

Theologian-scientist says there are pathways between two disciplines

September 17, 2009

ATLANTA (ABP) — There are paths between science and theology, and both can find value in interaction, noted author and professor of science and theology Robert Russell told an audience at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology Sept. 15.

Russell, founder and director of the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences and a professor at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, Calif., delivered McAfee's second annual D. Perry and Betty Ginn Lecture on Christian Faith and Modern Science. He used his address to take on some common historical misconceptions about the roles of science, philosophy and religion.



Robert Russell lectures on theology and science at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta on Sept. 15. (Mercer photo)

"Philosophy mediates between theology and science," Russell said.

“Science doesn’t prove God, but it does show that life is very much at home in this universe. This is not a proof of God, but an invitation to take the universe and give it a sense of purpose and value in a way that the science I grew up with did not.

“It isn’t as much of a leap to say that God created the universe as it is to say there are an infinite number of universes out there,” he said. “It tends to be unanswerable because it’s beyond the laws of science and observation.”

Russell has spent his career studying these interactions. An ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, he is a member of the Society of Ordained Scientists and has written or edited numerous books on science and theology. He holds a Ph.D. in experimental physics from the University of California, Santa Cruz, a master of divinity and a master of arts in theology and science from the Pacific School of Religion and a master’s degree in physics from the University of California at Los Angeles. As an undergraduate at Stanford University, he triple-majored in physics, religion and music.

One example of philosophy influencing science, he said, surrounds the “big-bang” theory about the creation of the universe. Russell said some theorized a single event beginning the universe, while physicists said this created the philosophical paradox: “How could the universe have a beginning?

A competing theory, called the steady-state or ever-expanding-universe theory, was rejected by Albert Einstein in 1927 and called “an abomination.” But in 1931, after reviewing the theory and considering his own position, Einstein changed his mind and called his original opinion his “greatest blunder.”

“In my opinion,” Russell said, “this shows that philosophy can play a

creative role in science” because evidence can be proven false as part of the scientific process. The big-bang theory and the steady-state theory are still being debated today, Russell said, and philosophical and theological considerations influence theory choice.

Objections to the big-bang theory have also arisen on theological grounds. Some said the theory supported creation, while others disagreed, saying it would promote atheism. Other scientists said if the theory is relevant to theology, it should be abandoned.



An audience member listens to Robert Russell as he delivers the Ginn Lectures on Christian Faith and Modern Science at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology. (Mercer photo)

Russell said he thinks science is only indirectly relevant to theology. “Science provides confirmation for theology, and science and theology are in consonance with each other,” he said. “Science plays a secondary role in Christian faith, which primarily has its basis in Scripture, tradition, reason and experience.”

Even though the theory of evolution is often vilified by Christians, Russell said for believers, theology can offer an explanation. “Evolution biology requires a specific set of circumstances to exist. There’s a very subtle

connection to God, because if any of the circumstances had been any other way, we wouldn't be here.

"The existence of life puts constraints on the type of physics you have," he said. "It ties physics and biology together. It's not a design argument; it's an argument against cosmic meaninglessness. Philosophy mediates between theology and science."

The Ginn Lectures were endowed at McAfee by Perry Ginn to encourage a deeper understanding by clergy and students of science and how it relates to the biblical revelation. Ginn is former pastor of several Georgia congregations, including the First Baptist Church of Gainesville and Peachtree Baptist Church in Atlanta. He is semi-retired and currently serves as pastor of the North Clarendon Baptist Church in Avondale Estates, Ga.

-Bob Perkins Jr. is an Atlanta-based writer who has written for Mercer University and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.