

Being faithful in the secular academy:
Responding to “tough questions”

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A bit about myself...

Tough Questions!

How can a smart guy like you believe
all that stuff?

I don't get it. You must use a different part of your brain when you do that!

But, Bill, this is so different from your
normal way of thinking!

No, no, no...I'm not religious,
I am a scientist!

No, I am not into all that irrational stuff.

The world makes *more sense* to me with
my faith than without it.

In general, the *results* of science pose no necessary conflict with Christian faith.

Big Bang

Robert Jastrow: *God and the Astronomers*

Anthropic Principle

Francis Collins: *The Language of God*

Evolution

Kenneth Miller: *Finding Darwin's God*

Simon Conway Morris: *Life's Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe*

BUT....

The *modes of thought* can be quite different in the two domains. This is where I experience (and many perceive) a genuine point of tension between science and religion.

Method for seeking truth

Science: experiment-based, precise, objective (transferable across communities and cultures).

Religion: more holistic, greater dependence on intuition, requires commitment in the absence of proof.

Importantly, however, the mode that predominates in religious life is the *normal mode* of evaluation and decision-making in the overall context of human experience.

The scientific mode, in contrast, is quite peculiar: it is applicable to a rather narrow range of experience and is generally practiced by a rather small community of professionals.

The most important questions in life are not susceptible to solution by the scientific method.

In fact, I would argue...

The importance of a question tends to be inversely proportional to the certainty with which it can be answered!

Is it better to live or to die?

Should I pursue a professional opportunity elsewhere in the country at the cost of uprooting my entire family, all of whom have their own independent lives?

We can't do the control
experiments!

Should I marry [this particular person]?

Experience in the relationship
(empiricism, data)

Looking at family backgrounds
(try to identify trends and predict future)

Advice of mentors, counselors
(Access to common experience of others)

In the end, however, a faith commitment is
required, and the stakes are high.

Simply put, this is the human condition.
It is *life*, and our most consequential
decisions in life have little or nothing
to do with science.

This is true for everyone, including my
postdocs and my faculty colleagues!

If we get this far, we have built some common
ground. We are all in the same boat. The
perceived divide between “the religious”
and “the scientists” is deeply incoherent.

Religious quest involves the same sort of reasoning as the marriage example.

Sources of evidence are available: my primary experience in the religious community, the testimony of other genuine seekers throughout the ages, the critical reflections of fellow pilgrims I meet along the way.

In the end, the evidence is not compelling in a scientific sense. Faith, accompanied by commitment is essential. Risks are high.

For everyone, the key question is:
What sort of universe do we live in?

Is there an ultimate source of
meaning and value? If so, what is it?

Science is not much help here...

I believe that we live in a Holy universe.
One in which each human life is valued and
endowed with intrinsic dignity by our Creator.

If science is neutral, how would we actually
know whether God exists, and whether
God really cares about *us*?

I don't think we can, unless God chooses
to *disclose* her/himself to us.

After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him. Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?”

Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

— John 6:66-68

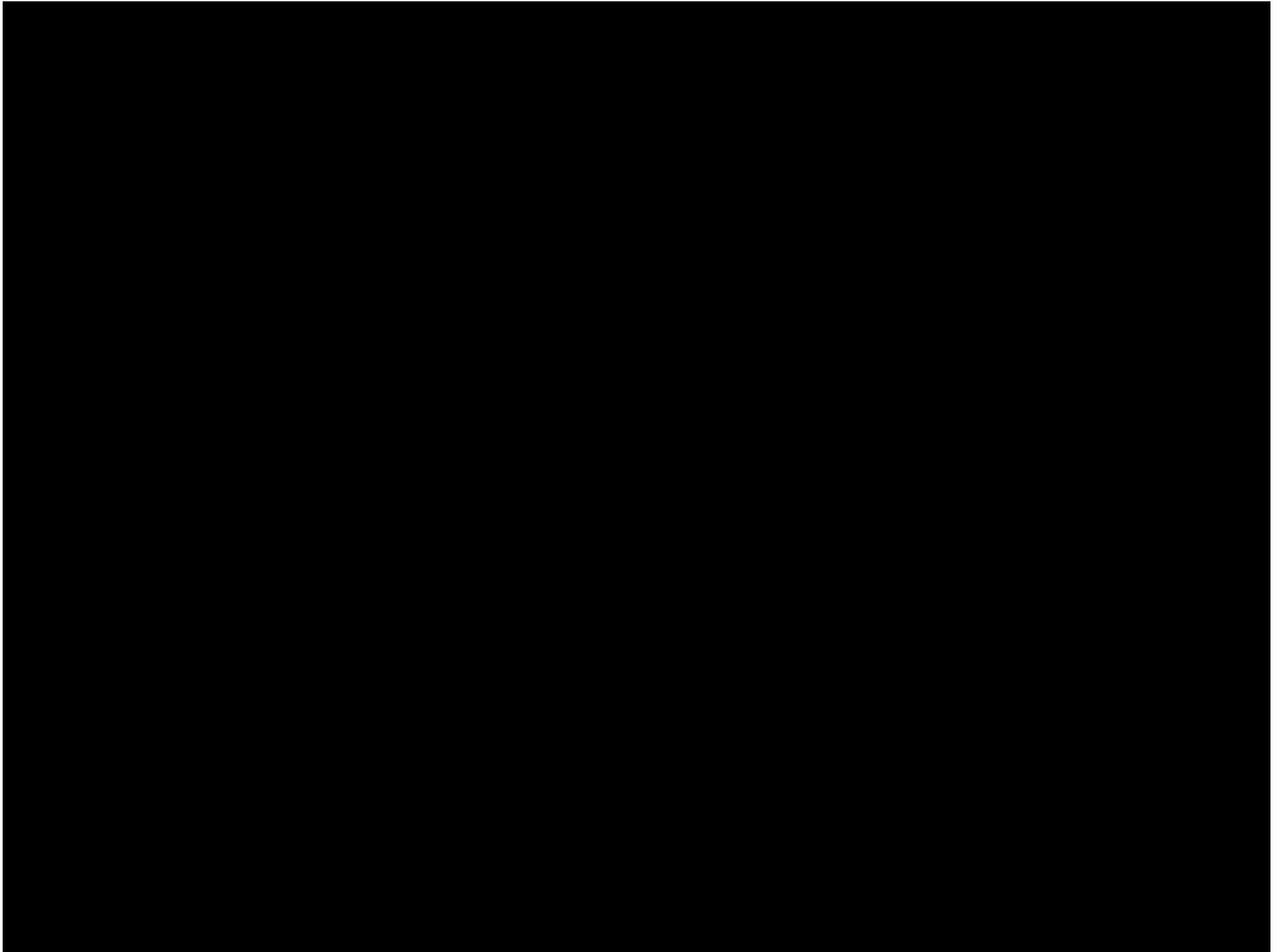
And we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”

— John 6:69

Belief and experience precede knowledge...

We learn in relationships, in community...

A web of meaning...



This command to wait, I think, is the
queerest idol ever invented in the
philosophic cave.

—Carlyle Marney