

OpenTheo

Why We Need Christians in Science | David Lahti

May 7, 2020



The Veritas Forum

Evolutionary Biologist David Lahti talks about the need to have Christian thinkers in the sciences. • Augustine Collective Keynote. • Please like, share, subscribe to, and review this podcast. Thank you!

Transcript

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas Forum Podcast. A place where ideas and beliefs converge.

What I'm really going to be watching is, which one has the resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful, and humble toward the people they disagree with? How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity, and consciousness are a mystery, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this involved. Today we hear from Dr. David Lahti, evolutionary biologist at the City University of New York, Queens College. As he discusses why we need more Christians in the sciences, from the stage at the Augustine Collective Conference in Boston, Massachusetts.

So yeah, I'm going to talk about the science end of things here. I do think the university needs Christian voices on science and faith. I suppose that's not really surprising to you.

I'll give you three reasons. So just as the philosopher was surprisingly personal, I'm going to be surprisingly philosophical or ministerial and giving three reasons for something. But anyway, number one is we need Christian voices in this area because a pluralistic society is best served by the unhindered and courteous sharing of ideas.

So almost an axiom it seems like in our society today is that pluralistic society is best served by secularism. In other words, separation of church and state, for instance, is often thought to mean that matters of faith should be completely absent from the public square, is that that could possibly be consistent with free exercise of religion. But anyway, the assumption behind that though is that in a society with a diversity of

religious views, the absence of religion, the absence of religion is a neutral ground that is least offensive and yields the greatest net comfort for all.

That's the idea. And this sort of thinking is very sensible in some context. So on the commuter train, for instance, everybody has different musical tastes and everybody has different levels of tolerance for noise.

And so the best option for all in this case turns out, and not everybody realizes this, but turns out for nobody to play music that anyone else can hear. And so many people in our society think that religion operates by the same rule. Keep it to yourself, don't let anybody see it, and we'll all be happier for it.

The problem with that is unlike music, but no religion isn't like no music. No religion actually makes a noise just like religion does. You can't escape having a worldview and you can't escape operating by the assumptions of that worldview.

There's no such thing as a neutral place that is devoid of assumption or implication. The absence of God is itself a positive position about religion. Even avoidance of the issue is itself a position.

As the old Rush song says, if you choose not to decide, you still have made a choice. Neil Pert. In the Christian worldview, to get more specific, for our perspective, there's no division between the sacred and secular.

If God exists, then all truth is his. Then all the world is his. And to borrow an image from C.S. Lewis, every meaningful step we take is a step closer to the beatific vision or to destruction.

So in this context, a Christian view of our response to pluralism isn't just to pretend we're secularists, but to number one, love our neighbor, whatever their creator opinions, and then to live out the Christian life and everything that we do. And so what this means is to be salt and light in a wise and careful way, allowing others to live out their own perspectives as long as they don't violate the similar capacities of other people. So in this model, the pluralist society becomes sort of mosaic of ideas being shared rather than a sort of make-believe empty canvas as if there were such things as the absence of color.

So again, the university needs Christian voices on science and faith because the pluralistic society is best served by the unhindered and courteous sharing of ideas. So let's look at faith and science particularly in this respect. Of course, non-Christian views are diverse on this topic, covering nearly every conceivable position.

But in universities today, there is a certain subset of views on the interaction between faith and science that students are likely to hear. One example, a rather moderate but misleading one is that faith doesn't impact science. This is often presented as either a

conciliation by secularists like, "Oh, don't worry, I'm not going to bother your faith," or else defensively by people of faith who don't want others to think that their faith will somehow infect or poison their science.

And we would, of course, hope that good science is good science regardless of our faith. But at the same time, the 20th century philosophy of science has taught us, as if we didn't know before, that science is a human endeavor, and our values do end up coming to bear on it. Even if they don't bias our strict conclusions from the data, for instance, they can influence, our values can influence the questions that we ask, the speculations and interpretations and hypotheses that we come up with, and of course how we interact with our collaborators, how we interact with our competitors, all sorts of things about intellectual and academic ethics, especially in gray areas.

You can imagine how a Christian perspective could speak to all of these things in a way that might differ from what you're likely to hear otherwise at the university. They might. Another common view is when I heard put forth very strongly, for instance, by a colleague of mine, when I just arrived at my department in a teen-taught course, an honors course for freshmen, called "Big Ideas in Science." And this view that the professor espoused who is teaching this with me was that religion, and especially Christianity in Islam, is corrosive to rational thought and to science, and science gradually and essentially replaces faith in the modern, healthy mind.

So he portrayed that replacement as a good thing. Now, religion and science do have a mixed historical relationship, but the message that my colleague was putting forth is highly biased and caustic. For one thing, science doesn't really replace faith in the mind of the secularist.

It's just what left when you remove faith. The world is simply smaller. That's all.

The Christian can respect science just as much as the secularist can, so they shouldn't be seen as alternative. And secondly, of course, the lecture could just as easily have followed the narrative of modern science being an outgrowth of monotheistic trust in the regularity of the universe and thinking God's thoughts after him, etc. And so a fully honest presentation of the interaction of science and faith throughout history, would be nuanced and would have bits of both conflict and collaboration.

But you can imagine what effect this professor's teaching of his pejorative one-sided narrative to thousands of 18 to 19 year olds has had over his entire 40 year career. So I don't mean to sound overly negative here. I mean, I did kind of mean sound negative, but there's a reason.

And that is that I think it's powerful to illustrate why we need Christian voices on science and faith in the university by showing what things would look like, what things do look like when they don't exist, when those voices are silent. On the final day of my mid-level

evolution course one year, a pair of Muslim twins came to my office and told me that they had never before heard anyone tell them that you could accept evolution and still believe that God created the world. They'd never heard that before.

No one had said anything about the issue in their intro course. And the one popular evolution book that they had read with by Richard Dawkins, you might know his perspective on that, but it's but their father also a devout Muslim told them that the idea of accepting evolution and God's creation at the same time is preposterous. So they were getting the same message from both sides with respect to that and only that message.

And these were seniors just about to graduate with bachelor's degrees in biology. One wanted to be a teacher, other be a nurse. They'd have great influence on other people's rest their lives.

Maybe they are by now in those fields. And at so at the end of that last day of class, I had said that nothing in my entire course I did this every year, nothing in my entire course is in conflict with or undermines an orthodox religious faith. And in fact, evolution of faith can be mutually supportive if you are so inclined.

That's the only thing I say on this issue, unless people ask me about it in my evolution course. So when they came to my office later that day and wanted to hear more and we talked a while, their reaction was immediate relief and enthusiasm. Because both of them had spent the entire semester in anxiety.

They waited until the senior year to take the middle level evolution course. And they were in anxiety over having to make this big decision as to whether they're to abandon their faith or reject science. So I guess I should have eased their minds earlier in the term rather than at the end.

But my point is if you have this idea that the proper response to pluralism is for people of faith to be quiet, you end up with students that are ill prepared to think carefully about how their faith and science should interact. That's what you get. And that brings me my second reason why we need Christian voices on science and faith in the university.

This one's the most obvious because students have questions. They're curious. And they're whole people who yearn for their world views to be meaningful and coherent.

Proponents are of higher education. We're always talking about how we want students to integrate learning in different fields. We require capstone experiences.

We try to make courses more relevant to students' lives so we can coax them into seeing the broad relevance of the things that they're studying. We call the place where they study the university because it's supposed to be at the same time a multiplicity of learning experiences united or unified in the mind of the scholar. We have to put our

money where our mouth is in this respect.

We can't cultivate thoughtful students if we don't reward students for being thoughtful. And most students are naturally curious. They want to achieve this integration.

So when you learn about the Big Bang and Physics class, you can't help but ask questions about the nature of the universe and its origin. Questions that go beyond what the science can address. When you learn about DNA and the shared common ancestry of all life, you can't help but ask questions about what makes life distinctive and how it came to be in the first place and even why it exists at all.

So very soon the questions go from run-of-the-mill scientific questions to very difficult, even edgy, potentially scientific questions to which we don't have the answer yet to questions that most likely will never be answered by science. Questions that aren't even remotely of the sorts of questions that science addresses. But those of us who are scientists and have been scientists for a long time, we sort of naturally move around in the area that science can countenance.

But students are not like this, generally speaking. They ask questions regardless of whether they can be addressed by science. And we need Christian voices in the university because we want to be able to provide students with a responsible range of answers to their questions.

Not necessarily to tell them what we think or definitely not what to think but to give them a range of possible answers and just important, just as important to know the difference between questions that science can address or does address in those that science cannot. So, and I would say that those like Christians who have a worldview that admittedly and explicitly goes beyond science gives us an advantage over those who believe wrongly, as it turns out, that they stick just the facts, the scientific worldview. We know that our world extends beyond what science can countenance and so we're in a great position to invite students to be holistic and to analyze and contemplate the nature and the expansiveness and the integration of their worldviews.

But whoever we are as professors in the university, we have a responsibility to do this. What I'm saying is that Christianity gives us excellent tools for that. So again, students have questions and we have a responsibility and a great ability to nurture and feed that curiosity.

So, the third reason I think that I'm going to talk about today anyway, that we need Christian voices and science and faith in the university is because we can effect important change, change in science, change in society, beyond that which I already mentioned in terms of changing individual students' perspectives and lives when we teach them. For instance, the way that Christian graduate students talk to other grad students and even their advisors can change the way people think about faith. I was in a

lab at the University of Michigan when I was a grad student in biology where my mentor, Richard Alexander, analyzed morality and religion from an evolutionary perspective.

And I do some of this sort of thing myself now. Sometimes non-Christians don't even realize when they're doing this kind of work and in other work when they are oversimplifying or skewing religious or even more specifically Christian thought sets of opinions, mind-says. Just having one Christian in the lab can make an enormous difference to the exchange of ideas, can change the way papers are written, can change the way studies are interpreted and so on.

Once I did a veritas form at Ohio State with a Columbia University professor and he was excited about a solution to religious disagreement. That's what he was looking for, he was looking for a secularist about secularist but he was looking for a solution to religious disagreement and he called it refined religion. Now you're going to be able to find out who it is.

Where we would all keep our social interactions that relate to religion. We keep those, like going to church and we could also keep the moral guidelines but we would refine religion by getting rid of the supernatural entities, the gods. So this is a refined religion.

So I told them that would go over like a lead balloon among Christians because the only reason we get together in church is because we have a shared devotion to God. So Christianity without God wouldn't be refined. It would be gutted.

Is it like expecting people to go to a refined Billie Joel concert in Madison Square Garden where refined means that Billie Joel wouldn't actually be there? His answer to me was that he hadn't thought of that before. Sorry. This is why we can't let this get out of here.

So to Christians something might seem very clear and obvious but to non-Christians who don't really understand the draw of Christianity might never have considered our perspective seriously before. And sometimes the influence that we can have isn't so explicit or specific. Sometimes just by example even we can be like a gentle goad or a flea in the ears they say disturbing a stereotype maybe.

Influencing people to take faith a little bit more seriously or less dismissively. More seriously or less dismissively. Once my office mate at the University of Michigan went biking with me and we stopped our bikes on a bridge.

I know many of you have probably had this experience. He warned me not to take this the wrong way but that I seem reasonable about everything else and I seem like a smart guy with just this one exception that I believe in God. Of course I told him that he just doesn't know me well enough.

I'm dumbing a lot of ways actually. But people end up returning to experiences and examples like that in their life and they're thinking and writing even if they're atheists

themselves. So this office mate of mine now speaks to thousands of people on the relevance of evolution for human life is in the front line.

For another instance Stephen J. Gould who was based here at Harvard and one of the most influential writers on evolution because of his many books and his regular contributions to the magazine *Natural History*. Was not a person to faith himself but he admitted that he was motivated to respect religion and to be moderate in his views on whether evolutionary biologists could be Christians in particular because he respected two great evolutionary biologists colleagues who were Christians. Theodosius Dabzansky who was Russian Orthodox and Francisco Ayala who was Catholic.

Ernst Meyer also based here at Harvard and the longest live in the most prolific of the foragers of the modern synthesis of evolution and genetics was similarly affected by those same two Christian evolutionary biologists and he once said that he once said don't tell me it's not possible to be a good evolutionary biologist in the Christian because those two are. So and again the flip side is the situation when we do not hear Christian voices in academia or when someone has not experienced this the way Stephen J. Gould and Ernst Meyer did. So there was an editorial article in *I think it was science* but Josh Swamadass says it might have been *nature* recently to the effect that at least we can all agree that mankind is not created in God's image.

And of course that's woefully ignorant about the range of views of what Christians who understand evolution and the relatedness of all life because that's where this idea was coming from if we're all related and it's impossible for us to have an amago day but it was woefully ignorant about what we actually think about the amago day when we accept evolution and relatedness of all life the range of views that we have so the editor of one of our most respected journals thus misled thousands possibly hundreds of thousands of people who know how many people read those journals but the reason Christian voices can make a difference to science then is because the journal *science* isn't just about science and the journal *nature* isn't just about nature those journals are often philosophical and political and moral in tone now often the positions are not controversial but sometimes you can find indications sometimes sometimes only between the lines of positions that are not scientific but they're metaphysical and sometimes anti-theistic Darwin himself was partly a product of an ignorance of science-based discussions once he wrote *I think it was* in the market it was in either in just an autobiography or in the margins of the book he said man thinks himself a great work worthy the interposition of a deity humbler and I think truer to consider him created from animals but little did Darwin consider at that time apparently that the deity can create man from animals in fact *genesis* one literally has him creating man from mud and that's not actually far off so luckily darwin's views on science and faith were moderated eventually because of the correspondancy head with ace agrae a great botanist at Yale and a devout christian now this doesn't mean that christian's christian voices always have to be profound or couched in terms of disagreements with others or sage advice I

try to find ways of just doing it in little ways innocuous ways so when you can use examples from the bible or illustrations from christian thought to emphasize points or represent an idea almost in a literary way so for instance I like to tell people that evolutionary biologists are fulfilling one of god's first commandments to humanity to add them to name the living creatures we're still not finished that nowhere near finished it in genesis two then if you look at it this way I mean more seriously god presents the creation to humanity to study it and and see what we will name them and find out what's going on it's fun though and it's a little light to sort of faux brag that my job fulfills a biblical command you know but and but still i'm being i'm being i'm talking about sort of these objective reasons why we need christians in um talking about science and faith they're willing to talk about science and faith but more personally i myself wouldn't be here today if it weren't for those christians who accepted evolution in particular because i'm an evolutionary biologist now but if it weren't for those christians who accepted evolution and discussed those things with me in academia so i'll tell you about a few of them i mean you might not you probably won't know the names but uh first was Richard T Wright he's emeritus professor of biology at Gordon college just north of here christian college who graduated from here from harvard and wrote biology through the eyes of faith where he laid out very consistently and openly a christian view that embraced evolution and he also exemplified in his own life how to be a compassionate and thoughtful christian biologist and mentor he was my mentor there and brought me here for instance after i graduated to see what harvard biologists were doing as i was thinking about entering grad school also up there was tom dent a botanist at gordon who inspired a love of plants and a love of creation with everything that he did he had a childlike joy and a sense of wonder he threw himself down in on in the forest floor and just showed us all the little mosses and liverwort down there he was the tom bombadillo of gordon college if you know talking but um and then there are the people that i met at the ossobel institute of environmental studies in mancelona michigan so it was founded by um calvin do it at university of wisconsin who showed me and hundreds of other students there that god calls us to be stewards of the environment and then also there i met the two greatest natural aside i have ever known even to this day dave mahan is a western michigan aquatic biologist who's been associate director of ossobel for 35 years and joe sheldon is an entomologist and professor at eastern and then monsieur college is in pennsylvania who taught at ossobel for more than 20 years all of these biologists are christian i dedicated my phd dissertation to the people that i just mentioned without them i probably wouldn't even have pursued a biology phd so when i was a kid i was a nature boy but i thought that evolution was inherently atheistic so that's why in addition to those broad reasons the objective reasons i have a personal reason i hope that we have more christian voices in academia on science and faith because i hope that more kids who love nature like i did will find good role models and maybe even think that science even evolutionary biology could be a place where christians can feel comfortable if you like this and you want to hear more like share review and subscribe to this podcast and from all of us here at the veritas forum thank you

