
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Science

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

I would love to meet your chemistry professor.

It is funny that he believes in God, while your religion professor does not. But, I'm not surprised. Judging by the story that he told you about the sense of awe he experienced on seeing the rainbow over the ocean, your chemistry professor sounds like he has a poet's sense of wonder that has taken him on a long journey of discovery.

Scientists often become scientists, I think, because they are curious about how things work. Yet, it is not unusual for their explorations to lead them to ask larger questions about why those things even exist. These are questions about ultimate meaning that the scientific method can't answer.

Your chemistry professor reminds me of Alister McGrath, a professor of science and religion at Oxford University who has written a number of books about the relationship between science and faith.

As McGrath tells his story, he realized that he needed a more expansive way of seeing things after reading about the history and philosophy of science. He began to realize how often theory is not completely determined by the data, how often universally accepted theories turn out to be wrong, and how difficult it really is to determine the best explanation of the observations made in even a well-devised study.

He found the "bigger picture" he was looking for when he came to believe in God. He describes his conversion by quoting C. S. Lewis: "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else." In other words, his faith gave him the lens he needed to bring more things into focus.

I see the workings of a similar faith in your professor's questions. I hadn't thought, for example, about how mysterious it is that we know what we know. It really is amazing that mathematicians conceive of abstract formulas that chemists and physicists later find in the world around us, or that people come up with theories that predict things that haven't yet been discovered.

Perhaps it's true that we know these things because we are made in the image of the one who created them.

In the end, science allows us to exist, but as McGrath says (and I suspect your professor knows), it's faith that gives us life.

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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