

Using Science to Double-Check Faith

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The relationship between spirituality and science fascinates me.

On the one hand, we have scientists who describe their greatest discoveries in terms of Moses-like revelations and Einstein who stated that the pinnacle of spirituality is scaled in serious, scientific endeavor.

On the other hand we have science consistently helping to debunk ideas that were once foundational to religious faith and which are supported by scripture. Some of these concern the earth's shape (flat – Job 22: 14; Isaiah 40: 21,22; Daniel 4:10,11; Matt. 4:8; Rev. 7:1), the earth's position in the universe (immobile and at the center - 1 Chronicles 16:30; Psalm 93:1; Joshua 10:12), the earth's age (young – Genesis 1), the cause of certain diseases or disabilities (sin – Matt. 9:2; John 9:2) and the nature of humanity (unequal – Genesis 9:18-25).

These and other similar scriptural passages continue to enliven organizations such as the Flat Earth Society, the Klu Klux Klan, young earth creationists, Mormon polygamists and other radical fundamentalist movements. The idea of human inequality has been a particularly virulent evil, used to justify slavery, genocide and many other atrocities on religious principle.

As a result of the manner in which I have seen spirituality inform and inspire some of the greatest of our scientific minds, and have seen science purify religion, whenever occasion presents itself to test a specific religious or spiritual principle that plays a role in my life against scientific research, I do so. Dr. Martin Seligman presented me with such an opportunity through the publication of his book "Authentic Happiness". There, he has summarized recent scientific research respecting a number of spiritual principles that are important to me. I will refer to only two of the many he covered.

First, Seligman notes that what he calls the "rotten to the core dogma" is one of humanity's worst ideas. This concept comes to us from various sources, one of the most powerful and prevalent of which is the Bible. It teaches that in the Garden of Eden, mankind "fell" from a higher state into sin, and that throughout our mortal existence we struggle against our fallen nature.

Seligman also notes that his profession – psychology – bears of much blame for propagating this bad idea through the teachings of Freud and others who brought it into the 20th century and gave it science's stamp of approval. Much of Seligman's research is intended to disprove the notion that mankind is inherently "bad" and to show that we will experience more joy and satisfaction in life when we get rid of that idea.

Second, Seligman notes the potent and positive effect on our well being of two important religious principles – forgiveness and gratitude. These both help to defuse our biggest joy blocker – the adrenalin response.

The adrenalin, or "fight or flight" response, is hardwired into us to enhance our chance of survival when confronted by danger. However, it is triggered by many things – a dispute

with our spouse, a slight suffered at the hand of a friend, an unfriendly encounter in traffic, etc. And worse, the recollection of any event that caused an adrenaline response may trigger another one. Because the adrenaline response is connected to survival, it overrides everything else, including the more subtle aspects of the nervous system that are responsible for joy, contentment, happiness, etc.

If we learn to forgive and let go of past wrongs, they will not continue to come up in memory, ignite our adrenaline system and block those parts of life that bring us joy. Learning to forgive, hence, frees us from an emotional prison that continual recollection of our flawed past can create. And as we learn to emphasize the positive aspects of what we face in the present and future and feel as much gratitude as possible in that regard, we minimize the instances in which our adrenalin response is ignited by that part of our lives.

Seligman notes that many of the psychological techniques that he and his colleagues use to enhance joy come from the Buddhist faith tradition, which has historically been more concerned with the creation of harmony than has Christianity. He postulates that the Buddhist mindset creates an effective counterbalance to our frenetic world.

And I am reminded of the old saying that he who only knows his own faith does not know any faith. For those of us steeped in the Christian tradition, we can often learn much by looking at other modes of spirituality, and then coming back to our own tradition with new eyes.