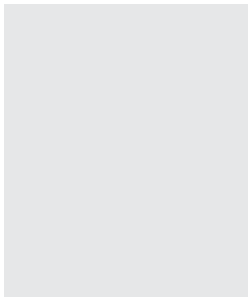


# Eyes Wide Open

A disciple of science and religion embraces the paradox of commitment and critique. *by James Proctor*



James Proctor

I have mixed feelings for both science and religion.

In my single digits I devoured the *World Book Encyclopedia*, eager to learn all about existence. In my preteen years, I won gold ribbons for science projects about the fertilizer value of horse manure—of which my rural Oregon hometown was the land of plenty. A few years later, I'd spend my breaks from bagging groceries reading about biochemistry. Finally, I was ready to take on Stanford University and become a famous scientist.

Somewhere along the way, the bottom fell out. Science, I realized, is a relatively neat and tractable human pursuit because of the way it necessarily simplifies the world in order to understand it. Deeper than my desire for scientific understanding was the urge to find meaning in this huge universe: Why so much beauty? Why so much evil? These are questions too messy for science alone.

## Science omits as much as it includes and ... religion is more earth-bound than most devotees admit.

An olive-hued picture of Jesus hung on the wall of the little, white, steepled Methodist church of my youth. We went every Sunday, every late Christmas Eve, every early Easter morning. And when I hit my high school science crisis, I turned to my religious upbringing for answers to these larger questions, giving up my Stanford scholarship to attend a small Bible college.

As zealous in my pursuit of religion as in my pursuit of science, I spoke to a captive graduation audience on the merits of believing in God.

But as my study of religion deepened, I awoke to the realization that I was a Christian largely because of circumstance. Had I been born of parents in, say, India, I would have devoted my life to an entirely separate set of beliefs and rituals. Religion, I realized, was not only a window onto the mysteries of the universe, but also a mirror reflecting cultural origins.

Because of these experiences I changed my commitments to science and religion. I obtained college degrees in both. I routinely receive

research funding from the National Science Foundation, and I continue to participate in religious services. But I know now that somehow, we must—I must—embrace the paradox that both commitment and critique must inform all that ultimately gives our lives meaning if we are to walk a chosen path with eyes wide open.

Commitment is inescapable: We all stand on something, however unacknowledged. Critique sounds like the commitment's opposite. An admission like mine, for instance—that science omits as much as it includes and that religion is more earth-bound than most devotees admit—often results in rejection rather than commitment. Yet both science and religion are valid, important human dimensions. Paradox is the willingness to embrace both commitment and critique, in spite of their apparent contradiction. As Danish physicist Niels Bohr once said: "The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. The opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth."

My current research explores how trust, or lack thereof, in major authorities such as science, religion, government, and nature constitutes a particular blend of commitment and critique. For some of us, religion and government are trustworthy institutions. For others, science is the ultimate authority. And for still others, nature yields far deeper truths than any human institution.

I hope to discover how trust, commitment, and critique interweave in contemporary American society. I hope to find many who have chosen a wide-eyed walk through these realms of authority. But I don't believe I will. Dissent and critique, although founding precepts in American history, are by no means widespread. Worse, many who cast a critical eye on authority behave as if they believe in nothing beyond themselves. Surely, through open-eyed commitment to religion and science, we can do better.

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*Jim Proctor, associate professor of geography, directs the Science, Religion, and the Human Experience lecture series at the University of California-Santa Barbara. The lecture series is funded by the John Templeton Foundation. (c)*