

*“Facts and Faith Collide”*  
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I was reading the headlines recently, online of course and I came across a few I wanted to share.

From the *National Enquire*: “British royalty fears another royal divorce!”

And from *Weekly World News*: “BigFoot kept lumberjack as love slave”.

Then I read in *The Onion* that Mount Rushmore will be adorned with a neon sign. And a lighter study found that the average American inadvertently eats eight pieces of fruit each year<sup>1</sup>.

Then I went one of my favorite science communicators, Neil deGrasse Tyson. He tweeted<sup>2</sup> that the energy consumed by the US in one year equals the energy made by the sun in one millionth of a second.

To continue my enjoyment of culture events, I took a *Buzzfeed* quiz on whether I was ready for sweater weather (spoiler: yes, definitely). And then another on if babies or animals are cuter (hint: it’s a total toss up). Finally, I ended my internet surfing with the *Wall Street Journal* article on Gene Therapy developments and with the *New York Times* article on why the New York subway must be rebuilt at any cost.

Why do I tell you all this? Well, it certainly isn’t to give you a peek into my browsing history. Which of these headlines would you follow? Which do you believe? Which made you giggle and move on?

And why? I’ll venture a guess: there are sources and the people behind those sources we trust and we believe in. Such as the *Wall Street Journal*, but not the *National Enquire*; or Neil deGrasse Tyson but not Ken Ham, the man behind the replica Noah’s ark in Kentucky. Beyond that, there are forms of communication we value above others. For many of us that would include scholarly articles or magazines or textbooks. Dare I say that Twitter and blog posts would not fall in the same category.

And that is where it gets fuzzy in the modern world.

We are constantly having to reevaluate who we trust and how they tell us their information. If I automatically don’t trust someone, like Ken Ham, a reputable source, like the *Wall Street Journal*, would be damaged if they promoted him. The opposite is likely true too. If Neil deGrasse Tyson writes an article for *Buzzfeed* or *Huffington Post*, perhaps those mediums garner a touch more respect.

I bring up these questions first because in order to talk about faith and facts, we have to know who is talking and what our bias is toward that person.

So, for a moment, let’s take it out of the sphere of the media, and take it into the personal realm. Think about one of your dear friends. Now think about a mutual acquaintance you have. If both of them came to you, separately, telling you that the other lied to you—who are you more apt to believe? Intellectually, we might hem and haw over this question, but emotionally we will say that we believe our dear friend. They hold that role in our life for a reason.

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<sup>1</sup> Googled “Tabloid headlines” and included some of the results here; I did not actually go to any of the websites.

<sup>2</sup> 20 Oct 2012 twitter @Neiltyson

Let's now begin to talk about what facts or science are and then what faith or religion is. And how they come together in the end.

In science, there is a particular way of digesting what we see, it's called the scientific method and it has six steps:

- 1) Make observations
- 2) Think of pertinent interesting questions
- 3) Formulate a hypothesis
- 4) Develop testable predictions
- 5) Gather data to test predictions
- 6) Develop general theories.

At any point, any one of the steps can be a do-over, but that does not mean that all theories or the process itself becomes null and void.

Let me use an analogy of building a house to elucidate this in a different way. How perfectly do you have to build a house such that it becomes a single brick? Well, that seems absurd. A house has many components, each with different functionality. So, what if you build a house and then realize that there is a room with no door—no way to get in or out. Clearly, something is wrong. Do you walk away from the entire house and start over from scratch? Or do you look to see if there is a way to install a door to make the room useable. Or maybe you decide you don't need the room and demolish that section<sup>3</sup>.

Scientific theory works the same way. Finding a flaw in one theory doesn't send all scientists back to the drawing board.

New observations and new testing, based on new evidence and an old theory, will generate a new theory. Scientific laws tell us what happens (such as mass divided by volume is density), and theories tell us how and when something happens.

There are moments, rare ones, which do cause us to reevaluate everything we know. A paraphrase from a 1919 book<sup>4</sup> Einstein wrote says: "No amount of experimentation can ever prove me right; a single experiment can prove me wrong."

It takes years of training and failing, and occasionally succeeding, to become comfortable with knowing that some day you might be proven wrong and that would be ok. It would be ok for many reasons, including that the new knowledge advances scientific understanding.

How different that statement of being incorrect looks when viewed through the lens of faith!

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<sup>3</sup> <https://thehappyscientist.com/content/when-does-theory-become-law>

<sup>4</sup> *Induction and Deduction in Physics*; "A theory can thus be recognized as erroneous if there is a logical error in its deductions, or as inadequate if a fact is not in agreement with its consequences. But the *truth* of a theory can never be proven. For one never knows that even in the future no experience will be encountered which contradicts its consequences; and still other systems of thought are always conceivable which are capable of joining together the same given facts."

When many religiously affiliated people, of which I include everyone in this room, are asked about their faith, there is found an uncomfortableness surrounding doubt. Honestly, it is unknown whether this concept of faith and need for certainty is societal or innately human. While a study conducted by Oxford University in published 2011 concluded that it is innate, it also showed that in more developed societies, there were fewer adherents to faith<sup>5</sup>.

So that gets me into the question of faith and religion—do they overlap or are they discrete? We can ask this question another way: can a person have faith without religion or have religion without faith. Before going into this more, I want to tell you a story.

There once was a drought in a particular town, perhaps like this one. But in this town, there was no water. And in this little town, they did not know what to do. They tried everything, but everything was dying, the crops were dying, and the animals were dying. And they did what they could to care for them, to save them. But with no water, they were simply not successful. And finally one day the rabbi, after months of trying to help the people said they would all come together to pray. That perhaps it would work if they all focused together on *the* one thing they wanted, that perhaps like the stories of old, perhaps it just might work.

And the rabbi brought them together for prayer; and they prayed and they sang. And they prayed some more, and they sang some more. And indeed it did begin to rain. And nobody knows if it rained because they prayed, or it rained because it was time. Some say perhaps it was a combination of both.

But afterwards a boy and his father were at their home talking about what it was that had happened. And the boy said, “they all came together, *we* all came together. But, Abba, they didn’t believe it would work”

“Well yes of course they believed it would work,” the father said, “of course they believed. I mean you were there, you saw how much they prayed.”

“But they didn’t believe” said the boy

“They did, they did! Didn’t you hear the rabbi? He called us all together and we all came, everyone from the whole town was there.”

“But they didn’t *believe*” said the boy, “even *you* didn’t believe”

“But how can you be saying this?! You saw them. How can you believe they didn’t believe?”

“Abba” he said, and without a hint of disrespect in his voice, just the voice of a simple boy-- who saw what others did not-- he looked at his father and said, “Abba, if they really believed, then why didn’t a single one, not you, not me, not a single one bring an umbrella?”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/8510711/Belief-in-God-is-part-of-human-nature-Oxford-study.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://storieswetell.libsyn.com/did-you-bring-your-umbrella>

For me, one place where this story connects to the question of faith and religion is with community. The people in this town gathered together for a common purpose. But their individual understanding, or belief, of what they were doing was not necessarily in line with the religion. So perhaps, in this case, religion offered a community, a social structure, a support system, a network of like-valued peoples. I would argue that it does the same today. That is why in the Oxford study, the more developed and urban an area, the less faith a person professed to have.

So let us, for today, talk of faith, not necessarily religion. Faith is a personal understanding of the world which invokes something greater than the individual human and which can describe our world when it cannot be explained by observations or experiences or with our five senses. “I just *know* it will be all right” ... how many times have we heard, or said, that phrase? Perhaps faith is even tied to a gut feeling or sixth sense or divine intervention, or all of the above.

As humans, no two of us are identical, not even genetically identical siblings—which is why the debate of nature or nurture still rages on. And yet, we are not so very different either. So we find nuances to help group us together. Details of personal character or interest or belief join us into variegated communities. This then allows the insider and the outsider to make sweeping generalizations, of which many in the community will fit, and few will fulfill.

Perhaps I can make some generalizations about this community: the literal reading of scripture is not a focus here. How people treat one another in society and helping the vulnerable is a focus. Tolerance is preferred over narrowmindedness. Gender roles are meant to be broken. Diversity is an asset not a liability.

But, if I were to ask the individuals in this room, or those of this congregation who are not in this room, to define what your faith is, that is where we will likely see some more stratification, with so many layers that I dare not try to enumerate them.

So what do we do?? We make a Venn diagram! We recognize science and facts for what they are, and we recognize faith for what it is. And we also do best homage to ourselves when we recognize where they overlap and where they diverge.

A simplistic way of looking at these two broad topics is in the form of questions. Science attempts to answer: where, what, how that which we observe works. Faith attempts to answer: where, how, why we exist.

Let us take for example a rainbow. It is one of the first things a child draws. Which frankly, as the mother of three year old, one of the first things which is also instantly recognizable. They are not an everyday occurrence, yet neither are they rare.

In our scripture, from the story of Noah, faith gives us the answer that a rainbow is a visual sign between God and humankind that God will exercise a bit more patience with us the next time we really try to destroy ourselves with hatred. In our earth science 101 class, we know that each droplet of rain is refracting and dispersing the visible light spectrum. A water stream with a light source opposite it will generate a rainbow.

Do either of those explanations eliminate the awe we feel though? If we base all our understanding of a rainbow with the covenant, does that change how magical it is to see? If we can give the actual nanometers of wavelength of each of the colors of the rainbow, does that detract from our attraction to them? Can we hold both a covenantal view, as well as a scientific one? I won't leave that rhetorical—yes, I believe we can. The more I know about the universe and its workings, the more faith I have in something much greater than myself, and I don't believe I am alone in that thinking.

However, there are limits to this cross-section. In my current role as clergy, there are limits to my authority in our community—and rightly so. People might come to me to learn about Judaism, or religion, or values. But no one is coming to me to help them choose furniture or to do taxes. I *can* do those things, but that's not my role. And then if someone asks me to re-wire their home, not only is that not my role, I simply cannot do it well, and risk burning down the house.

Similarly, faith can attempt to answer great big questions and individual ones—like where did I come from, what happens when I die, how do I form a loving and compassionate society, where is God in all of this? But scripture is really bad about telling us how to treat diseases, or the way the solar system is arranged, or the details of evolution.

Both are tools, and like any tool, they are amazing at what they do, and they are amazingly bad at what they don't do.

Please don't use a hammer for a fly swatter, you'll ruin your walls. Please don't use scripture to calculate the age of the universe. Please don't use Hubble Deep Field Telescope to look for God.

So what do we do? Think about our bodies: each organ and muscle have a specific task to create one of us. And in general, we need all of them to be whole. And our language already gives us the tools to use to integrate these various topics. If we expect doctors to start treating us holistically, meaning, as a whole person, not simply one ailment, then shouldn't we ask the same of ourselves in our world?

Let us then relegate facts and science to our head. They are good at discerning, describing, organizing, categorizing what we observe. We'll let our heart be our guide in community. That is good for creating relationships, taking care of each other, ensuring our survival. Our gut is like our instinct—that which we are born with, but cannot identify its purpose at this point; yet we are remiss to ignore it. The sixth sense is that which cannot be explained, the mysterious, the thing which gives us doubt without cause or hope without cause.

Added all up together and we get a human who experiences the world in full. We then become a person who knows that in order to see the whole picture, we must parse the elements.

From there, we are able to identify who we trust, to whom we give authority, to which sources earn our loyalty.

If a person asks you which you believe, facts or faith, you can say they collide.

May this year bring us awareness of intersections. May it bring facts to reality and more sources like the Wall Street Journal and fewer like the National Enquirer. May we see our world and ourselves as complex, not to be relegated to a single topic or characteristic. May we be whole. Perhaps then we will all be at peace.