Dr. Nancy Howell: How do you understand the relationship(s) between science and your religious or secular tradition?

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Prof. Nancy Howell: 00:20 When asked about the relationship between science and religion my first reaction is they are not enemies and they are not in conflict. In fact, I think they can be complementary and collaborative. And I find that each bring something new as a mode of engaging human thought, experience and spirit in relationship to nature. What I think impresses me about the relationship of science and religion is that each expresses awe and wonder about humanity and nature. And together, they collaborate to give us a larger narrative about what it means to be human and what it means to be in nature. (01:08) Given what we know about evolution, given what we know about God, sometimes the question might arise how is it possible even to think of God being involved in evolution without compromising who we think God is and what we think evolution is? I think scripture and tradition actually give us reasons to think that God can work in nature without compromising what nature is as the scientists describe nature. Take humans for example, I like to think that when I sin and do things that are not good, it is totally my responsibility. I chose it. I have freedom to choose that. Not that God controlled me or made me do the bad things that I do. Well, what if God somehow has a relationship with nature that's similar? So, that nature has a kind of freedom. There are certain principles, there are certain limitations based on environment that affect nature, but there are points of freedom and development and growth, and there are options in nature. (02:23) Perhaps God doesn’t micromanage nature, but is in fact present in it in such a way that God calls us forth to something better. God lures us to the best possibilities for us, to greater survival, to better relationships, to more accountability to each other. And maybe nature has something of that effect. And it's not just the call of an individual, but a call to a species or a call to the way we are interrelated in our environments. The public debate seems to lead us to a question that's not helpful. And that question is, is it God or is it nature to whom we give the credit for human evolution and for the existence of humanity? And I find that question unhelpful, because it creates a false dichotomy. It already assumes that either God did it or nature did it. And I want to say something new. I want us to ask this question, is our vision too small and what if God, in God's limitless has...
worked in and through nature? And what if nature has done its work so that the amazing surprise of human evolution has brought us to where we are? (03:55) I think the challenge for Christianity is that we've made God too small and we've made nature too simple. Typically, we talk about a Potter and clay, God is the Potter we are the clay. We have been molded and formed by God. But the issue for me is that that makes God someone who works on existing material in a very mechanical fashion. And it makes the clay something very simple, like what we used to do when we were preschoolers. But what happens if we remember that science tells us that humans are complex, that organisms and systems are complex. Are they as simple as clay? And if they're not, then maybe God is not as simple as we thought. Maybe God's creativity is more wondrous and complex than we've ever imagined. So picture a God then who works in and through evolution, a God who is so limitless that God can be in the processes of nature. (04:57) Imagine God then tending lovingly everything that is in nature. And then picture the God with wonder and surprise and delight encountering humans and non-human animals as God's companions. And then like any good creator who lets that creation go, we can picture a God who awaits our future. What will we evolve to be? What will our animal companions evolve to be? It seems to me that by engaging evolution, Christianity can in fact have a deeper and richer understanding of God. Christianity can be more than it is, richer than it is because of engaging evolution. We should be a Christianity of that sort, not one that creates itself in spite of science.

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