

## How Covid Raised the Stakes of the War Between Faith and Science

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By Tish Harrison Warren, Opinion Writer

I have never had much interest in faith versus science debates. They simply did not resonate with me. I believe God created the world, but I never felt the need to nail down the details or method of creation. I went to a fairly conservative evangelical seminary (founded by Billy Graham himself), and even there, I was taught that Genesis 1 was more like a hymn or a poem than a science textbook. I have long been influenced by early church theologians like Augustine of Hippo, who understood the biblical creation account as primarily making theological claims instead of offering a precise explanation of cosmological origins.

I was in campus ministry for a decade among scientists who were leaders in their fields. They sought cures for cancer and studied black holes, and were also passionate about their faith. They saw science as a tool, a gift from God that allowed them to help people and explore the glorious wonder of the world.

So I mostly ignored the larger cultural conversations that pit science and faith against each other.

Then along came Covid-19.

It has not been hard for me to trust the medical community and their recommendations during the pandemic because I personally know biomedical researchers whom I trust. I worship each Sunday with physicians. My church prayed for an end to the pandemic and asked God to help scientists in their vaccine research. We never saw a conflict between the work of God and efforts of science.

But others saw the two in opposition. In April 2020, Andrew Cuomo, then the governor of New York, explained declining coronavirus rates by saying, “Our behavior has stopped the spread of the virus. God did not stop the spread of the virus.” Around me, I heard some churchgoers say that Covid precautions were motivated by fear, not faith.

Indeed, these past two years have exposed how the science vs. faith discourse isn’t an abstract ideological debate but a false dichotomy that has disastrous real-world consequences. According to a September Pew study, white evangelicals are the least likely religious group to get vaccinated (about 57 percent have received at least one dose of a Covid vaccine). There are certainly political reasons for this. Many white American evangelicals lean Republican, and Republicans overall are less likely to get vaccinated against Covid. But we also cannot overlook the broader context of distrust between evangelical faith communities and the scientific community.

To better understand this cultural division, I talked to Deborah Haarsma, an astrophysicist, a Christian and the president of BioLogos, an organization that explores the relationship between faith and science. In popular thought, she said, scientists and Christians are often slotted into “two different categories.”

It wasn’t always this way. At the outset of the Scientific Revolution, many scientists were motivated by their beliefs about God. Nicolaus Copernicus, Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle and other giants of modern science were people of faith. But, after high-profile debates over Darwin’s theory of evolution in the late 19th century, a perceived division began to emerge between religion and science. In the spectacle of the Scopes Monkey Trial in 1925, which assessed, among other things, whether a state could prohibit the teaching of evolution in schools (but was also staged as a publicity stunt by town leaders in Dayton, Tenn.), Christian beliefs and science were set up as incompatible ideas.

It “is better to trust in the Rock of Ages,” wrote the prosecutor William Jennings Bryan, “than to know the age of the rocks.”

Haarsma told me that the rise of the creationism movement in the 1960s, led by the engineer Henry Morris, increased the skepticism between some evangelical churches and scientists. The rift continued to grow because of bioethical conflicts around issues like stem cell research and euthanasia, but more so because of a latent cultural assumption that faith and fact oppose each other. When President Barack Obama appointed Francis Collins, an evangelical Christian (and the founder of BioLogos), as head of the National Institutes of Health in 2009, some questioned whether Collins's religious faith should disqualify him from the position.

A 2018 study by Barna, a Christian research and polling firm, showed that "significantly fewer teens and young adults (28 percent and 25 percent) than Gen X and Boomers (36 percent and 45 percent)" view science and faith as complementary. Young people increasingly see an essential conflict between faith and science.

I asked Haarsma who is to blame. Is it the fault of religious communities for denigrating science or the scientific community for denigrating faith? She laughed and said there's plenty of blame to go around.

At times, a vocal minority of prominent scientists have marginalized religious communities. Haarsma cited a tweet by Neil deGrasse Tyson, a prominent astrophysicist, from Christmas morning 2014: "On this day long ago, a child was born who, by age 30, would transform the world. Happy Birthday Isaac Newton." That's clever, but it appeared to mock Christians on one of our most sacred holidays. These sorts of messages spur needless animosity. If the cultural conversation requires people to choose between their faith and science, most will choose faith, but we don't have to ask people to choose. This is a false choice.

At the same time, Haarsma said, there are some Christians who present faith as opposed to evidence, instead of "faith as a lived-out commitment in response" to evidence. She also said that heated anti-science rhetoric from a minority of Christians online encourages scientists to dismiss people of faith as a whole.

So, I asked Haarsma, what is the path to reconciliation? If this dichotomy between faith and science is truly a false dichotomy, how do we purge it from our broader cultural discourse and imagination?

I heard her voice rise with passion. This is her life's work and the work of her organization. She offered practical steps: The message to religious communities needs to be, "Don't trust science instead of God; trust science as a gift from God." Church leaders can praise God for creation and the unique ability to be able to study and understand it. Churches can also spotlight scientists, especially people of faith who are leaders in their fields. (BioLogos has a bureau of scientists and other scholars who speak to faith groups.)

In turn, the scientific community could be more honest about the limits of the discipline. "Sometimes people say things like, 'If everyone would just accept the science, the world would be great,'" Haarsma said. But she notes that science doesn't solve everything and that scientific communities have to "acknowledge the value of religion as a way of answering life's biggest questions."

In the end, Haarsma said, these two communities share a goal: seeking truth. "They can find common ground in their desire to know what is true," she suggests, "whether about nature or about God." I asked Haarsma how faith and science entwine in her own work. Her voice sounded ebullient. As a professor of astronomy, she said, she truly sees how, in the words of Psalm 19, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork." That's what scientists study, she told me, "the very handiwork of God."