How do you understand the relationship(s) between science and your religious or secular tradition? – Dr. R. Wesley McCoy, Ph.D., Presbyterian

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Wesley McCoy: 00:19

Well, most people talk about evolution only once in a while, if at all. And I have to talk about it every day as a biology teacher. My students come to me with a lot of misunderstandings. They don't seem to understand things about genetics, about adaptation, about how life works in general. One of my responsibilities is to make sure they understand evolution thoroughly, and I take that responsibility very seriously. (00:47) It takes all of my education, and all of my work, and all of my background to develop differentiated lessons for all of my students so that they can understand what evolution is. And when I teach them about biology ... for example, if I teach photosynthesis or cell division, they usually don't bring up questions about religion. But evolution is a little different. When I teach them evolution, questions about evolution arise within the first few minutes. Some of those questions are spoken, and some are not spoken. And I have to attend to those questions carefully because every student's a little different. (01:23) I approach the discussion of religious questions with great humility, because I know that I don't know everything and I'm not really sure who does. I approach these questions by trying to find out what students really want to know. Asking questions is one of the skills that I try to teach my students. (01:42) There are people who divide religion and science into battle lines, and they want to take a stand that it's impossible to accept God and also to accept evolution as a science. I am not a person who is supposed to be challenging a person's cherished religious beliefs. That's not the job of a science teacher. However, it's incumbent upon me as an educator to make sure that students not only understand evolution, but know that it's possible to have many different possible religious views that can encompass evolution as part of their philosophy. (02:19) I teach students from all over the world, and it's
important to me to make sure that I do not alienate any of my students. The job of a science teacher is not to explain their own personal religious view of the world. In contrast to that, what I should do is open the students up to many different views. Many different ways of looking at the planet and looking at the universe. I've heard some science teachers tell their students that, "I'm a Christian, so you all know that I don't believe in evolution. But I have to teach it to you anyway." I think that's a totally inappropriate idea. A science teacher is abandoning their main responsibility if they are approaching evolution in that way. (03:03) A teacher who is doing that has falsely assumed that all Christians think the same way. That everybody who's a Christian has to reject evolution. I think it's also confusing to students to have a teacher pronounce their own religious views in the classroom, and insist that other people understand them and accept them. When a teacher assumes that all students and all Christians have to either accept evolution or accept God ... one or the other, then that person has abandoned their philosophy. Their teaching responsibility. And as a result, they are confusing the students. I think it's very important for a teacher to explain evolution carefully, and thoroughly, and make sure they tell the difference. Can help the students tell the difference between what science and what is religion, so the students aren't confused about those two ideas. (04:03) I remember one day a reporter asked me: how do you handle your enemies who do not agree with the idea of evolution? And I was stunned into silence by that question, because I couldn't think of a faithful, religious person as my enemy. I suppose one of the best examples I give my students ... When we are in class, I explained that long ago people probably had no good explanation for how thunderstorms work. So, they might've said, "Well, God did that." But now we understand a great deal about thunderstorms. We have the science of meteorology. Well, that doesn't make God any less of a creator or any less involved in the creation. (04:47) Science is a matter of physical evidence while religion is a matter of faith. Or to be more precise, religion is a matter of trust. So, I have decided to trust God. For me, that means that I understand that God is responsible for all that I see and is with me and all that I do. Even in the absence of physical evidence, I put my trust in God. I
also understand that we’ve been given a gift of reason and science—powerful tools that allow us to explore the natural world very deeply and thoroughly, uncovering explanations for things that we used to refer to as mysteries. Science is filled with power and possibility. And I’m convinced that God is filled with delight anytime humans make a new discovery like that. (05:36) To me, working in evolutionary science is a way to celebrate the diversity of God’s creation. And making new discoveries is a very deep form of worship, in my opinion. I have decided to embrace evolution as an elegant explanation for human origins. Evolution reveals that we are all connected very intimately and very directly to all of our ancestors and to all of God’s creation. We are all together, and nothing can be better than that. (06:13) Many people ask me what kinds of advice would I give to a new science teacher just beginning to teach a class that involves evolution. One thing I would tell them is that you have the responsibility to teach evolution as thoroughly as you can, because so many people misunderstand it. Plus it’s the cornerstone of all of biology. Without that information, it’s difficult to link all the various branches of biology together. That’s what evolution can do. (06:40) So, what does that mean for you as a person? As a teacher, you have your own religious faith. You have your own questions about the world. You have your own misunderstandings. So, what do you do? The most important thing to do is to be honest with students, and let them know that you understand evolution but you also have religious questions to ask. One of the best things that a religious person can do or a scientist can do is to ask questions about both their faith, and their science, and see what they can do about joining those two together in harmony. Some people are very uncomfortable and sometimes fearful or angry about evolution. If you take that approach that you’re asking questions and you’re trying to find answers for yourself, that usually draws people into a partnership. So, your parents, and your students, and your colleagues are all partners together in learning about the world.

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