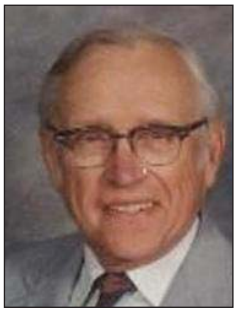

V. Elving Anderson

Christian Commitment and the Scientist

V. Elving Anderson

Objectivity and commitment are compatible attributes, and both are to be encouraged. The nature or pattern of commitment, however, may restrict one's openness to new facts or ideas.

Objectivity and commitment are sometimes presented as opposing attributes. A person may ask, "How can you be intellectually honest and believe the Bible?" Science may be thought to represent the peak of objectivity, whereas religion stands for commitment. If these terms are indeed opposite in meaning, then direct conflict between science and religious faith appears inevitable.

In contrast to this point of view, I wish to suggest the following:

(a) Objectivity and commitment are qualities of persons rather than of topics. Each person develops foci of commitment, and is more objective or less objective in different areas of life.

(b) The person who is most deeply committed may be the one who is able to be the most objective.

(c) It is the pattern of commitment (rather than its presence or absence) which conditions one's objectivity.

Objectivity and Commitment

Huston Smith points out that objectivity is not equivalent to impartiality or neutrality.[1] Anyone active in research realizes the selective nature of his or her work. One is never able to study *all* the factors which might affect the problem under investigation; the researcher is forced to select those thought most significant. The interpretation of results also involves the observer's personal sense of perspective. Complete impartiality would be possible only for an omniscient God. In a similar sense, complete neutrality is neither possible nor desirable. Neutrality may simply mask an inability to make decisions when they are needed.

It is more appropriate to think of objectivity as an individual's openness to new ideas or fairness to evidence. Smith elaborates,

> This involves open-mindedness—the willingness, even eagerness, to entertain seriously every item of relevant evidence that has a bearing on the problem at hand. It involves maximum responsiveness to the facts, seeing each, insofar as possible, with discrimination and without distortion to the end that it may be assigned its appropriate and becoming weight.[2]

Objectivity is, thus, not a passive attribute which is given as a prize for good behavior. It requires energy to maintain. It involves a willingness to listen and an attempt to understand, followed by an appraisal of significance.

V. Elving Anderson *(1921–2014) was Assistant Director of the Dight Institute for Human Genetics, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis and president of the ASA when he wrote this communication.* *It was based in part on a paper presented at the 18th Annual Meeting of the American Scientific Affiliation, Westmont College, Santa Barbara, California, August 19–23, 1963.*

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Teachers soon learn that students differ in their abilities to tolerate new ideas. Some students appear to feel that new evidence may markedly alter their systems of thought. They consider new ideas as a personal threat and are unable, or unwilling, to spend the effort required for re-evaluation.

Scientists also can reveal a lack of objectivity. A vigorous defense of a particular hypothesis can be a very stimulating exercise if it leads to new tests of the idea. But such a discussion can degenerate into an emotion-filled defense of an hypothesis as though it were personal property to be protected against all invaders. It is tempting to confuse one's models or interpretations of reality with the reality they are intended to represent.

On the other hand, a successful research scientist is often a deeply committed person. He or she must devote time and energy to study, planning, testing, recording data, and interpreting results. Furthermore, he or she is committed to basic assumptions, such as the following: (a) If an experiment is carefully designed, executed, and reported, the results can be verified by someone else. (b) If a principle or generalization is proved to be inadequate, it will be replaced by another more adequate one. (c) A good hypothesis is measured, not by its "truth," but by its usefulness in stimulating relevant research. (d) There is a reality which corresponds to the data supplied by his or her senses in answer to a research question.

Commitment a Basis for Objectivity

It would seem, then, that objectivity and commitment are not alternative but mutually supporting attributes. Each person (whether theologian or scientist) reveals a pattern of objectivity and a pattern of commitment. Smith suggests that it is possible to possess a basic faith or commitment which

> provides that matrix of ultimate confidence toward life which can accommodate the maximum open-mindedness … We have now been brought to a paradox: the more faith a person has, the more open-minded he will be.[3]

Both objectivity and commitment are essential.

What happens, then, if we examine those commitments that we make as Christians who are also scientists? I am personally committed to the faith that the Bible is God's revelation and that Jesus is both Savior and Lord. These, in fact, are the basic tenets which bring us together in the American Scientific Affiliation (ASA).

Some have urged strongly that we should add additional criteria for ASA membership: either specific interpretations of the Bible or specific ideas about the nature of science. The ASA Executive Council has resisted these pressures from both directions, feeling that our present statement of faith is a sound basis for fellowship and that we must not restrict open discussion of differing points of view.

Nevertheless, it may be appropriate for us as individuals to put into writing our personal "commitment profiles." This may be the only way we can discover the reasons for our differing opinions. Further discussion can be directed to these basic differences rather than to more secondary matters. It is in this spirit that I present the following as issues on which I am willing to take a stand.

(a) The God who is my redeemer is also creator and sustainer of myself and of the universe.

(b) In the world of nature about me, I see evidences of his activity. These are *evidences* in the sense that they demand a decision about faith in God, but not proofs which would compel an affirmative answer.

(c) God's activity is involved both in what I think I understand and in what I know I do not understand.

(d) Research is an appropriate task for a Christian, not just for the useful results which may accrue, but as part of God's command to subdue the earth and have dominion over it.

(e) My faith creates no barriers to research, no forbidden areas. The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof. Certain methods of investigation, however, would conflict with my concept of the nature of humans. My research indicates that space is more vast, time more extensive, and nature more complex than I could possibly have imagined, and thus enlarges my concept of God.

Helmut Thielicke has described the difference between a "world picture" (the sum of scientific knowledge about the world) and a "world view"

(which deals with the ultimate meaning of life and the world).[4] God as creator is part of my "world view." I hope to grow in my comprehension of this idea and its relevance for me, but I do not expect to have my "world view" significantly altered by the results of research in any of the scientific disciplines. On the other hand, a good deal of my time and energy must be spent in trying to keep my "world picture" up to date. The rapid advances in molecular biology, for example, have dramatically modified some of the questions we address to the world of life as well as the answers we obtain.

This distinction is important for discussions of "evolution." Some scientists are so deeply committed to evolution as a comprehensive explanation for the universe that any thought of God is rejected violently. Clearly evolution has become part of their worldview as a substitute for God as creator. But some Christians reject carefully documented data concerning natural selection or speciation in just as emotional a manner. These latter topics I would consider part of one's world picture. I do not feel that my commitment to God as creator (as a creationist, if you please) should restrict my interest in genetic similarities between species or in natural selection in humans. If anything, my awareness of the problems of interpretation places me under some compulsion to become involved in this type of research.

The Pattern of Commitment

Thus far I have argued that commitment and objectivity are compatible and that both are to be encouraged. But it is essential to point out that one's *pattern* of commitment has an effect on one's objectivity. The Russian commitment to Communist dogma, for example, has severely limited freedom for research in genetics. A commitment to the "gap theory" (an original creation in Genesis 1:1 followed by a large span of time and a re-creation) limits one's objectivity in geology, even though some might hold this limitation to be desirable. A belief in vegetarianism would restrict openness to research in nutrition.

Furthermore, the pattern of commitment may be central or peripheral. That is, one's energies can be devoted to simplifying and consolidating commitment or to protecting and up-dating a large number of specific beliefs. In general, it would seem that a larger number of commitment foci would place greater restrictions on objectivity.

Finally, it may be necessary occasionally to distinguish commitment to God's word from commitment to traditional interpretations of the Bible. It would be presumptuous to claim that one has personally explored all facets of important questions and has arrived at independent conclusions. We must not discard the insights inherited from past centuries, but it is entirely possible that the Holy Spirit may yet have new lessons for us, if we will listen.

Notes

[1]Huston Smith, *The Purposes of Higher Education* (New York: Harper, 1955).
[2]Ibid., p. 43.
[3]Ibid, p. 46.
[4]Helmut Thielicke, *Man in God's World,* trans. and ed. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

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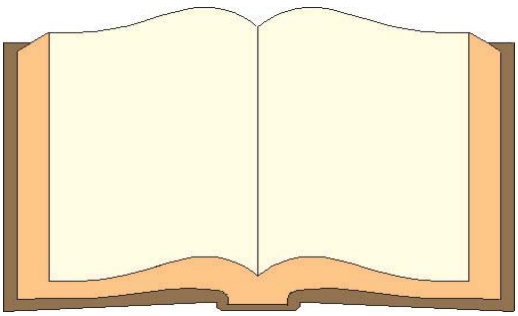

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