

The place of Science in Christian schools

Abstract: This paper discusses some of the expectations of a Head of a Christian school concerning the teaching of Science at secondary level. It is offered by way of reflection on 45 years' observation of the teaching of Science, 28 of those as Head (Principal) across four schools.

Immediately, there is a clash between theists and atheists about the nature of reality and about causation: Genesis 1:1 proclaims '*in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*'. The late astrophysicist Carl Sagan insisted '*the cosmos is all there is, or ever was, or ever will be*'.

Popular culture and some science academics are advocates of scientism, wherein they argue that only scientific evidence is valid. Many of our students operate from a default assumption that 'science has disproved God'. Without a strategic approach within schools, there can be an apparent dichotomy between the academic curriculum posited on scientific principles of the discovery of truth, and Christian ministry within the school, which can easily be relegated by students to the realm of fantasy. Science teachers who are Christians can challenge this shibboleth in ways which are both arresting and productive.

Our political masters value science in schools for its utilitarian prospects of creating a clever country, thereby promoting economic prosperity (which they hope will translate into votes for them). Society values science as a panacea for personal (medical and technological) and global (e.g. environmental) problems. A Christian school needs to avoid these reductionist approaches and appropriate the science curriculum as a means of unfolding God's reality and commenting on ethical issues which arise from the study of science.

Christian schools will need to deal with the apparent polarity of scientific as against other modes of discerning truth. They will need to deal with fundamentalism, both in the form of scientific reductionism and retreating to religious ideological enclosures.

Too often Christian schools are content to relegate the discussion to a caricature of the intersection of science and faith as seen through the creation / evolution disputes which have bedevilled the Christian church for nearly 150 years. While this discussion is important, it is not the totality of interface.

These issues can be helpfully addressed by placing them in context of a wider discussion: the philosophy of science and science education, the nature of experiential and other kinds of evidence and enquiry, the history of science and its relationship with Christian faith, the provisional nature of scientific truth and the changes in science orthodoxy over time, and the limits of science. A Christian school will want to stand against any hegemonic truth claims of science as the only valid form of enquiry.

As many of the blockers to faith amongst young people are scientific, at least in a popular sense, the science teacher in a Christian school will have an important role in the apologetics ministry of the school, which can function as pre-evangelism.

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