

A Sermon preached at St Mary's, Warwick Trinity 6 (2012)

The recent discovery of the Higgs boson has continued to draw much comment this week. The 'Higgs' is the proposed, elementary particle in the Standard Model of particle physics, which provides the explanation as to why some other elementary particles have inertial mass. I'm now teetering on the precipice of my ignorance and won't say anymore about the Higgs boson itself but some of the comments about it have also sought to make claims as to what this discovery means for religion and faith – whether it's a good thing or a bad thing. You may have heard the joke about how a Higgs boson goes into a Catholic church. 'We don't allow Higgs bosons in here!' shouts the priest.

And the particle replies: 'But without me, how can you have mass?'

So does the possible detection of the Higgs boson have implications for Christian faith? One leading advocate for an atheist perspective has written: 'The discovery is yet another demonstration of scientific method as the scrupulous process by which humankind acquires knowledge. The importance of this becomes more obvious when contrasted against the current resurgence of rabid religionism ...' He continues, 'The illiterate shepherders of the Middle East, upon whose wisdom many people base their worldview, were wrong about the size, shape, structure, location, formation, behavior, age, and relative importance of the Earth. They were wrong about astronomy, biology, chemistry, cosmology, history, geography, geology, medicine, zoology, the treatment of women and personal grooming. And pretty much everything else ...' And he concludes categorically, without fear of contradiction: 'The ancient religions possess no methodology for the validation of knowledge, but are quite good at the denial and destruction of knowledge.' (Rick Wingrove *The Washington Post* July 11th 2012.)

By contrast one Christian philosopher who writes extensively on matters of science and religion has observed about the discovery of the Higgs boson that: 'this impressive achievement has no theological implications of any direct sort ... except in an indirect sense (e.g. testimony to the mathematical order and beauty of nature.) In particular, it changes nothing regarding the cosmological arguments for the universe's beginning or ... fine-tuning.' And, he goes on to note, it was a book written by Nobel Prize winning Leon Lederman entitled *The God Particle* (published in 1993) which popularised that quasi-theological tag and the same writer says: 'I really like Lederman's [title] because it highlights two aspects of God's existence. First, God's conservation of the world and second the hiddenness of God.' (William Lane Craig *reasonablefaith* website July 9th 2012).

So perhaps we can conclude that although the discovery of the Higgs boson is both significant and exciting for scientists; for theologians it merely allows people to confirm their worldviews and firmly-held perspectives on matters of faith. However, there's one other interesting point that emerges from this discussion – the curious link between science *and* God-talk. The story behind the title to Lederman's book is that the particle was originally nick-named the 'goddamn particle' because it was so hard to find. However, his publishers balked at using that phrase in the title so it became *The God Particle* instead, even though any significance for God, theology or faith is tangential at best. Other examples of similar God-talk in science are easy to find.

A couple of decades ago, research into faint radiation left behind from the Big Bang moved into religious language. The theory was that the primal explosion wasn't totally uniform. So the remnants of the hotter and cooler parts might still be detectable. In 1992, astronomer George Smoot was among the first to see the satellite data that showed exactly the predicted fluctuations. It was, he said, "like seeing the face of God." A phrase that grabbed headlines just like the *God Particle* title did some years later.

Stephen Hawking's attitude toward religion seems to range from the apathetic to hostile. In his bestseller *A Brief History of Time* he offers this line: "If we discover a complete theory of everything, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason – for then we should know the mind of God." There was much debate at the time about what he meant and there are still discussions and arguments even now.

Perhaps the most famous science and religion quotes belong to Albert Einstein. Among his best known is: "God does not play at dice with the world." It was his objection to the then new theory of quantum mechanics – a theory depending upon uncertain probabilities that Einstein didn't much like.

And what did Einstein mean by "God?" In his book *The World As I See It*, there's an essay about religion, where Einstein observes: "You will hardly find one among the profounder sort of scientific minds without a peculiar religious feeling of his own. But it is different from the religion of the naive man. For the latter, God is a being, from whose *care* one hopes to benefit, and whose *punishment* one fears ..." And he carries on: "But the scientist is possessed by the sense of universal causation. The future, to him, is every whit as necessary and determined as the past ... [The scientist's] religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection." (Jeffrey Weiss, *Real Clear Religion*, July 5th 2012).

Science and faith do share common ground in that both can be human responses to the wonder of the universe in which we find ourselves and that's always been the case from illiterate shepherders through to scientists working on the Large Hadron Collider. We need language to speak about and describe such wonder, what Einstein called 'rapturous amazement'. It's not surprising that people still reach for God-talk to do this, since it's a form of language that touches all aspects of human experience and provides a wisdom that's been winnowed and refined over time.

The Higgs boson isn't the 'God particle' in the sense that it will confirm or deny the existence of Deity; it is part of that great sense of wonder that humanity has as we gaze upon and explore the hidden depths and farthest reaches of creation – which for many still speak of Divinity and God.

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July 2012