

TOWARD UNDERSTANDING EACH OTHER: BRIDGING GAPS IN THE SCIENCE-AND-RELIGION DIALOGUE

by *Grace Wolf-Chase*

Abstract. The high degree of specialization in society and compartmentalization in education have resulted in increasing difficulty in communicating across different fields of study. I propose that these gaps in communication across disciplines must be addressed to ensure a fruitful ongoing science-and-religion dialogue.

Keywords: compartmentalization; cross-disciplinary communication; disconnect; process-oriented approach.

My experience as a research scientist within the academic community and at a major institution for public outreach, as well as my involvement as a lay person within a community of faith, tells me that the biggest barrier to progress in dialogue between science and religion is the huge disconnect that exists across disciplines such as science and theology as well as between these disciplines and in public perception and understanding of both. Widespread misunderstanding of the language and jargon used in science and religion, and the historical development, methods, and questions that most concern these disciplines, has resulted in far more talking past each other than talking to each other at both the academic and lay levels of discussion. People in highly specialized fields often have the most difficulty communicating both with nonspecialists and with specialists in different fields of study. Ironically, vehement disagreements often arise between

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persons who do not understand each other well enough to even identify the similarities and differences in their positions.

I think that much of this disconnect stems from the compartmentalized way in which individual disciplines are generally taught, from elementary school through the university level, with little attention given to the methods used by different disciplines and how these methods compare across disciplines.

In my experience, many people of faith who are hostile toward science know something of the results of science but have had little exposure to the actual *process* of science. Similarly, many who are hostile toward either science or religion have had a Sunday-school level of exposure to theology, with little background in the historical development and methodology of religious traditions. This situation is made worse when media stories abound with tales of science and religion at each other's throats, and other views are not heard by the great majority of people. *Dialogue* should not mean presenting people with a vast array of bewildering end products; it should mean giving them the tools they need in order to make better-informed decisions for themselves. One of the wisest pieces of advice I have heard regarding education is to always assume that people are smarter than you think they are but know less than you think they know.

My recommendation for moving ahead with the science-and-religion dialogue is to shift from a product-oriented approach to a process-oriented approach. Perhaps, using Ian Barbour's four categories of conflict, independence, dialogue, and integration, which describe different perspectives on the relationship and interaction of science and religion, it is time to begin to address the question of how one reaches a position in the first place. Before a person can make an informed decision, it is necessary for that person to have some basic understanding of the underlying assumptions and methods used in science and religion, the historical development of these methods, and the types of questions of most concern to each—How are these questions approached, and how are the “big ideas” developed? How are the methods similar, and how are they different? This process-oriented dialogue should be pluralistic, to enable people to come to a better understanding of cultures different from their own. Unity ought to be able to exist with, and benefit from, diversity, but the only way that we'll ever begin to understand each other is to first identify our similarities and our differences.

The urgency for proceeding in this direction is great. Compelling arguments can be made for the importance of improving scientific and technological literacy among all religious communities. In recent years, major scientific efforts have been initiated to address two questions of enormous potential significance to humanity—Where do we come from? and Are we alone? Science has made significant progress in understanding the “how” of our cosmic origins, and within the next couple of decades we will be

able to take images of entire planetary systems around stars other than our Sun and study the atmospheres of planets in these systems for indications of life as we know it. There is a great irony in the fact that we can understand so much of our cosmic origins, yet, on our own world, in our small corner of the vast cosmos, we often can't understand our next-door neighbors, let alone people who live in very different cultures. In my opinion, addressing this need to understand each other should be the driving priority of future dialogue. In doing so, the discussion must reach much further out of the ivory tower than it has to date.