Religious perspectives on the science of human origins - What are the limits of science and religion?

This video was recorded at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History on March 21, 2010

Audience Member: 00:17 Hi, there. My name is Scott Graves, and I'm a visitor from Rome, Georgia, very near Kennesaw, Georgia. First, I'd like to congratulate Dr. Potts and the Smithsonian on its magnificent new exhibit. It's very impressive, and I appreciate [inaudible 00:00:33].

Scott Graves: 00:40 My question is regarding non-overlapping magisteria, I've heard a number of members of the panel suggest that maybe science and religion have two different languages or they talk about two different things. But it seems to me, if you look at the history of science, science has this property of growing its ability to explain things. Whereas religion seems to have this property of shrinking its ability to explain things, largely to the expense of the growth of science. For instance if this panel had come, if you guys were empaneled in the 1600's, maybe you would say something like, "Well only religion can explain the origin of people," but seems if you wait long enough, eventually these explanations appear. (01:28) So I have two questions that are related to one another. The first is, can you give me in any one of the panel, an example of a question that you believe is untouchable by science and inaccessible by the methods of science? And the second question is, can you think of any scientific demonstration that would make you abandon your beliefs and change them?

Elliot Dorff: 01:53 Well, the first one I think is easy. Almost any moral question. I mean, for example, I wrote a, it's called the rabbinic ruling at teshuva for the committee on Jewish law and standards of the conservative movement on donations of ill-gotten gain. Right? A nonprofit organization has been given money by somebody and then later that somebody is indicted for fraud. Okay. (02:17) So you have a real moral question about whether you have to return the money and if so, to whom? Whether you can keep it, oh, by the way the money was in
the meantime use to build a building. If you have to take the building down, do you got other money to pay for it? May you take other money from the same person? Science has nothing to do with any of that. So yes, there are. And science has nothing to do really with why is a Mozart concerto beautiful? (02:45) I mean, you can talk about the various tones and all of that and how they get put together. You can talk about Mozart's particular skill in doing that and compare it to, I don't know, the Beatles or somebody else, right? But that's not the essence of question. The essence of the question is one aesthetics, which science has nothing to do with. And I mean, there are a whole series of questions. And that's why one of the things that I think is really important is that the question of this exhibit is, "What makes us human?" That's only in regard to, the exhibit is very clear about the fact that it's only in regard to the physical aspects of who we are, but what makes us human is law is well beyond that. It has to do with our moral character, with our ability to imagine, to create, to relate to each other. (03:34) I mean, all of which are connected to our physical abilities, but our physical abilities alone do not explain them. And the same sort of thing I think is true with science generally. Science is wonderful. I did my undergraduate thesis of philosophy of science. I love it. Right. I do a lot of bioethics. I've been on several federal commissions on bioethics and the ethics committee of UCLA Medical Center. I love it. Okay. And I really do think that it's a way of revealing God as well as the textual tradition. (04:03) And I love it just on its own accord, but it's not everything in the same sort of way that economics is not everything. History is not everything and literature is not everything. That's why you need to have all of these perspectives it seems to me to feed off of, in order to get anything like an adequate understanding of what the phenomenon is actually about.

Connie Bertka: 04:22 What was the second question?

Lee Medows: 04:26 If at some point, theology has tried to explain more than it can, I think we always come into the problem where any way of knowing tries to explain more than it can. And that science can also do that. Can also fall into the trap. So there are people that want to explain everything through
economics and want to be able to define all of reality through an economic theory. (04:48) And so I think that that's also part of the challenge that there are things that science can do. And one of the things that makes us human is the ability to ask the questions that the scientist has. And so that the nature of being in God's image is also the nature of being able to ask the questions and being able to examine. And so, yes, there are many things that if when we try to go to a reductionism and, yes, has theology been guilty of it? Of course. Have other sciences or other ways of knowing been guilty of that? Yes. (05:23) And so we always have to recognize what it is we can demonstrate and what it is we can't demonstrate. What it is that we can describe effectively through a way of knowing and what it is we can't. And does again, you know, do we as theologians and as Christians in particular have a lot to repent of? Well, we've been repenting for a long time and hope there's some of us that maybe still need a little more repenting or a lot more. (05:46) But again, yes, there are many things that science cannot describe and it can't answer is there a why to all of this. It can answer the what and the how. Can it answer a broader why question? So why are we here? Some would say that's a non-logical question, but if that's a question that keeps coming up for humans, theology struggles with that question and Christianity in particular.

**Betty Holley: 06:15** You asked for a question that only religion can answer. I can give you one question for me. I believe I was called by God and the ministry. Science cannot answer that for me. Only religion can.

**Fred Edwards: 06:31** Well, I would point out that we really don't know what the limitations of science are. It kind of goes to your earlier point about if we were having this discussion in the 1600s, we would be putting the limits somewhere differently than we're putting them now. And we don't know where we're going to put those limits tomorrow. (06:48) So we don't know what the limits of science are. We know that science attempts to answer as many questions as it can. Used to be thought that the area of human love couldn't be addressed by science. And now they've worked it down to the chemistry. So, and Stephen Jay Gould's non-
overlapping magisterial, he took a lot of heat for that from his fellow humanists, I should tell you, at a conference of the American humanist association, because the question was reasonably asked. All right, well, can you clearly put in hermetically sealed containers what religion does and what science does and what other endeavors do. (07:28) And that you really can't very easily because religion doesn't want to stay in such a container and science doesn't want to stay in such a container. So nobody's cooperating. Okay. So I think we have to realize then that science is exploring such things as what's the evolutionary basis of morality. (07:48) I mean, you look at the behavior of orangutans or other primates in the zoo, and you watch some of their family and social behavior. And they seem to engage in all sorts of moral and family values they have, all without benefit of clergy. So we might reasonably ask then, okay, then is there an evolutionary basis for morality? (08:11) These are reasonable questions. So we don't want to erect any stop signs for the scientific pursuit. We don't need to say as a dogma, that science can answer all questions, but we don't need to say as a dogma that we know where the inquiry stops.

Connie Bertka: 08:25 Nancy.

Nancy Howell: 08:27 One thing I've heard my colleagues talk about in answer to the question has to do with the fact that each field has limits. We create those limits by the kinds of language and the kinds of methods that we use. And we always get to places where if we act on our own, we come up against questions that are too puzzling for one field to answer. (08:51) The importance of this particular committee is that we have an interest in dialogue, because it's by dialogue among people of different interests and from different fields that we come closer to answering certain kinds of questions. And an example has to do with the relative success of philosophers and religious scholars addressing how we might learn from science about ecology and about environmental destruction. And then put our heads together about certain kinds of solutions and kinds of societal transformations that can take place.

Connie Bertka: 09:30 You had a second question.
Jim Miller: 09:31 I think the second question is actually a very important one and that is, is there any finding in science that would make you change or abandon your faith?

Scott Graves: 09:41 It's a little bit more, I guess, broaden that it's can you think of even theoretically, not something that science has already demonstrated, anything even theoretically that could be demonstrated.

Jim Miller: 09:52 Part of the challenge of that is I think is a categorical error. And that is that belief in God, for instance, is not a conclusion. It's a presupposition. One begins with God. And then on the basis of that, you don't have to begin with God, but if you do begin with God, then you work out what consequences may come from that. (10:14) But it is the case it seems to me that every religious tradition that I'm familiar with presumes something about the way the world is, incorporate some narrative account of what the world is like. And part of what science does is create narratives about what the world is like. (10:38) So there's a sense in which there is a natural impetus for each new narrative that's discovered by virtue of scientific inquiry to call upon a new religious reflection. As it seeks to take account of the new best understanding of what the world is like. I mean the opening chapter of Genesis, the writers there didn't come up with their own cosmology. They borrowed the cosmology that was around them, that everyone agreed on, basically. What they did was they gave a very different theological account of it. And because they had a different notion of what the divine was like as compared to their neighbors. (11:22) But I can only speak in this particular case personally, and I hope that my Presbyterian colleagues aren't listening too closely, but it seems to me that there are a number of issues with regard to the meaning, for instance, of the term, "made in the image of God." Which do not necessarily require that that term be used exclusively of human beings. In other words, it depends on how you intonate that particular passage at the end of the opening of Genesis. You can say it like it's often traditionally read, "Let us make humankind. Let's make humankind in our own image." Apart from the whole plural that's involved in that. (12:14) But what if it's more like, "Oh, and let's also make humankind in our own
image." I added the also there. You may have noticed. But you didn’t intone it so that it sounds that way. And you don’t have to add the word, which would suggest that all of creation in some sense is an expression of the divine image. Some would say that [inaudible 00:12:37]. Okay, that’s fine. But that’s not the only way of thinking about it in traditional theistic terms. (12:44) So an evolutionary account of the world that suggests that we as human beings are intimately connected by virtue of kinship with every other living thing on Earth. And as a matter of fact, if you get beyond that, the emergence of life itself is dependent upon a kind of relational connection with preexisting material order. Think organic chemistry and so forth. (13:10) So that ultimately we all ended up being stardust when it finally comes down to it, or as somebody once said thermonuclear waste. We have this intimate connection with the whole of the cosmos in ourselves. And then maybe this whole notion of being made in the image of God is not a term that is appropriate only for Homo sapiens, but as something that’s appropriate. A way of understanding the whole of creation.

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