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God, Religion & Science

By Jim Myers

The New York Times published an article by Cornelia Dean on August 23, 2005 -- *Scientists Speak Up on Mix of God and Science*. The article came about as the result of an unexpected question asked by a student at a recent scientific conference at City College of New York:

"Can you be a good scientist and believe in God?"

The reactions of the panelists, all Nobel laureates, were quick and sharp reports Dean.

"No!" declared Herbert A. Hauptman, who shared the chemistry prize in 1985 for his work on the structure of crystals. Belief in the supernatural, especially belief in God, is not only incompatible with good science, Dr. Hauptman declared, "this kind of belief is damaging to the well-being of the human race."

This, however, is not the universal position of all scientists. For several centuries religion and science existed in their own exclusive domains. It almost seems like there was a mutual agreement between scientists and theologians to confine their activities to only their domains. Today things have changed as religious groups challenge the positions of scientists in "arenas that as various as evolution in the classroom, AIDS prevention and stem cell research" Scientists who embrace religion are also beginning to speak out about their faith.

"It should not be a taboo subject, but frankly it often is in scientific circles," said Francis S. Collins, who directs the National Human Genome Research Institute and who speaks freely about his Christian faith.

Although they embrace religious faith, these scientists also embrace science as it has been defined for centuries. That is, they look to the natural world for explanations of what happens in the natural world and they recognize that scientific ideas must be provisional - capable of being overturned by evidence from experimentation and observation. This belief in science sets them apart from those who endorse creationism or its doctrinal cousin, intelligent design, both of which depend on the existence of a supernatural force.

Their belief in God challenges scientists who regard religious belief as little more than magical thinking, as some do. Their faith also challenges believers who denounce science as a godless enterprise and scientists as secular elitists contemptuous of God-fearing people.

Other scientists continue to hold the traditional position that science and religion are two separate realms, "non-overlapping magisterial." The late evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould wrote that science speaks with authority in the realm of "what the universe is made of (fact) and

why does it work this way (theory)" and religion holds sway over "questions of ultimate meaning and moral value."

When the American Association for the Advancement of Science devoted a session to this idea of separation at its annual meeting this year, scores of scientists crowded into a room to hear it. Some of them said they were unsatisfied with the idea, because they believe scientists' moral values must inevitably affect their work, others because so much of science has so many ethical implications in the real world.

One panelist, Dr. Noah Efron of Bar-Ilan University in Israel, said scientists, like other people, were guided by their own human purposes, meaning and values. The idea that fact can be separated from values and meaning "jibes poorly with what we know of the history of science," Dr. Efron said.

Dr. Collins, who is working on a book about his religious faith, also believes that people should not have to keep religious beliefs and scientific theories strictly separate. "I don't find it very satisfactory and I don't find it very necessary," he said in an interview. He noted that until relatively recently, most scientists were believers. "Isaac Newton wrote a lot more about the Bible than the laws of nature," he said. . . .

According to a much-discussed survey reported in the journal *Nature* in 1997, 40 percent of biologists, physicists and mathematicians said they believed in God - and not just a nonspecific transcendental presence but, as the survey put it, a God to whom one may pray "in expectation of receiving an answer. . . ."

Steven Weinberg, a physicist at the University of Texas, a member of the academy and a winner of the Nobel Prize in 1979 for his work in particle physics, said he could understand why religious

people would believe that anything that eroded belief was destructive. But he added: "I think one of the great historical contributions of science is to weaken the hold of religion. That's a good thing."

He rejects the idea that scientists who reject religion are arrogant. "We know how many mistakes we've made," Dr. Weinberg said. And he is angered by assertions that people without religious faith are without a moral compass. In any event, he added, "the experience of being a scientist makes religion seem fairly irrelevant," he said. "Most scientists I know simply don't think about it very much. They don't think about religion enough to qualify as practicing atheists." Most scientists he knows who do believe in God, he added, believe in "a God who is behind the laws of nature but who is not intervening."

For other scientists, research is not about belief.

"Faith is one thing, what you believe from the heart," said Joseph E. Murray, who won the Nobel Prize in medicine in 1990 for his work in organ transplantation. But in scientific research, he said, "it's the results that count. . . ." "When you are searching for truth you should use every possible avenue, including revelation," said Dr. Murray, who is a member of the Pontifical Academy, which advises the Vatican on scientific issues, and who described the influence of his faith on his work in his memoir, "Surgery of the Soul" (Science History Publications, 2002).

"I think almost without exception the people I have spoken to are scientists and they do believe in the existence of a supreme being," he said. "If you ask me to explain it - I cannot explain it at all."

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