

FAITH & Science

A New Conversation

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The scientific revolution continues with radical new developments treated as ordinary events. The preliminary mapping of the human genome lays the groundwork for unparalleled changes in the very definition and function of human life. As the chemical revolution dramatically changed modern medicine by making available medications that diminish pain, fight infections, control emotions, and change heart rhythms, the biological revolution may diminish or make obsolete chemically derived medications as the genetic origin of many illnesses, feelings, and behaviors are potentially altered. Cloning of life forms is a present reality and the ability to clone humans is no longer the mere plot of science fiction.

The recent discovery of water on Mars and other data gathered from the far reaches of the cosmos raise anew profound questions concerning the origins of life and the uniqueness of earthbound life forms, including humans. The vast expansiveness of the universe questions the significance of finite creatures and puts in cosmic perspective the probing of the psalmist: "When I look at the heavens . . . what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" (Psalm 8:3-4)

Revolutionary, life-changing, and world view-shattering developments in science raise new questions and re-frame old ones for people of faith.

Science is a magnificent resource God makes available to humanity.

- What is the origin and purpose of life, especially human life?
- What does it mean to be a whole person in an age when the biological essence of personhood can be predicted and altered? What is 'sin' when many behaviors and conditions once labeled 'sin' are found to have genetic predispositions?
- What is the relationship between freedom of will and genetic determinism?

Perhaps the most important question has to do with the goals of science and what is propelling the scientific revolution. It was once assumed that science was the objective, value-free search for truth. However, scientific research requires enormous economic capital and scientists can only pursue that for which they have funds. Research and development presumes marketability; therefore, the scientific revolution is fueled by the pursuit of profits as much as the pursuit of truth.

Market driven science runs the risk of reducing life and truth to commodities exchanged in the market place by those who have the money to purchase them. Are the fruits of the natural sciences to be available only to those able to purchase them? If so, what does this say about God as the giver of all life and human beings as stewards?

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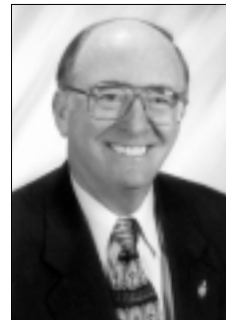
God makes available is distorted, abused, and destructively used by human beings.

The chemical revolution created advances in medicine while at the same time spawning a drug culture that enslaves millions of persons. The discovery of the atom made available new sources of energy, but human beings also used it immediately to make weapons of mass destruction. The breakthroughs in genetics make possible yet unimaginable progress in the prevention and treatment of disease and suffering while at the same time creating the potential of unparalleled distortion and destruction of life itself.

When human beings are able to initiate, alter, and end life, then questions, such as what it means to be a person, the origin and goal of creation, the definition of sin, the meaning of salvation, the origin of freedom, and the place of community in shaping the future, take on added significance.

Science and faith need a new conversation. Science needs the vision and critique of religious faith for a more transcendent purpose than profits. Religion needs the resources of science to expand life's horizons and to bring nearer a time when creation is healed, human beings fulfill their potential as beloved children of God, and the whole creation shouts for joy.

The conversation between science and religion cannot be left to scientists and professional theologians only. Clergy and laity in our churches must enter the dialogue in order to help shape the vision and determine public policy on critical choices related to scientific research. Since advances in science are confronting us with new ethical dilemmas and life itself, effective ministry requires a working knowledge of the issues. The articles that follow invite church leaders into the conversation and provide a background for continued study and reflection. As stewards of God's good gifts, including science, we engage in this conversation with humility, openness, and discernment. □



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