How do you understand the relationship(s) between science and your religious or secular tradition? – Father Peter Ryan, S.J., Us Conference of Catholic Bishops

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Father Peter Ryan: 00:27

Well, you know, Pope Saint recently canonized John Paul the second wrote an encyclical called Faith and Reason, and he made a beautiful statement. He said, "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to a contemplation of the truth." So, according to the Catholic understanding, faith and reason are not opposed to each other, rather they compliment each other and so we have nothing to fear. Believers have nothing to fear from what reason can discover and of course, reason applied to nature is science and so what reason can discover about human origins is something we have nothing to fear. We have nothing to fear from the fossil record. We have nothing to fear from what honest and competent geologists discover about how life began, because this is not something opposed to what faith tells us. So the two go hand in hand, and in fact, God is the one who created us and endowed us with reason to begin with. (01:38) Of course, there is evolution, I'll be saying a little bit more about that later, but God gave us the gift of reason and so he wants us to use our reason to discover all we can about the world. There's so much to discover that is so magnificent. Believers and non-believers alike can look at creation and be stunned by its beauty. I remember going scuba diving once, and I was just amazed at the different colors and the odd shapes of these different fish and you're just blown away by the magnificence of it all. Now, believers and non-believers can appreciate that. As a believer I think, "Boy, God has an amazing imagination." (02:24) Just yesterday here at the museum, I was in the elevator and I saw a paper advertising a presentation, I think by someone who studies flies and insects and my first reaction was, "I can't imagine devoting my life to that." As soon as I stepped out of the elevator, I saw these different posters of different insects and they are so intricate and beautiful and different colors and you just kind of... I was immediately brought up short saying,
"Wow, there's just so much to wonder about. So much that's so beautiful." (03:01) On the one hand, we have every reason to trust the study of fossils and of the Earth and to be able to say, "Well, yeah, this is what we're learning about reality." At the same time, I think it's a mistake to assume that evolution explains absolutely everything. For example, it was a Catholic priest, the Belgian George Lemaitre who first proposed the Big Bang theory, realizing that the universe is expanding. He thought in terms of tracing it back until it reached that point where all matter was contained in a incredibly dense point and then just exploded. (03:44) Well, does that mean God doesn't exist? Of course not. It doesn't mean that he's not creator. The only reason there was able to be the conditions for the Big Bang to exist is that God brought it all into existence. Otherwise, there wouldn't be anything. There wouldn't be any Big Bang at all, but that doesn't mean we need to deny the Big Bang when we have faith in God. Rather, we're talking about how God brings the world into existence, and not only the world, but of course the human species. We can look at the development of human beings in relation to subhuman animals that went before us who are in one sense, our ancestors because our bodies. (04:31) I think there's enough scientific evidence to be able to say our bodies evolved from these earlier creatures, nevertheless, at a certain point, God endows the human being with a soul. He gives us the gift of rational consciousness so that we can do things that no lower creature could possibly be capable of and I think we have to say, isn't capable of developing into one who is capable of. Human beings can do trigonometry for example. I may not be so great at it myself, but many are. Write great literature, compose poetry, make great works of art and so forth. These are traits of a creature that is not just one who developed from lower creatures, but one who is endowed with reason and with sensibility and with the ability to be awed and to express that awe. (05:32) So, I think that's how I would reconcile the two. I'd also say we have to be careful of a deterministic account of human life. Some want to explain all of reality in terms of evolution. They might say, "Well, there's genetic evolution and then there's cultural evolution." And we can talk in that way, but it's very important as we do, not to deny that we have the ability to
reason and to make free choices. So it's not as though everything is sort of unfolding in a way that's predetermined, rather we have a radical freedom because we're created in the image and likeness of God and have been endowed with reason and free will. (06:23) Some of the opportunities are simply answering the challenges because these are things that disturb a lot of people of faith. A lot of people of faith think that somehow the discoveries of evolution can't be really true because they seem, from their point of view, to contradict the faith. And it's an opportunity to show that that's not the case, but there's also a more positive side of the opportunity instead of just answering objections. It's that I think we can appreciate the wonder of God by allowing ourselves to be awed by his creation and to realize that this is how God brought us about, at least our bodies, and it's how God unfolds his creation over time, over millennia. So we see these different insects, one perhaps developing from another and different forms of animals, different species that manifest the amazing imagination of God. (07:28) We can look at it in that way and we see it's something that should help build faith rather than threaten it. The same God who we Catholic believers and Judeo-Christian believers are convinced brought this world into existence out of nothing, even though we use things like the Big Bang and Evolutionary Unfolding to do this, has a plan. It's not true from our point of view that billions of years now, this world's just going to be wiped out of existence. There's going to be nothing left of human beings. There's a belief that the Lord who, if he's powerful enough to bring into existence this world out of nothing and to unfold it in the way that he has through evolution, he is also able to transform the creation that he brought about so that we have a future full of hope to look forward to it if we're doing our best to live good lives.

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