

“Is That Your Final Answer?”

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Most of us have watched at least one episode of the “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” show. The rules of the show specify that the subject be allowed to take as much time as he/she wishes to ponder his answer, may consult one of his/her “lifelines” if desired, and may even think out loud on the camera. But no response is considered official until the subject answers in the affirmative to the moderator’s question “Is that your final answer?”. After that, there is no going back.

It seems to me that the “Is That Your Final Answer” principle also applies in discussions of science and religion.

Imagine for a moment that a dear friend or relative, or even a member of your own family, comes to you in great distress over what unfortunately is a very common dilemma: He/she has been taught since youth by well-meaning Sunday School teachers, Seminary teachers or even Priesthood leaders that evolution (or science in general) is an enemy of faith, and that one cannot possibly seriously affirm the scientific worldview and remain a “good” member of the Church. Yet he/she is now enrolled in a college or university course that makes it very plain that there is considerable evidence for these theories. What’s more his/her professor, or even perhaps a fellow student, belittles this person’s reluctance to accept the conclusions of science, and dismisses religion as both antiquated and unnecessary in our modern scientific era. As a result, this person faces a major crisis of faith.

I might add that such crises are certainly not limited to college students. It is not uncommon for a middle-aged adult, after reading some semi-popular scientific book or even Internet posts, to realize that cherished beliefs held since childhood can no longer be defended.

Imagine such a person, who dearly needs some answers, has come to you for guidance. So what do you say? Here, for instance, are two possible responses:

a. Science can sow doubt and disbelief, as evidenced for instance by some prominent scientists who have publicly proclaimed atheism and derided those who hold religious beliefs. From the Church’s perspective, any secular theory that denies the hand of God in the creation, or which denies doctrines such as the Fall or the Atonement, is false doctrine. At least one general authority has specifically taught that one cannot accept the modern scientific theories of evolution and still pretend to believe in the Atonement. Besides, these scientific teachings are theories – subject to future research and potential falsification – and thus need not be accepted as absolute fact.

b. Throughout history, religious fanaticism has led to horrors such as the Inquisition, the persecution of Galileo and centuries of religious wars. In our own

day, similar fanaticism has been behind the horrors of September 11 and suicide bombers. Science, on the other hand, continues to advance forward, with remarkable new discoveries being announced on almost a daily basis. The scientific picture of a several-billion-year-old earth, with countless biological species arising through the eons via the natural processes of biological evolution, is extremely well grounded in experimental evidence, using the best high-tech equipment available. As a result, any religious precept (LDS or not) that is in open conflict with such well-established principles of modern science is out of date and should be discarded.

First let me point out that each individual sentence of these two paragraphs is quite defensible. It is true that a handful of scientists and scholars, themselves self-declared atheists, have recently derided religious beliefs, citing the authority of modern science. It is true that at least one past general authority opined, in writing, that the theory of evolution is incompatible with LDS doctrine. It is true that scientific theories should not be taken as absolute eternal fact, since they are subject to modification by future research findings. It is true that religious fanaticism has resulted in many tragedies through the years, not the least of which was the disgraceful persecution of Galileo. It is true that the theory of evolution, including the associated picture of a very old earth with millions of species leading up to all present-day forms, is extremely well attested. And I personally agree that any religious precept, LDS nor otherwise, that is in conflict with well-established principles of science needs to be re-thought.

But, to return to the original theme of this note, when your friend or relative says, "Is that your final answer?", are you really willing to leave this person with the stark choice of science or religion? Even a moment's reflection should confirm that an all-or-nothing response is both unnecessary and potentially damaging.

For those scientists and others who identify more with (a), ask yourself the following: Is the defense of some scientific precept, no matter how well established you may feel it is (or no matter how established it really is), really worth the personal damage you might do to a long-time devout religious believer? What is the point of waging a battle against a viewpoint that you yourself presumably believe will eventually prevail? Wouldn't it be more gentle and effective to direct this person's concern in a positive direction? For instance, it is an indisputable fact that modern science reveals a world that is far more wondrous and awe-inspiring than ever before recognized in human history. So why not respond with a sense of awe?

For those devout religious believers who identify more with (b), ask yourself the following: Is the defense of a literal interpretation of some scriptural passage, or the defense of some religious leader long deceased, really so important that you are willing to let a questioning youth or loved one walk away with only the sternest all-or-nothing choice? What is the point of taking such an inflexible stand? The Church at the present time certainly does not make a big deal of scientific issues – to the contrary, there is strong evidence that the Church is studiously avoiding scientific controversies, as evidenced by the short, open-minded statement on evolution that

it approved for the Encyclopedia of Mormonism (and which it now distributes from the First Presidency's office).

In searching the vast literature of LDS commentary, I found one clip that I believe, more than any other, summarizes the essential idea I wish to make here. This is from a speech given in 1952 at BYU by Pres. David O. McKay (who by the way personally believed in evolution):

“For example, evolution’s beautiful theory of the creation of the world offers many perplexing problems to the inquiring mind. Inevitably, a teacher who denies divine agency in creation, who insists there is no intelligent purpose in it, will infest the student with the thought that all may be chance. I say, that no youth should be so led without a counterbalancing thought. Even the skeptic teacher should be fair enough to see that even Charles Darwin, when he faced this great question of annihilation, that the creation is dominated only by chance wrote: “It is an intolerable thought that man and all other sentient beings are doomed to complete annihilation after such long, continued slow progress.” And another good authority, Raymond West, said, “Why this vast [expenditure] of time and pain and blood?” Why should man come so far if he’s destined to go no farther? A creature that travels such distances and fought such battles and won such victories deserves what we are compelled to say, “To conquer death and rob the grave of its victory.” [David O. McKay, “A message for LDS College Youth,” speech to BYU studentbody, Oct. 10, 1952, pg. 6-7, Extension Publications, BYU. Also published, nearly verbatim, in LDS Conference Report, April 1968, pg. 92.]