

God's resources and Secular materialism

Given that secular materialism has become the underlying assumption and almost the religion amongst many western academics, a few comments may need to be made about my acknowledgement of God in a database of food plants of the world. This is not some confounding of my faith and my science, nor is it a subtle way to promote the Christian faith. I am a Christian and do seek to acknowledge God in all I do. But I do not confound science and faith or practical agriculture and "religion". Everybody has a worldview and implicitly or explicitly they put their faith in this framework to guide and direct their motivation and their thinking.

Asking the right questions

My framework for thinking is called "theistic". When we look at any object we tend to ask four fundamental questions. "What is it?" "How does it work?" "Who made it" and "Why did they make it?" For example with a watch, we decide it is for telling the time, but then the curious disassemble it to find out whether it is mechanical or digital and how it works. They obviously have a scientific world-picture or analytical mindset. This still leaves 2 more questions that we are logically entitled to ask. The commercial brand of the watch may give us a clue as to where it was made, but on further investigation we may find the factory is now closed, as the people involved grew old and died. We will still maintain our assumption that someone made it, even if we never meet them. And without finding them, we will never know whether their motivation was commercial, or fastidious precision, or to prove to themselves that their parent's prediction about them being clumsy, was not true. If we confound a "How" and a "Who" question we end up talking logical nonsense. No amount of explaining how the world works makes the equally reasonable "Who?" question redundant.

Reductionism

And to try to fit God in to fill the gaps that science can't explain would be not only illogical but also a sure guarantee that such a "god" would get squeezed out with the advance of science. We would no more look for an artist amongst the dots of their painting, nor expect an engineer to be among the bolts holding a bridge up. The concept we are discussing requires a change of paradigm in our thinking. We all must address it even if we do not hold a traditional concept of God. The average lay-person frequently refers to "Nature causing" or even more explicitly mentions "Mother Nature". Only by making an error of logic, called "Ontological reductionism" would we consider the question redundant. Unless we resolve this issue we could also find the same logic and reductionist philosophy, eliminates beauty and truth from our understanding and becomes devastating in our personal relationships.

Christians in Science

Thankfully the reality that many of the world's top scientists are Christian believers is not to query their intelligence, nor their logic, but to affirm that faith and science are compatible. "Christians in Science" in the UK, of which I am a member, will give some indication of the credentials and credibility of this position. One of my heroes is Prof. Dr Sir Ghilleen Prance, (usually called Ian on the internet and amongst his friends!) who is indisputably one of the world's top botanists, is well known as a committed Christian and was leader of this organisation as well as many other professional organisations worldwide, including Kew and Missouri Botanical gardens.

Systems

Many western scientists and their progeny make the assumption that there is no one there or no Creator, when we get to the origin and the sustainer of the Universe. By adopting a facile argument that 'evolution' explains everything they have unthinkingly elevated evolution from being a scientific description of change through time, to a 'someone' who does something. This is shown in the way they use "Evolution" as a personified term deserving a capital letter. It is as if "Evolution" now directs the processes of the world! I personally am fascinated by the continuing changes occurring in the biological and ecological realm and it greatly influences my attitude to agriculture. It is fundamental to my agro-ecological approach to food production. In hot humid tropical environments, changes and selection and resistance in pathosystems, can easily be observed. But to elevate this to someone as a personified agent who maintains system control, and to then adamantly and arrogantly deny people the right to maintain a belief in God, is the epitome of intolerance.

Biblical illiteracy

Unfortunately the discussion has become very clouded - especially in publications from the USA, where the Christian position is often assumed to be one of "young earth Creationism". The very concept of God confining his creativity (Hebrew - '*Bara*') to a few days at the beginning of the universe both defies the way the Bible uses that term as an ongoing activity of God, but also locks these people into a Deistic way of thinking. This was beautifully expressed in Darwin's conclusion to the "Origin of Species" where he speaks of God creating and now the world running by laws of science. Laws of science are not something that does something, but descriptions by scientists of how things usually work. Adopting Bishop Ussher's dating system to arrive at a young earth chronology is naive in the extreme. (How long does it take for someone to become the "father" of a clan or tribe? I suspect more than a generation - even if dating were the purpose of the family listings, which it is not!) It is most certainly not compatible with any informed reading of the Bible.

A Christian worldview

One of the Biblical sections I find most encouraging is in Colossians 1:15 ff where it says that the God we have got to know in Jesus created everything in the universe - visible and invisible and sustains them and did it for his own purposes. This puts the discussion back into a reasonable worldview framework, as a theistic system. No-one is without a belief or faith framework, and it is important to consider the implications of the belief system they hold.

Why is maintaining this position important to me, and my work? We all need to have a reason for doing what we are doing. It is my motivation. I could be doing my compilation for financial gain. My Creative Commons attribution will quickly put the lie to that. It is available for free distribution, with appropriate acknowledgement. I could be doing it to compensate for my inadequate ego or to make myself famous. Although it does have my personal name attached, the aim has been to work within a not-for-profit organisation called "Food Plants International" to avoid personal attention. Jesus himself said that if we were not doing something for the poor regarding food, water, shelter, clothing and justice then we were not disciples of His. The apostle and early church leader James, said that if all we gave the poor and hungry was words and not action, then such a faith was dead and useless. As a minor aside, if some rich and powerful company tries to claim copyright or patent ownership of a plant species then our alarm bells should ring and it should remind us to adopt a more

humble perspective, recognising them as universal gifts from a Creator making them available to all.

Faith in practice

There are positive personal benefits from holding the faith and worldview system that I do. It encourages me to see all people as important and made in God's image as persons (not simply machines nor another animal species). This has enabled me to cross a thousand cultural and racial barriers, and discover a rich and diverse world of experience and knowledge and accumulated wisdom. A multitude of people around the world in their homes, and gardens and local food markets have become my friends and assisted me with information. It has also greatly enhanced my appreciation of global diversity. The sheer beauty of the thousands of edible flowers, and the diverse flexibility amongst continually adapting species and varieties as they become selected to biomes and environments, has become cause to thank God for his dynamic and ongoing creativity. It is liberating to be able to thank someone who is above the "system" rather than to feel a denizen trapped within an ultimately meaningless biological system.

Tolerance and acceptance

The call globally is to conservation and environmental responsibility. Seeking to explore sustainable food production and having confidence in a Sustainer, to me makes logical sense. Whenever the alarm bells ring in any section of our global environment it calls me back to responsible stewardship to my Creator to whom I feel ultimately responsible. Having personally learned about foods and taught about them in Buddhist wats and Hindu communities and Muslim schools along with many Christian organisations and groups should establish that a worldview is not a pretext for creating offense nor a mandate for religious intolerance. For me personally some of my core values have been affirmingly recognised when the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation chose successively to call me an "Agroecologist" then an "Agrosociologist" for their consultancies in which they employed me. The first implies putting the right plants in the right place and growing them in a natural and sustainable way. The second recognises that hungry families and undernourished children are at the heart of my concerns.

Vibrant faith and practical help

Having a deep concern for the poor and hungry and malnourished, especially in many rural tropical areas where far too many children don't live long enough to get to school, my travels have taken me to a range of countries and rural locations. Often I find vibrant faith communities amongst seemingly materially deprived homes and families. To seek to impose our secular materialism, flowing from our worldview formulated in western comforts and enriched lifestyles, seems to me to be an act of crass hardheartedness. Not surprisingly religious belief and Christian faith is growing explosively amongst these, the world's majority peoples. They need a worldview and faith framework that is able to sustain them in what could easily become a destitute and depressing world. For me it is enriching and empowering that I can "Help the Hungry Feed Themselves through the strategic use of God's amazing natural resources" in a way that is informed, consistent and sustainable.

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