

Science & Christianity

Frequently Asked Questions



Many people think that science and Christianity are incompatible, forcing a thinking person to choose between a commitment to science and robust Christian faith.

However, this perceived conflict is a myth, and many scientists today (and throughout history) demonstrate that science can be a fulfilling and God-glorifying vocation.

ISCAST—Christianity & Science in Conversation is a network of people ranging from students to distinguished academics exploring the interface between the Christian faith and the sciences. ISCAST engages people in this conversation through various means, including visits to Australian schools, churches, and other groups.

Here are some responses to our most frequently asked questions.

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Can a scientist believe in God?

Yes. Absolutely!

You may be surprised to know that science in the West was nurtured by the Christian church, and the two have walked hand-in-hand for hundreds of years.

Many of the visionary thinkers of the scientific revolution were religious people whose passion to understand nature was an act of worship bringing glory to the creator.

Well known historical figures of science such as **Isaac Newton**, **Johannes Kepler**, and **Galileo Galilei** saw the natural world as the work of

God and had no problem reconciling their religious beliefs with their scientific pursuits.

The Roman Catholic Church has been at the forefront of science and faith in a systematic way for centuries and has been a driving force in promoting science through that time.

Two famous priest–scientists were Gregor Mendel, who founded the field of genetics and Georges Lemaître who theorised that the universe came into existence via the Big Bang.



Did you know Isaac Newton wrote more about theology than science?

Can science still be a Christian vocation today?

Yes! There are many eminent scientists today who publicly declare their Christian faith.

One famous example is **Dr Francis Collins**, a medical doctor and researcher who led the fifteen-year international effort to sequence the human genome. He was also head of the National Institutes of Health (the largest medical research agency in the world) and was appointed as Acting Science Advisor to the US President for 8 months until late 2022.

Collins says that science is a worthy pursuit summed up as humanity **“trying to understand the greatness of God’s design.”**

He says, if we do not respect science, we do a disservice to God because “the God of the Bible is also the God of the genome. He can be worshipped in the cathedral or in the laboratory. His creation is majestic, awesome, intricate, and beautiful, and it cannot be at war with itself. Only we imperfect humans can start such battles. And only we can end them.”

Dr Collins is just one example among the many scientists today who are firm Christian believers.

In Australia, ISCAST promotes a healthy dialogue between the Christian faith and the sciences. Among its members are many distinguished scientists who claim that a passion to understand the natural world comes from a desire to know and glorify its maker.



What about Genesis?

Did God really create the universe in 6 literal days?

In order to answer this question, it is important to **understand what kind of book the Bible is**.

Whenever we read anything, we have an expectation about what sort of text it is (the technical word is “genre”). We know that if we want to bake a cake, we will not find the instructions in a romance novel. We also understand that when we read *Harry Potter*, it is fantasy and not a true account of historical occurrences.

In the same way, **there is a fundamental difference between the Bible and a scientific textbook**.

Some Christians take a literalistic approach to reading Scripture and think that “if the Bible says it, that is literally how it happened.”

The problem with that approach is that it does not recognise the essential role of interpretation in all reading and nor does it appreciate the style or genre of the text.

In fact, the Bible is made up of numerous books of various genres written over centuries. There are historical accounts of Jesus in the Gospels, but there is also poetry, psalms, and figurative or symbolic language.

If we read Genesis as a scientific account of creation, we will run into trouble reconciling God’s word with mainstream science.



Is it wrong for me to believe in evolutionary theory?

On the Origin of Species by Charles Darwin was published in 1859 and popularised the evolutionary theory of natural selection. Its publication promoted one of the most famous examples of a so-called conflict between science and faith.

However, **Darwin himself did not see a conflict** and specifically referred to God at the start and end of his famous book.

Although Darwin was not a traditional Christian by the end of his life, it is simply not true now or when Darwin popularised the theory to suggest that evolution was anti-God or atheistic.

Among ISCAST's members are many biologists who accept evolutionary theory while also being committed Christian believers.





05

I thought science and Christianity were at war. Is that true?

Unfortunately, rumours of profound conflict between science and Christianity are very common.

More than just disputes and misunderstandings, some people have made claims that they are contradictory in some respects and that we must choose between them.

However, the relationship for Christians is on solid ground if we **take science seriously** and **avoid misinterpreting Scripture** as if it were making scientific statements.

Does science have limits? Will science have all the answers one day?

Science is excellent at finding answers to questions about the natural world. However, there are limits to the kinds of questions science can answer, and these fall into two categories.

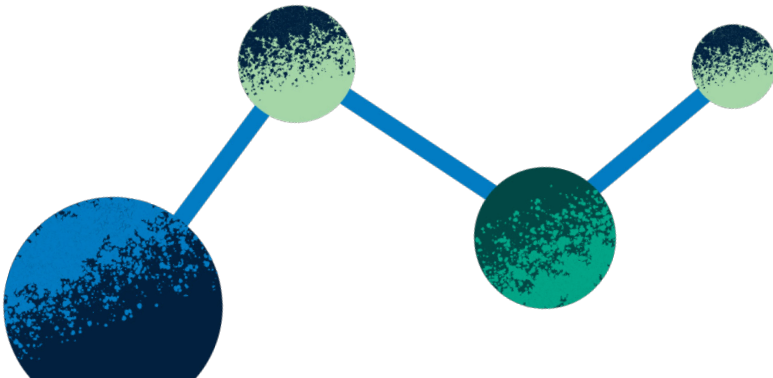
The first are those questions that science does not answer yet, but that we might imagine science answering one day. There are many things we don't know about the natural world and, as science progresses, we find out more and more.

However, **there are other questions that science will never explain because they lie outside its domain.**

Here's an example.

Imagine you go into a laboratory and your science teacher has a beaker of boiling water over a Bunsen burner. The teacher asks the class "Why is the water boiling?"

A bright student replies, "The water is boiling because the stored chemical energy in the gas is converted to heat energy and transferred through the glass to the molecules of water in the beaker. The molecules get hotter and hotter and start to move around more violently until eventually bubbles of water vapour start forming and coming out of the liquid water."





The teacher congratulates the student but then says, “actually, the water is boiling because I want a cup of tea.”

Which answer is correct? Both answers are correct! The student was right, but it is also true to say the water is boiling because the teacher wants a cup of tea.

The two answers show that the question “Why is the water boiling?” is ambiguous because it can be understood in more than one way.

It could be a question about **mechanics**: “What causes the water to boil?” Or it could be a question about **meanings**: “What is the purpose of the water boiling?”

Science can answer questions that deal with mechanisms and particles, but it is incapable of answering questions about meanings and purposes.

The big questions of life, such as “Why are we here?” or “Is there life after death?” or “Do I have a purpose?” will never be answered by science because they lie outside its domain.

If there are answers to those sorts of questions, we will have to look elsewhere.

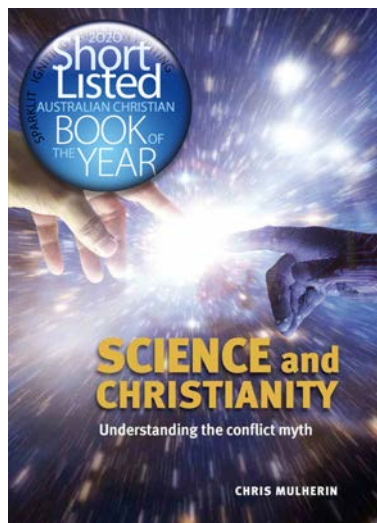
Got more questions? Let us know.

If you have science–faith questions we haven't addressed here, send them in to ISCAST at contact@iscast.org.

If we already have a helpful resource, we'll direct you there. If we haven't touched on it yet, we'll try our best to address it.

Learn More in *Science & Christianity* by Chris Mulherin

These short, succinct responses are expanded more in the comprehensive, easy-to-read book *Science & Christianity: Understanding the Conflict Myth* by ISCAST Executive Director Chris Mulherin.



Written for students, teachers, clergy, parish groups, and lay people, this is an attractive and engaging introduction to the relationship between science and Christian faith.

The book is available to order through ISCAST for \$25 (now \$20 for ISCAST members).

The book is **free for new members** of ISCAST; just join at iscast.org/join then send us an email for the book.

Buy it here:

iscast.org/scbook

About ISCAST

ISCAST—Christianity & Science in Conversation is a network of people, from students to distinguished academics, exploring the interface of the sciences, technology, and Christianity.

We are committed to Jesus Christ and we are convinced that Christian faith has much to say in engagement with the sciences. We're concerned that so many people, both outside and some within the Christian church, think that there is a destructive conflict between faith and science.

The rapid development of science and technology has left many people bewildered, leading some to accept a naturalistic, "science-only" mindset, while others retreat to a fundamentalism that rejects much of mainstream science.

With Christians throughout history, ISCAST stands for another way: a dynamic dialogue that critically engages with both Christian faith and the sciences, allowing each to contribute to our understanding of the other.

Since 1987, ISCAST has promoted the harmony between faith and the sciences. ISCAST runs conferences and seminars, speaks in schools, churches, and theological colleges, and provides resources.

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