

Science is not the great enemy of faith



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

In his book, "Field and Study," naturalist John Burroughs challenges the notion that science is the enemy of religion. Though he agrees that the pursuit of scientific knowledge can be an adversary to old superstitions, he understands that it "discloses to us new ground for wonder and awe in the presence of the universe." Remarkably, he goes a step further to assert that the scientific process provides a stronger moral foundation than "any creed or sect." This flies in the face of the old lame-

claim that morality is grounded in religion, that religion is the sole basis of a moral life. Burroughs explains that he is not "in any strict sense a man of science," yet he takes "great pleasure in the world of new truths" discovered through science. His religion is nature itself.

A little over 100 years ago, Burroughs was among the most popular nature writers. His essays and books were enjoyed by schoolchildren as well as the Queen of England; his writings helped form friendships with Walt Whitman, John Muir, Teddy Roosevelt and Thomas Edison. Though he believed "Nature" and "God" were essentially the same, he was a skeptic toward any and all supernatural or superstitious beliefs. Sticking a human face on nature and calling it "God" distracts us from reason and responsibility to the world before us. He

was no enemy of faith, just a curious student of the earth and our fellow creatures. He had no time for those who had their heads in the clouds of heaven while the beauty and wonders of the world were all around, with endless facts to teach.

Is science the great enemy of faith? I'm not sure how, any more than politics or art. Only someone with a fearful faith or persecution complex would be afraid of those who present hypotheses, investigate our world, and ask serious questions. Actual threats and attacks on Christianity are rare — at least in the U.S. — but pushback on assumed privilege or intrusive preaching may feel like assault, though it usually isn't. I sometimes find myself defending religious faith in the face of unfair criticisms that stereotype or set up a strawman of reli-

gion to take cheap shots — "religion is poison" — and also when someone seems to think all religion is anti-science, that all religious believers resist scientific progress. We might say fundamentalism is one enemy of healthy faith, while a faith that accepts scientific knowledge and reasonably considers real world issues, unafraid of new ideas, may indeed be an adversary of a fundamentalist mindset.

John Burroughs is honest about his approach to nature. He was no professional scientist in search of facts, simply one who appreciated facts while seeking enjoyment in the wonders he encountered at every step. With a touch of the poet, he investigated "the reason of things, and the relations of things."

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He wasn't interested in looking for "sermons in stones or for books in the running brooks." He was drawn to read even "a fragment of a page of earth's history," which was one reason he enjoyed geology as well as physics, chemistry and astronomy. Yet, he was primarily a wildlife student, a keen observer of the intriguing inhabitants living and moving around him.

Burroughs was no adversary to faith, however, he offered an alternative to traditional faith. Rather than mere credulity (easily convinced to believe), superstition, or hard science, he followed his own natural inclination, joining "inquiry with contemplation." I find this a captivating idea. Practicing an attentive observation, inquiring what is happening in the world, then stepping back, pausing, to contemplate the interconnections. In my view, good scientists as well as good spiritual believers, practice this healthy balance, utilizing the senses to probe deeper into curiosities, while allowing deeper thinking to rise and settle, rise and settle, with the breath. Neither cold, detached science nor fired-up faith offers this balance of inquiry and contemplation.

The greatest friend of faith may potentially be the natural world, as well as those who study it and learn lessons from it. This reminds us we are all in the same boat, that is, in the same house. Burroughs states: "The greatest pleasure of life is the pleasure of knowledge," but this is not unfeeling or impersonal knowledge — not merely "in the head" stuff. Think: inquiry plus contemplation. Personal beliefs don't need to be agitated by defensiveness, imagining someone or something seeks to take away cherished faith. When we choose to be open to wider knowledge, we can sense the depth of our connections to the world, to contemplate the "new ground for wonder and awe in the presence of the universe" — whether we call the Cosmos "Nature" or "God."

Fearless faith can befriend the sciences. A common enemy is ignorance.

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