No need for tension between science and religion

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When my oldest son was in high school he came home puzzled one day. After hemming and hawing about my office he finally cleared his throat and asked, “Dad? My seminary teacher told me that the big bang theory of the universe was false. What do you think?” He clearly was in a bad spot, caught between a teacher he greatly respected and his father, the head of the astronomy group at BYU, who taught that very theory every semester.

My son had a wonderful seminary teacher, and I did not want to lessen his faith in this good man. Whatever he might say to him about science was not as important as what he was teaching him about the gospel. So I thought for a second on how I might clarify things while still preserving this important relationship.

Why is there tension between science and religion? Science is just an examination of the world through studying facts, asking questions about those facts, forming explanations and conducting experiments to test and refine the explanations. Is true religion offended by this? No. How can it be? In fact the Lord commands us to study things out in our minds then ask him if it be right (D&C 9:8). Consider how Joseph Smith obtained the First Vision. He studied different religious beliefs and when sufficiently schooled he found in James 1:5 a way to test which religion was true. He conducted an experiment in the Sacred Grove and obtained a result. You don’t get much more scientific than that.

Of course, scientists like Richard Dawkins do attack religion, often in a condescending manner. And theologians can be quick to return fire. It is good to bear in mind that when outspoken scientists condemn religion, it is either because they are possibly sincerely questioning the tenets of false religion, like Joseph Smith did, or they are falling short as scientists and do not understand as well as they should the scientific method and the limits of their own knowledge.

I was privileged to be at a conference 20 years ago when the great cosmologist, and devoted atheist, Fred Hoyle gave a stirring talk on why he
resisted the big bang theory. It was Hoyle who derisively gave the theory its name, and to the end of his life he refused to endorse it even as his own theories crumbled for the lack of evidence. In his talk he confessed that as a youth he was forced to attend church by his parents. This so offended him he determined to never support the idea of God. The big bang theory just looked too much like God’s hand to him.

I agree with Hoyle that the big bang is not an atheistic theory. It hypothesizes a beginning when pure energy was infused into space, and time as we know it began. This energy transformed into matter which has been and is continuing to be organized into numberless stars and worlds. We see the universe expanding and evolving consistent with this. It is the only theory that makes sense and is great and grand and glorious beside. Even the mostly atheistic Carl Sagan has lamented how major religions have missed the opportunity to conclude, “This is better than we thought! The Universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander, more subtle, more elegant. God must be even greater than we dreamed.”

What I said to my son was essentially this: No doubt your seminary teacher has heard atheistic scientists twist theories of the universe to their ends, proclaiming science has shown there is no God and that all can be adequately explained through our theories. They do not know what they are saying. When pressed they will reluctantly and often angrily confess that we do not understand what caused the big bang. Nor do we understand why the laws of nature emerged from the big bang to be what they are. Nor do we even understand the genesis of the forces that shape the universe. To paraphrase Nobel prize-winning physicist Richard Feymann, we can describe the universe through theory, but that is not the same as comprehending the universe.

Even so, do not dismiss these theories. They are part of how we learn and grow. Someday we will comprehend all things and when we do, expect to see the truths revealed through science standing in support of the truths revealed by God.

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