Lifting Up – Bethany Sollereder

Bethany Sollereder is a PhD candidate in theology at the University of Exeter in Great Britain, with a Master’s Degree in interdisciplinary theology from Regent College in Vancouver, Canada. For her BA in intercultural studies, she did field work in China and Thailand. Her PhD focus is on how a good God could create through an evolutionary process, when evolution necessarily involves pain, suffering, and death for countless animals. Bethany speaks and writes widely on issues at the intersection of theology and science. Bethany joined the American Scientific Affiliation (ASA) a few years ago; see her contact info at her profile in the ASA membership directory.

Why are you a Christian?  Mostly because I love horses!  I kept going to these Christian camps in the summer where riding was part of the curriculum. They also told the campers about Jesus, and over the years, the message stuck, particularly when I became staff at a camp at 15 years old, and found myself suddenly teaching devotional and Bible lessons!  I finally had to figure out what this faith meant for me.

Why are you a theologian with an interest in science?  I always enjoyed the sciences growing up, and since both my parents are healthcare professionals, the sciences were a regular part of everyday life. However, my interest in science and theology as a discipline happened almost by accident. I was finishing my undergrad in theology, and was enrolled for a master’s in theology with a history major, when I had a chance meeting with Denis Lamoureux—a CSCA/ASA fellow—who ended up asking me to read his forthcoming book *Evolutionary Creation*. I was struck by how bringing science into dialogue with theology changed the way we read the Bible, and suddenly, I was hooked! I changed over to a major in science and theology, and the rest (as they say) is history!

How do your faith and your interest in science enhance each other?  There are really three, not two, different elements in my work: faith, science, and theology. I see theology and science as two different, but complementary, ways of experiencing and describing reality. They are like railroad rails, both of which are necessary to support the worldview train traveling on them. Faith is the engine aboard the train, which gives power and dynamic ability to the worldview. How do science and theology enhance each other? They help define each other, and help describe the world at different levels. Both are necessary if our search for truth is not to be derailed right at the start. I really like John Polkinghorne’s example of asking “Why is the water boiling?” The scientist answers “It has reached 100 degrees Celsius and is undergoing a state change.” The theologian answers “Because I want a cup of tea.” Both descriptions are true, and both are necessary to understanding the full mystery of the boiling kettle. Meanwhile, the person of faith gives thanks to God for a world that includes tea!


What, or who, have been the three greatest encouragements for you personally in your career?

It is very hard to choose! I have had help and encouragement from all sorts of unlikely places and people. Three of the most important are probably:

1) The faculty and community of Regent College. The theological diversity of the college meant that easy answers to difficult questions were rarely given, and the community-oriented structure of the college meant that doubts and challenges could be wrestled through authentically. Combined with rigorous academic standards, Regent College shaped my theology very deeply.

2) My PhD supervisor, Christopher Southgate, and the University of Exeter. The university provided a scholarship which has allowed me to continue to study in this area I love, and my supervisor has played a huge role in helping me gain the confidence to explore my own thoughts on theology, science, and suffering, rather than simply repeating the orthodoxy of others.

3) My churches. My church here in Exeter, Isca, has been vital for providing encouragement and support through the hard times. They have also encouraged me to keep my theological feet on the ground: because of them, I have always tried to make sure that my work is understandable to everyone, and not simply members of the academic guild. Theology should always be for the ultimate benefit of the church: being part of a worshipping community reminds me of that often.

What advice do you wish you had received as a student or earlier in your career, or would you like to offer others, regarding your faith and regarding being a woman?

Hmmm... well, I am still a student, and haven’t had a career yet! However, one of the best pieces of advice I have received about faith and decision making (whether about careers or anything else) is that you should not make a major decision in a place of desolation. When everything is going wrong, and you are afraid and panicked, it is the wrong time to make a decision about where to head next in your life path. Wait for the consolation: the encouragement, the comfort, the clear path. Then make your decision out of the peace God grants.

As for being a woman, I would say “Don’t be afraid to be the odd one out.” When I attend ASA meetings, for example, I am always in the minority in almost every way: student, female, Canadian, theologian. But each of these just means that I have something to offer to the people in the majority groups that they would not hear any other way. Embrace your differences as key parts of how God wants to use you to build his Kingdom. This will be particularly true of scientists in congregations, but is true elsewhere as well.

What is your vision for Christian Women in Science and/or the American Scientific Affiliation?

I would like to see more trained theologians bringing their voices to bear on the questions of science and religion. Most women in theology tend to end up in either biblical studies, ethics, or spirituality-focused endeavours. I would also like to see some of the classic conflicts fade away. Let’s stop asking “Did evolution happen?” and start asking “What does the evolutionary process tell us about God?” or “What does Genesis tell us about the human condition?” Let’s stop asking “Is climate change happening?” and start asking “How can we be a better part of the community of creation in which God has placed us as image-bearers?” These questions will yield far more interesting and more helpful discussions, particularly in the North American church.