

Faith and Science, Faith in Science?

Readings: Proverbs 8:22-36; Romans 12:1-2, 9-18

The theme for Commonwealth Day in 2010 is Science, Technology and Society as celebrated with this rather arresting graphic like an exploding firework presumably symbolising expansion, growth and moving forward.

Official information available on the web says: “The theme will remind Commonwealth institutions that science underpins economic and social progress, and that access to technology is fundamental to equitability and the implementation of democracy.” Quite a mouthful.

It also quotes from a statement to CHOGM 2008 (Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting) which stated “...*science, technology and innovation are among the most powerful tools for meeting the internationally agreed development goals, and such tools can make productive resources – natural resources, human resources, and physical capital – more potent contributors to the transformation of societies....*”

“Science is good for us” might be a more punchy way of saying the same thing.

What does that leave me to say, what can a preacher say on such a topic? This is a particularly pertinent question as in the eyes of many Science and Faith are mutually exclusive topics. Faith is often portrayed as believing what you know isn't true, whilst Science deals with realities. Science is the rising water of progress leaving less and less ground for faith with vocal voices of the likes of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens calling for it to be washed away entirely.

In what I guess is a re writing of the topic as *Science, Theology and Society*, I would like to briefly explore, from a Christian perspective, why Science is good for us, that is a question of Faith and Science; but also to query whether Science is necessarily good for us or we good with it, the question of faith in Science.



SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & SOCIETY
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FAITH AND SCIENCE

Whilst it is common these days to pit faith and science against each other, this need not be the case. In fact there is good ground for arguing that the biblical picture of creational monotheism, a good creation created and sustained by a rational mind, as the necessary for the start of entire scientific enterprise.

The ancient world believed life to be dominated by capricious and territorial gods and spirits. The path to success in such a world was determined by knowing the appropriate words and actions that would placate these supernatural forces and bring about the desired outcome. Wisdom in the ancient world such as Mesopotamia and Egypt had a lot with what we would call magic.

Into this world came the Scriptural faith in one God who created all things and as our reading from Proverbs says created them not only by wisdom but with wisdom as part of them. The world is not a place filled with magic and random divine acts but a regular reliable creation which is open to rational investigation and comprehension.

Humanity can look at the world around us, see the order and start to make plans accordingly, the beginning of the scientific method of observation, hypothesis, experiment, and conclusion.

Because in biblical thinking this is a good world made for our benefit then the outcome of such investigation and understanding of the world can be to our good. Science is good for us as we look, seek to understand, and live in God's world.

Furthermore because this is God's world, biblical faith has nothing to fear from where science may lead. All truth is ultimately God's truth, from the cosmological wonders of the expanse of universe captured in the night sky, to the extraordinary complexity of the human genome in the twists of DNA's double helix. These are all part of God's good creation for us to explore, understand and marvel at. In such knowledge Science is good for us as we further understand God's wisdom. .

As the German 17th Century mathematician and astronomer Johannes Kepler is credited as saying science is "thinking God's thoughts after Him."¹

Lastly I would argue that because this is all the product of a rational creation rather than cosmic chance and chemical accident it gives an underpinning and coherence to the whole scientific rational endeavor. Science does not wash faith away but rather gives confidence for new voyages of discovery.

In the 1940's C.S. Lewis was asked to give a paper at the Oxford Socratic Society on "Is Theology Poetry?"² Lewis argues that it was much more than poetry and took issue with assumptions that science did away for the need for any theology. He argued

"Granted that Reason is prior to matter and that the light of that primal Reason illuminates finite minds, I can understand how men should come, by observation and inference, to know a lot about the universe they live in. If, on the other hand, I swallow the scientific cosmology as a whole, then not only can I not fit in Christianity, but I cannot even fit in science. If minds are wholly dependent on brains, and brains on bio-chemistry, and bio-chemistry (in the long run) on the meaningless flux of the atoms, I cannot understand how the thought of those minds should have any more significance than the sound of the wind in the trees. ...

Christian theology can fit in science, art, morality, The scientific point of view cannot fit in any of these things, not even science itself."

He memorably concluded.

I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else."

FAITH IN SCIENCE

Science then is good for us because it is part of the human endeavor in God's good creation and much good has come through science and technology. However whilst science may be good for us often we do not use it for good.

Albert Einstein could ask "Why does this magnificent applied science which saves work and makes life easier bring us so little happiness? The simple answer runs: Because we have not yet learned to make sensible use of it." We have the wisdom to do science but do not use science wisely.

His own work is a great case in point. Whilst his theory of relativity he helped us understand the universe his work also lead to weapons that could end our world. An alternative interpretation of the logo for this year's theme, is a world blowing up!

Given this disturbing reality I wonder if we are to have faith in science as the means to the democratic technological utopia envisaged in the papers quoted at the start.

¹ We can also note Albert Einstein who said, "Everyone who is seriously interested in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a spirit is manifest in the laws of the universe- a spirit vastly superior to man, and one in the face of which our modest powers must feel humble."

² The essay is found in *Screwtape Proposes a Toast and other Pieces* (Fount, 1965), p41-58

Let us consider a few examples. Prof. Chris Rapley CBE, Director of the Science Museum, London noted that³

Science, technology and cheap hydrocarbon-based energy have shaped the modern world. This potent combination is the driving force behind many of society's greatest achievements - from irrigating the Earth to landing on the Moon, from building up into the sky to drilling down to the Earth's core and from developing lifesaving drugs to understanding the human mind. Faced with the current challenge of a harsh economic climate, investment in science and technological innovation will help the world power out of the recession. Ironically a more a urgent issue, arguably humanity's greatest challenge, is decarbonising the worlds energy system to address the threat of climate change. Science and technology, combined with social change, can (indeed must) provide the solution

In other words to progress we need science to deal with the problems that technology has created.

We have modern medical marvels yet these are so easily priced out of the reach of the poor, we have to keep the profits up and the shareholders happy after all, but we are happy to use them on our cats and even make TV programs about them.

We have the wonder of internet and all the information that we could ever want. But the web seems to be used primarily for sharing opinions that no one cares about, the dissemination of pornography perhaps taken invasively on that other great modern technological marvel the mobile phone. The internet really is all about login, blogging, ogling, as well as celebrating the democratic right of stealing music and movies. I went on line to do some research on how much time, effort and money is wasted in such pursuits but I got .. ahh ... distracted.

In the annual Webber Lecture last year our Governor, His Excellency Peter Underwood argued that all the advancements in electronic communications, email, texting, facebook, twitter is effecting the way that our younger generation think and will affect their capacity for abstract thought.⁴ Realistic thinking is replaced by Reality TV, cerebral grappling replaced by celebrity gossip, the test tube replaced by youtube. Ironically our advances in science and technology may ultimately limit the next generation's ability to develop new and creative technologies.

Most sadly though he noted the way that modern electronic communication limits the ability to form satisfying interpersonal relationships. With all the talk of artificial intelligence we are losing our social intelligence. Science may ultimately makes the possibility of society harder.

This is not to decry science. Science is good. I am for instance I am very grateful for the computer on which I typed this sermon, the printer which enabled me to have a copy and the internet on which I hope people may read this sermon at their leisure. I am simply reminding us that whilst science may be good for us, we may not be good at using it, or not even use it for good. The problem is not with science per se but with us. Technology does not make us greedy and selfish, we misuse it because we are already selfish and greedy.

If we return to the Scriptures, the Wisdom Literature of Proverbs reminds us that God's wisdom by which the world was made is the very same wisdom by which we are to live in it. This is a wisdom which values relationships above all, that encourages loyalty, kindness, truthful speaking. If science is to be good for all of us we need to encourage such wisdom. To not grasp this will leave us clever but foolish.

Such wisdom would also remind us that there is a God and it is not us, we did not make our selves but he is our Creator. Proverbs 3:5-6 says. *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him,*

³<http://www.commonwealthfoundation.com/news/ScienceTechnologySociety/KeyIssues/KeyIssuesProfChrisRapleyCBE/>

⁴ *Electronic communication in the new millennium: is it affecting our social intelligence?* The 2009 Webber Lecture by the Honourable Peter G. Underwood AO, Governor of Tasmania, The Hutchins School Wednesday 6th May, 2009.

and he will make your paths straight. This means explorations of science and technology should be done with humility before him. In particular taking God into account will mean dealing with the ethical issues that new discoveries and inventions bring. Along with practical “Can we?” needs to go the ethical question of “Should we?”

This will require a rethinking of what is important, what really matters. I would argue that history has shown us that this does not and will not come through science and technology but through the transformation of the human heart and mind. St. Paul argues in Romans that this come from understanding the incredible love that goes beyond wisdom shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Our minds are to be transformed by experiencing and knowing God’s self giving love, turning from the patterns of selfishness and greed in this world. This is a revolution far more profound than the industrial revolution, technological revolution or communication revolution, it is a radically reordering of what is really important and where we find our meaning. We are not who we are because of our ipod, iphone, but because I care for you, for the other.

We are to use whatever skills, technologies, sciences we have to create society, for the common good, the common wealth even.

*God of all creation,
we give thanks for the beauty and bounty of your world
and for advances in understanding of the natural order.
Give discernment and skill to those who develop new technologies,
and insight to all who undertake scientific research.
You have given us the knowledge to produce plenty;
give us also the wisdom and will to bring it within the reach of all,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.***