer us salvation.

These are not scientific discoveries — they are religious discoveries. But they are every bit as true, because they answer our deepest questions about the meaning of life.

I hope that students will find this helpful as they go into science classes and study the marvelous chemistry and physics of the world we live in. Students will learn much about the complex mechanics of the universe in their classes, but they will not find answers to the question of why God has put them in the world.

I hope that adults will find this helpful as they get drawn into conversations about evolution and Christianity. I believe that evolution is a part of God’s creative plan, and that the process of natural selection fits a God who is willing to take his time with us. Take the Ten Commandments, for example: Break the rule about adultery, and you will find your life threatened by an STD or a jealous wife. Over the course of many years, God allows us to evolve as we face the logical consequences of our actions, both bad and good. A physician named Richard Key once told me, “Natural selection is a study in patience. And God is a patient God.”

Science and religion. Each has a set of questions to answer, and each has a role to play in our lives. Let’s come to Christ as the wise men did, in search of the one who can bring us salvation.

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