

# Answering our Children's Questions

## *Science and Faith as an Issue for Christian Education*

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Children and youth in our churches ask searching questions, as they try to relate what they hear in Sunday School and worship with what they encounter in school and society. *Younger elementary children may ask: "Is the Bible fiction or non-fiction?" "Who made God?" Older elementary children may say: "What the Bible says about creation is different from what I am learning in school about the universe. Which story is true?" Youth may ask: "Do Christians have to believe that Genesis 1 tells the scientifically correct story about how everything was made?" "How can I believe both the Bible and the Big Bang?"*

In school, children and youth learn that science answers questions about the universe through observation, experiment and rational explanation. In church they learn that we accept, by faith, the biblical stories about the origin of the universe and the Creator's actions. As they grow older, children begin to wonder how science and faith fit together. Rarely do pastors and teachers try to bridge the widening gap between scientific and religious explanations. This is a serious mistake in a world dominated by science and technology because it compartmentalizes Christian faith, limiting it to the special world of the church.

By the teen years, many youth may already believe that they have to make a choice between science and the Bible. Some pastors and educators have found that, by confirmation age, youth may have already decided: some will throw out science explanations as "atheistic," while others will throw out the Bible stories as fictional. Other youth may simply compartmentalize their faith into a "church box" and cling to a horse-and-buggy faith while living in a technologically advanced society where scientific thinking permeates everything else.

There are in fact other alternatives which are respectful of both science and Scripture. Churches and pastors need to explore some of these bridge-building

approaches so that we can speak in an informed way when addressing the critical science-related issues of our day.

Current children and youth curricula may need enrichment to build these bridges between religious faith and scientific understanding. In doing so, we must remember that the science story and the scriptural story of creation are not interchangeable explanations. Rather, we can affirm that they are both true in their own sphere. The Bible teaches religious truth by which our lives may be guided, but it is not the kind of factual truth with which science and history deal. Properly understood, there is no conflict between science and religion. The classical Christian way to relate science and faith is easily understood by children: *God wrote two books: the book of nature and the book of faith*. Science investigates the book of nature with its tools and explanations; Christians investigate the book of faith (Bible) with a view to understanding God and our relationship to God the Creator. Basically, faith tells us *why* God created, and science tells us *how* it was done.

How would this work out in teaching the Genesis 1–2 creation story? There are no universal answers because much depends on the age group. But some general considerations apply overall: (1) The creation story is a story of faith, not of science. The main point is that God created everything in the universe and deemed all creation good. God brings increasing order out of chaos. The “how” is left for us to find out by the scientific study of nature. (2) The Creator who is behind all the awesome wonders of nature is to be praised by all creatures, especially humankind. (3) Try not to overstate what the story actually says. Most of the process of creation is not making something out of nothing, but shows God giving permission for already existing “stuff” to bring forth yet more wonders (Genesis 1:11, 20, 24). (4) It is also important to recognize how the context of biblical times differs from our context, so that we don’t ask children to accept the science of ancient times—with its Babylonian three-story universe—as the reasonable scientific explanation for our day. The task is not to defend an ancient cosmology as God’s revelation about the world. We must do in our time what the early Hebrews did in theirs: honor the sovereign Creator of “the heavens and the earth” in terms of our best, contemporary cosmology.

**Younger elementary age children (grades K-3)** love to discover the wonders of creation from stones to ants to animals to us! Pretend to be scientists making a discovery. God created everything. It is all connected (see Psalm 104) and science shows us how. We thank and praise God the Creator, who cares for the world and asks us to help care for it.

**Older elementary age children (grades 4-6)** probably are exposed in school or elsewhere to the possibility of conflict between Big Bang cosmology and the creation story. Science can never answer the question,

## FINDING ANSWERS

### For Youth

**Your youth have been asking questions about how science and faith fit together.**

**Where do you go to find the resource that will address their questions, engage their critical thinking, and help them grow in faith?**

**Help is just a click or two away! Go to:**

**[www.ileadyouth.com](http://www.ileadyouth.com)**

**for Cokesbury’s searchable database of youth resources. Currently, 486 topics are annotated on the site; additional ones are added each quarter.**

**For this particular concern, type in *science* in the Topic Search line. You will see a listing with descriptions that relate to your inquiry. Some of the resources are down-**

**loadable—a great timesaver! Some are available in print, and you’ll be directed to Cokesbury.com for a painless purchase and in just a few days the resource will arrive at your door.**

**Ileadyouth.com’s Resource Search feature will also allow you to search by Scripture reference (Psalm 139, for example) or by category (junior high Sunday school, movies, short-term studies, for example).**

**While you’re browsing the site, click on Youth Leader Tips for free for information, insights, and inspiration. The site will continue to grow—visit often!**

### For Children

**PowerXpress!™  
High Voltage Bible Experience Stations™**

**Immerse your children in the Bible with a new curriculum from Cokesbury for churches using a model based on children “rotating” among different learning stations each week.**

**PowerXpress!™ contains complete plans for a science station to help children learn the Bible story through science experiences. PowerXpress!™ also includes lesson plans for art, computer, cooking, games, music/ movement,**

**storytelling, and video stations. Complete lesson plans, stories, activities, scripts, station set-up tips, list of resources needed, printed music, word transparencies, and a music CD are included with each unit.**

**You get all eight stations, music CD, printed music, and word transparencies for \$99.00. Additional CD’s are only \$9.95. Available April 1. For more information, call: Curric-U-Phone 1-800-251-8591**

“Why is there something rather than nothing?” Genesis 1 does give an answer to this why question: God created and saw that creation was very good. The Genesis creation story is about the God who created, not about how creation happened. Genesis 1 is a magnificent poetic celebration of the sovereign Creator of “the heavens and the earth,” not a scientific treatise. How creation happened can have more than one right answer: a faith answer and a science answer. We know much more about how the universe came to be, but, like the ancient Hebrews, we also affirm God’s majesty and power in creation.

**Confirmation age youth (grades 7-9) and youth groups in general** can consider the stories of creation and compare them with what we know about the universe. The story means to say that all things ultimately come from God. The Two Books idea flows easily out of this discussion. Science and the Bible are not at odds: they answer different questions. Science explores the physical universe and how it came to be, while the Bible shows us how God wants us to live in that universe with each other and with the other creatures. Each of us is a creature of earth connected with all the rest of creation. Each of us is also a creature of heaven, made in the image of God and loved by God. Psalms 8 and 104 can enrich this discussion.

### BUILDING BRIDGES

The experience of awe at the majesty of the universe underlies both science and religion. Contemplating the wonders of the natural world can lead from religious affirmation of the Creator to a scientific study of the creation—and vice versa! Here are a few suggestions for bridge-building in educational ministry. Science and faith concerns can be made a more deliberate focus when the natural world and the actions of the Creator come up anywhere in educational materials or lectionary texts.

**Avoid either/or teaching about science versus religious faith at any level.** Emphasize respectful dialogue. Welcome questions from students, and expect a spirited discussion. You don’t have to have all the answers! “Living the questions” is a very scientific way of encouraging young minds to explore God’s relationship to the natural world for themselves.

**Evaluate curricula on whether they make openings for student**

**discussion of science and faith issues or not.** Pay attention to opportunities in the lessons to either add a missing strand or balance what is there with bridging material. Teacher training is a good time to look over a quarter’s material and discuss possible enrichments.

**Capitalize on the sense of awe in children about the natural world to encourage both thanksgiving to God and “scientific” investigation in the classroom.** We may be able to prevent an unbridgeable gap between religious faith and scientific understanding.

**Use rituals and litanies with their repeated refrains in the classroom to make connections, incorporating both the science side and the biblical side.** Stumped? Children’s science textbooks will mention many natural wonders for which to thank God.

**Watch your language!** Rephrase prayers and choose hymns that reflect our universe and not the ancient Babylonian cosmology.

**Confirmation classes might be interested in composing hymn texts or prayers which relate us to God in the universe.** Youth who have had good science courses in school might be interested in composing a “creation story” for our times that honors both the Creator and the scientific story of the origin of the universe.

**When the creation story comes up in the lesson series, invite a scientist or science teacher from your congregation, or a neighboring one, to visit the classroom.** These people may be helpful models of bridging science and faith. □



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>>> WHAT TO READ

**Next**

- **John Polkinghorne**  
*Quarks, Chaos, and Christianity*  
(Crossroad, 1996). A series of talks to non-scientists by a well-known scientists-theologian on issues that science raises for Christian faith, such as prayer and miracles. Textbook for adult or older youth to read, good background for teachers at any level.
- **Russell Stannard, editor**  
*God for the 21st Century*  
(Templeton Foundation Press, 2000). A compendium of short well-written essays on a wide range of science/theology topics written by scientists in various fields. Very successful in adult and older youth discussions. Excellent user-friendly overview of many pertinent topics for pastoral leaders to consider.
- **Video with Study Guide**  
*The Question Is...*  
(Templeton Foundation Press, 1995). Video with study guide designed by Russell Stannard for religious/ethical education in British schools. Deals with thorny issues such as evolution and cosmology by dialogue with scientists/theologians from all points of view. Aimed at teens, but good with adults, and very helpful for pastoral leaders.