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Introduction: When Ministry Meets Science

If the Internet is good for anything—besides streaming TV shows, movies, and music—it is lists. Top ten lists are everywhere, and about everything. Recently I clicked on one (when, of course, I should have been doing something else): “Greatest Movie Rivals.” The list included Happy Gilmore vs. Shooter McGavin from *Happy Gilmore*, Woody vs. Buzz Lightyear from *Toy Story*, Daniel LaRusso vs. Johnny Lawrence from *The Karate Kid* (remember, “Sweep the leg, Johnny!” “Put him in a body bag!!”), Harry Potter vs. Draco Malfoy from *Harry Potter*, Neo vs. Agent Smith from *The Matrix*, Maverick vs. Iceman from *Top Gun*, and controversially, number one . . . (drum roll) . . . Rocky Balboa vs. Apollo Creed from *Rocky*.

If you add sports rivals to your search you’ll find more lists with a heightened level of debate. The comment threads often convey that this rivalry is for keeps, as Michigan fans tell Ohio State fans to die a slow death. Rivalries seem an essential part of the human drama; a way we make sense of our world.

We’ve been living with another rivalry that’s had a major impact on our ministry—the rivalry between faith and science. Some people have the perception that science is out to “sweep the leg” of faith, putting our young people’s Christian

commitment in a body bag. Many of us respond by seeking to avoid the rivalry altogether, never creating space for our young people to discuss how scientific findings affect their faith. Others of us, with the tone of a college football fanatic, have told our young people to pick sides. Both options keep faith and science apart, treating them like oil and water, unable to be mixed.

But, if we're honest with ourselves, keeping faith and science apart is impossible, and both approaches are unhelpful to our young people. Whether we address science and its relation to faith or not, they'll be confronted in a high school classroom, on the Internet, or in a vocational calling with how, or whether, faith and science can relate. And at some point, we'll be asked by a parent or curious young person to help them make sense of evolution or the Big Bang next to the claims of Jesus and the creation account of Genesis. We get the sense that these questions are much more than merely intellectual; they stretch to the deepest level of Christian faith. Essentially, young people wonder if there is a way to think about a God who moves and acts in the world, and yet still be a smart, normal person (this will be the focus of part 1). Can you affirm evolution, the Big Bang, and quantum mechanics and still believe God heals bodies, directs events, and transforms life? In other words, in a scientific world how do we think about divine action? If we care about faith-formation, about actually helping young people live out their faith and encounter a living God in the world, then there is no way to avoid discussions about faith next to big scientific ideas. If we can find a way to explore the intersection between faith and science with young people, we can show them a living God who acts in the world.

But maybe we are overwhelmed by putting faith and science in dialogue because we've misread things from the beginning. On closer examination, we will discover that faith and science are not actually rivals. The history of the birth of science reveals that the church, in fact, had much to do with science coming into the world. The first scientists and those who supported their work were committed people of faith who acknowledged the acts of God. Although we very much live as though the rivalry is real, there is actually no clear line of demarcation separating faith and science, as there is between Vikings and Packers fans.

Science, or “natural philosophy” as it was first called, is a probing of the world. This emerged not in opposition to the acts of God, but as a way to understand the acts of God as deeply as possible. Probing the natural world, it was believed, would help us more deeply understand the creativity of God.

But all this only adds to our conundrum. Those of us doing youth ministry have often avoided the whole faith-and-science discussion, not only because we’ve been misinformed about this supposed rivalry, but more so because we feel inadequate and confused about the topic to begin with. Our calling, after all, is to minister to young people, not to explain string theory.

The starting point of many of the religion-and-science discussions hasn’t helped us. These conversations often begin at a philosophical altitude that makes the air too thin to breathe, scrambling our minds in confusion. Ultimately, it just feels like the discussions are lodged somewhere far from the practice of ministry. We care about discussions of faith and science not for philosophical or intellectual reasons, but for ministerial ones.

That’s what this book is about. This book looks at the faith-and-science discussion through the practice of ministry. We will push deeply into scientific and theological discussions, but with a mind on how this affects the practice of ministry itself. I believe that to enter the faith-and-science discussion at the level of the practice of ministry (as opposed to academic theology or philosophy) shifts things.

Our actual lives and experiences are the places where faith and science interact in real ways every day. Cancer, hurricanes and space exploration, viruses and virtual reality—we make meaning and choices guided by science and by faith all the time. These are not hypothetical or distant philosophical arguing points. As we share life with our young people, these are the places their questions and struggles will arise. These are the places we seek to meet them in ministry.

Therefore, attention throughout this project will be on *ministry*. When I say *ministry*, I *do* mean what you do with your young people on Wednesday night or on a retreat, formally leading a mission trip or informally hearing a story from their week. But I also mean something else; when I say *ministry* I

mean the very form of God's action. I believe that the way God makes Godself known to the world is as a minister—as one who comes into the world to share in the world, embracing and loving it, caring for it by sharing deeply in it. God creates the world to lovingly minister to it. I think there is a way to think about scientific theories, like Big Bang cosmology and Darwinian evolution, as witnesses to God's ministry in the world.

This book, then, will not only explore how we should think about faith and science next to *our* ministries, but also next to the ministry of God. As a matter of fact, I believe that an important way to see, know, and experience the act of God is to take on the form of God's own action. Our ministries not only do things to the human beings giving and receiving ministry, but they do so because they participate in the ministry of God, connecting our human actions with divine action. Particularly in parts 2 and 3, I'll explore how some of the most central scientific theories and findings witness to *ministry*, and whether the universe itself isn't held together by ministry. It's possible to see the Big Bang, evolution, particle physics and more, as an echo of the ministerial nature of God in the world.

This leads me to give a heads-up about how this book is written. When Galileo Galilei wrote arguably the most important book in the history of science, *Dialogues Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, he wrote it as a fictional debate, creating characters and circumstances that allowed him to make his point that the earth moves around the sun. When Einstein had his many scientific breakthroughs, they came from a story, a thought experiment, where he'd imagine himself in a fictional situation. In a similar way and as a kind of homage to Galileo and Einstein, I have done the same, creating a fictional youth worker named Jared. Like Galileo, I use a fictional character as a way to explore the significance of the faith-and-science conversation within the practice of ministry. Through his experiences, we will explore how faith-and-science conversations might affect your ministry and make a difference in forming faith in young people. Like Einstein, my thought experiment allows me to think through structures of reality, and in my case,

to explore how ministry, theology, and science might come together.

While Jared and the young people we'll encounter are fictional, the circumstances they confront are very real. In actuality, Jared and his young people are a combination of many of the situations and stories that we heard in doing focus groups of youth workers and high school students for our John Templeton Foundation grant *Science for Youth Ministry*.¹ So like Galileo I'm building my characters from real people (one of the missteps for Galileo was when he named a character "Simpleton" and put the Pope's words in Simpleton's mouth. Oops!). I'm hopeful that by using this fictional story you'll begin to imagine how these discussions might impact your ministry, and even spark some ideas for how to stage faith-and-science conversations in your church.

Throughout the book you will find intricate discussions of philosophy, theology, and scientific theory, but always through story—either the story of Jared, or from the history of science, meeting people like Einstein, Galileo, Charles Darwin, Asa Gray, and more.

My greatest hope is that by the time you put this story down you'll see that scientific findings like evolution, relativity, cosmic fine-tuning, and the Big Bang are *not* moves seeking to sweep the leg of faith. But rather, in their own way, these scientific perspectives open up a possibility for us to think again about God's action and how it comes to us for the sake of ministry.

So we now begin the story. Once upon a time . . .

1. For more on this study, see the white paper here: <http://scienceym.org/downloads/>.