

Jesus, Darwin, Einstein, & Catholics

By Fr. Dave Heney

Science and Catholic faith always agree. Our common tradition of reason and personal experience helps both flourish. In fact, many important discoveries in physics, astronomy and evolution were made by Catholic clergy: e.g. Nikolai Copernicus developed the mathematics that the earth circled the sun, long before Galileo, Gregor Mendel developed the laws of evolutionary heredity, and George Lemaitre developed the mathematical model that was later called The Big Bang, (and the first to finally convince Einstein about it!)

What is Science?

Science is a reasonable and rational choice to limit knowledge to what can be objectively tested, verified, and repeated. Scientists know there are subjective and personal experiences that are also real, such as love, freedom, and the personal experience of beauty, that cannot be objectively proven, but are still, nevertheless, very real to us. **Catholics have no conflict with scientific method.**

What is Materialism?

Materialism is an opinion that says that only what can be tested and verified is actually real. Therefore, free will, ideas, thoughts, and your personal experience are only the movement of atoms and molecules. Materialism, ironically, cannot be verified scientifically, because a proof for any system itself must come from outside that system. (Gödel's Theorem). **Catholics cannot accept Materialism.**

What is the Theory of Evolution today?

Living organisms evolve slowly over time from earlier ancestors. A process of random genetic mutation and natural selection guides this slow step-by-step process of change that gradually leads to the development of new species. The theory never addresses the origin of life itself. **Catholics have no conflict with this theory.**

What is the Theory of Intelligent Design?

The theory of Intelligent Design (ID) holds that certain features of living things are so complex that they are best explained by their having an “intelligent designer” that produces that cause. **Catholics have no conflict with this theory.**

What is Creationism?

Creationism holds that the story of creation in the Bible is the literal and scientific explanation of how the universe and life began. **Catholics do not accept this literal meaning of the Genesis account.** (Catechism: 100-140, 279-315)

Are Intelligent Design and Creationism the same?

No. Creationism affirms only a *literal reading of the Bible*, and tries to reconcile it with science. ID relies on a *reasonable inference* that the complexities of some events imply an intelligent cause. However, ID also recognizes that a “Designer” itself cannot be verified and so remains a reasonable inference. *It may be true, but it just cannot be verified scientifically.* Since “intelligent choices” of a

Designer or even our own personal experiences are by nature free and unpredictable they cannot be reliably or objectively measured and so remain outside the scientific method. No one else will ever see a sunset exactly as you see it and it is difficult to reliably predict what any person will do choose to do tomorrow!

What is “Darwinism?”

Darwinism is different from Darwin’s actual theory because “Darwinism” is not itself scientific. For example, there is no such thing as “Einstein-ism” or “Newton-ism.” When we add an “ism” to any idea, like Creation-ism or Darwin-ism” it can become an agenda and no longer open to objective criticism as true science requires. However, Catholic-ism, unlike Darwin-ism and Creation-ism, is always open to reason and objective critique. ***Catholics cannot accept theories not open to reasonable critique.***

What about Galileo?

Galileo continued the work of Copernicus that the earth circles the sun; however, his proof was based on the movement of the ocean tides, which was, and remains today, incorrect. Therefore the Church simply asked that he teach his idea as an untested theory, to which he, of course, agreed. Later, he broke that promise and taught it *and his own theological ideas* as a fact. For that, he agreed to house arrest at his large estate in Tuscany, where he continued his work in private. It was not until much later that the final helio-centric verification was discovered, to which the Church readily accepted.

What about the Big Bang, and creating something from nothing?

Some scientists, including Einstein, resisted the idea of Fr. Lemaitre and others that the universe had a beginning since cause and effect implied that a beginning had a “Beginner.” However, at Cal Tech in the early 1930’s, Fr. Lemaitre finally convinced Einstein, who then called it, “the most eloquent description of the origin of the universe I have ever heard.” The Big Bang was the *start of space and time*, so the “before” or “where” of that event cannot be experimentally verified. Space itself is never “empty” or “nothing” since it is governed by the physical laws that began at the Big Bang. Before that, there was truly nothing, and so no possible scientifically verifiable understanding of why the Big Bang happened.

What is the Catholic Understanding of science?

There is never a conflict between Catholics and science, as the Church has affirmed from St. Paul to St. Augustine to Pope John Paul and now Pope Benedict. Even Genesis affirms the goodness of scientific inquiry. In the ancient world, the sun and moon were gods to be worshipped, but in the bible, they are things created by a rational God to be studied. Science makes reasonable statements that can be objectively verified and Catholics make reasonable statements that are verified by subjective personal experience and affirmed by reason. ***While science is open to faith and Catholics are open to science, neither Catholics nor scientists can accept Materialism.***

Catholics can accept any evolutionary or cosmological theory that is based on objectively verified data. We believe scientists can discover very closely how God created the universe and even mankind. While we believe God is present in every part of creation, we also know that God cannot be verified scientifically. But scientists also accept they cannot discover why things exist because science is limited to what is measurable, and so cannot discover why there are things at all rather than nothing. We believe our *purpose* and *meaning* in the universe come from God, as affirmed in the Genesis account of Adam and Eve. (*Catechism: 355-421*)

That the whole universe seems guided *by such a small number* of finely tuned physical variables, and that we can even comprehend them, causes many scientists today to ask the religious question “Why” in addition to the usual science question of “How” Ironically, it is that simplicity and precision of nature’s law, not the complexity, that draws many scientists to faith. We believe a rational God created the universe and us using natural laws just as He designed. The truth about the universe cannot be in conflict with the truth of its creator so there is never a conflict between Catholics and science.

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