Being a Christian in Science

Rich Milne covers an excellent book by Walter Hearn, both a Christian and a scientist, giving perspective and advice on how to be a Christian in the science field.

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"Carl Sagan is a friend of mine. He said that if Jesus ascended literally and traveled at the speed of light, he hasn't yet gotten out of our galaxy."{1}

So said Episcopal Bishop John Spong, when asked if he believed that Jesus had ascended into heaven. This is an example of the worst kind of mixing of science and Christianity.

In this essay we are considering how to live with integrity as both a Christian and a scientist. Books about science and Christianity are published every month, but they are usually difficult to read and seldom easy to apply. Walter Hearn dynamites those stereotypes in his new book, *Being a Christian in Science*.

Hearn's book is the result of having been a Christian from childhood, and a scientist for much of his working life. His desire is for Christians to enter into science and make a career of it. But he also wants anyone who enters this road to know what joys and obstacles lie ahead around the many bends. His book is by turns intensely practical and deeply devotional.

Ever since Darwin, many Christians have been uncomfortable around science. Many of us have the feeling that science is trying to do away with the need for God. Most of us have heard scientists like Carl Sagan, speaking far from their field of expertise, make grand pronouncements like "The universe is all that is, or was, or ever will be." Is it possible for Bible-believing Christians to also be committed scientists?

Hearn's book, *Being a Christian in Science*, does not try to deal with creation/evolution issues, or chance vs. design arguments, or even science vs. God questions. Instead, his clear and heartfelt focus is on questions such as, How do you work as a scientist if you are also a Christian? What is science like as a profession? Can I really pray in the laboratory?

At the outset it is important to distinguish between a "Christian Scientist," with a capital S, and a "Christian scientist." In the first pages of the book, Hearn, a life-long chemist and editor, separates what science can and cannot do. Science can in no way establish the claim that nothing supernatural or eternal is real. When such a claim is made, it is not scientific but scientistic.{2} While this is not the book's emphasis, Hearn is very clear about what the limits of science are, and as Christians we must think clearly about what science can and cannot do.

Using *Being a Christian in Science* as a basis, we will look at what scientists really do, why Christians might spend their lives in science, and what resources there are for believers who make science their chosen career. My hope is that you will see, not only the value of science, but, if you are a Christian young person who already loves science, you will see that this is a vocation to which God may be calling you. Science is changing the shape of our world and we need Christian scientists just as much as we need Christian teachers, or carpenters, or missionaries.

What Do Scientists Do, Anyway?

Many Christians are not too sure what scientists do, and fairly sure they don't want to know. As Walter Hearn pointedly observes in his book, "Evangelical churches that send missionaries around the world seldom see the 'World of Science,' or scholarship in general, as a mission field."{3} Too many Christians seem to see scientists as "the enemy" with

little thought of what they do or how they might be reached with the Gospel.

What is a Christian? Someone who believes in Jesus. Yes and no. What is a scientist? Someone who believes in science. Again, yes and no. A Christian believes that Jesus is the answer to certain questions about how we can be forgiven and stand before a holy God, questions about how we can know what will happen to us when we die. As a Christian, have you ever thought about being a scientist? Just what is a scientist, anyway?

A scientist believes that science is a "group of methods for solving a particular kind of problem."{4} Science is not just a list of facts or theories, it is a way to understand the natural world by observing, experimenting, and then attempting to find cause and effect relationships. Scientists are fascinated by the world around them. They long to understand more than what we already know about this complex and intricately connected world we live in. A scientist knows we have few of the answers, and he or she sets out to at least try to ask the right questions so that we can learn more about how things work, and how this wildly diverse world fits together.

What does it take to be a scientist? Walter Hearn, himself a lab chemist for twenty years, gives a disarmingly simple answer to this question. A scientist needs "curiosity about nature, intelligence, perseverance, common sense, and better-than-average conceptual ability. . . . Flexibility is another important characteristic."{5} This is a little like saying "Just have faith" to someone about to enter a long spiritual trial. What he does not say is how hard it can be to maintain these admirable traits on a day-to-day basis in the face of what much of science really is.

Mathematicians can look at the same set of equations for months before they see the relationship between them.

Biologists can do the same or nearly the same experiment dozens of times over weeks and months, before they see the result they hoped might happen. Geologists may spend months in the field gathering data, unsure of how they will ever make sense of the big picture. Much of science is daily hard work, often without knowing whether you are succeeding or failing, and then, occasionally, the "aha" moment when things suddenly fall into place and you have one more small stepping stone across the wide expanses we know little or nothing about. Would you still like to be a scientist?

Next we will consider why God might call people to be full time scientists and how a Christian might live out such a calling. There are no easy answers, but if you enjoy science, God might well call you to be one of the bridges in the twenty-first century that allows Christians and scientists to understand one another. It is a critically important calling.

How Can a Believer Live as a Christian in Science?

"Avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called, which some professing have erred concerning the faith." (1 Tim. 6:20-21, KJV)

Misunderstanding Paul's admonition to Timothy has left many Christians skeptical of science. After all, don't most scientists believe Darwin, and didn't Darwin disprove the need for God? Why should Christians waste their time on science?

In his wonderfully gentle-tempered book Being a Christian in Science, Walter Hearn offers a quotation from a Christian physics professor that capsulizes this feeling as it applies to a broad range of academic pursuits:

> *One hears Christians speak proudly of their sons or daughters who have married seminary students or missionaries. . . [But] I have yet to hear a Christian father speak proudly of his*

> *son or daughter marrying a graduate student. No wonder our young people are discourage from entering the rigorous life of learning and research.{6}*

Christians could once justly claim to be leaders in most intellectual arenas. Modern science is widely acknowledged to have its roots in a Christian perspective on nature. If we believe that God created the world we live in, then shouldn't we be involved with the scientists who are exploring it?

We have already spoken briefly of some of the personal characteristics that many scientists share. If God is calling you to a life as a scientist it is likely that He has also given you the gifts or talents that it takes to work as a scientist. Have math and science classes gone well for you in school? Do you feel some drive to find out more than what you already know about outer space or inner space? What would life be like as a scientist?

Being a Christian in Science spends several chapters on questions like "What to Expect" and "Science as a Christian Calling." Perhaps the most difficult situation is being misunderstood by both scientific colleagues and other Christians. Christians in science live between two cultures. As Hearn warns: "Christians in science are people with two strong allegiances, holding citizenship in two distinct communities."{7}

The scientific community sets a very high premium on good work. Hearn writes of the importance for Christians who are also scientists not only to make clear their faith in Jesus Christ, but also to be committed to doing really good science. One author found that many Christian graduate students felt guilty about how much time they spent in the laboratory or the library, because it took time away from other Christian activities. They seemed to feel that "their professional work clearly did not have the same value in God's sight as their

Christian ‘witness.'”{8}

If God is calling you into scientific work, you must not only love scientific work, you must have an assurance that your work will be a way to serve God with your life. And this is where you may feel under attack from your Christian friends.

Most of us are used to the idea that the world needs Christian salespeople and Christian mechanics and Christian lawyers. If scientists are to be reached with the good news of Jesus Christ, the church must see that scientists too are a mission field, and, like most mission fields, they are best reached by the “natives,” other scientists.

In the next section we will consider some of the controversies that await a Christian entering science, and how a believer might respond to them.

Caution, Controversies Ahead

“Scientists may not believe in God, but they should be taught why they ought to behave as if they did.”{9}

Max Perutz, with a Nobel prize in chemistry, made this statement several years ago in response to critical remarks about Cambridge University establishing a Lectureship in Theology and Natural Science. Richard Dawkins, outspoken biologist and atheist, could barely contain himself in an editorial letter about the same lectureship: “The achievements of theologians don’t do anything, don’t affect anything, don’t achieve anything. What makes you think that ‘theology’ is a subject at all?”{10}

Being a Christian in our culture is often not politically correct. Christians often see scientists as not being biblically correct. So, if you intend on being a Christian scientist, controversy likely awaits you. How can you respond?

Walter Hearn has a chapter entitled “What to Expect.” It has

much hard-won advice, and he skillfully raises a number of issues while carefully avoiding taking sides. Hearn seems preeminently the peacemaker in both this chapter and the whole book.

One of Hearn's suggestions is to learn to live cross-culturally. A missionary to Africa may learn another language, and must understand a new culture well enough to explain the Bible in ways that make sense to those people. So, too, a Christian scientist must learn to explain the beliefs of Christians to unbelieving scientists. But at the same time, he or she must also learn how to explain the workings of science to Christians suspicious of the pronouncements of scientists. And the two different funds of knowledge make fundamentally different requirements on those who hear. Hearn summarizes: "Scientific conclusions generally take the form of statistical generalities making no demands on the knower. In contrast, the moral aspect of religious knowledge puts doing the truth on a par with knowing the truth."{11}

A second simple statement of great insight is, "It may be wise to step back from some issues even when people whom we admire are passionate about them."{12} Hearn follows his own advice as he discusses Phil Johnson and his critiques of Christian scientists who accept the whole of evolutionary theory and then have God direct evolution. Hearn does a masterful job of stepping back from this issue and presenting mostly the views in favor of Johnson's position. At the very least he is demonstrating another characteristic of a peacemaker: being willing to listen to and understand the criticism of those who disagree.

One area Hearn discusses at some length is the growing crisis in ethics among scientists. This is exactly the point of the quotation at the beginning of this section. As science has disowned God, it has also lost any rock on which to anchor a sense of right and wrong conduct. This is where Christians have much to contribute to the discussion. The Bible gives us

a basis for deciding right and wrong that science is sorely missing. But it will be primarily in our daily work as scientists that we will show what a biblical framework for ethics looks like.

Hearn makes the wonderfully sensible suggestion of keeping our Bible among the reference works at our desks. All of us, whether scientists or not, need to live more clearly by the book we claim as our authority.

Christians in Science Have a Godly Heritage to Follow

Being a Christian in Science may frustrate some people. Some will find themselves wondering why he doesn't take a more clear-cut stand on certain issues. Others will want Hearn to be more specific. But the often inconclusive stance of the book is also what allows Hearn to be so conciliatory in tone. On almost every issue he touches he allows as much diversity as he feels he possibly can. He is never strident, almost never critical, always positive or at most questioning. He models the role of a peacemaker in the midst of controversies that are dividing both the church and the scientific community.

Some of the best material in the book Hearn saves for last. In his chapter "Good Company" he gives us his personal Hall of Fame and Encouragement. Much like Hebrews 11, Hearn considers the lives of other Christians who have gone before him and lived the Christian life in the midst of the scientific community. Some are dead, some are newly arriving on the scene. All he considers friends. What unites them is their commitment to the work of science and their service for the God they love. It is both an encouraging and challenging chapter. There are men and women, a Nobel laureate, and the head of the government's Human Genome Project. There are mathematicians and biochemists, teachers and astronomers. Some

are members of the National Academy of Sciences, the most prestigious group of scientists in America. But all of them, Hearn tells us, “Have contributed to science . . . while clearly identifying themselves as Christian believers.”{13}

Another feature of the book is its short but intensely practical suggestions for living out what we believe. Stuck in a meeting that is starting late? Don’t waste the time, says Hearn—pray for each person around the room or table, bringing each before the Lord. Don’t know how to pray for someone? Perhaps this is a sign you need to spend more time listening to that person.

Possibly the most valuable part of the book are the resources mentioned throughout the text and then richly documented in the notes at the end of the book. Hearn describes how to develop a web of friends who can be a support when experimental work is going badly or when spiritual encouragement is needed. He also shows how the ubiquitous World Wide Web is opening up a whole new frontier of both information and possible friendships.

The twenty-three pages of notes at the end must be read to be appreciated. It is amazing how much diverse information Hearn packs into his comments on each chapter. If you are considering a career in science, or if you are already a working scientist, you need to read this section.

In summary, *Being a Christian in Science* is a compelling expression of just what Paul exhorts us to do: “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men.”{14} Hearn shows the potential young scientist what it will take to do his or her work heartily, and at the same time makes clear where many of the potential pitfalls lie, and what vast resources are available for the Christian who is serious about living as both a Christian and a scientist in this complex and confusing world. If you are a scientist, keep this book on your desk along with your Bible.

Notes

1. Quoted in Phillip Johnson, *Defeating Darwinism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 110, Note 1.
2. Walter Hearn, *Being a Christian in Science* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 12.
3. Hearn, p. 90
4. Hearn, p. 46.
5. Hearn, p. 51-52.
6. Hearn, p. 11
7. Hearn, p. 59.
8. Hearn, p. 112-113.
9. Hearn, frontispiece.
10. Ibid.
11. Hearn, p. 61.
12. Hearn, p. 74.
13. Hearn, p. 138.
14. Col. 3:23, NASV.

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