

Truth claims: In the realms of both science and religion

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 29, 2008](#) issue

One of the most serious challenges a person of faith confronts is the classic tension between faith and reason, religion and science. Some people live thoroughly and comfortably in one realm or the other. Some travel back and forth (perhaps only on Sunday mornings). So when I encounter someone who lives thoroughly and comfortably in both realms, I pay attention—as I do to John Polkinghorne, an Anglican priest and one of the world’s most distinguished physicists (see the [interview with Polkinghorne](#) in this issue).

Polkinghorne reminds us that there are lots of scientifically literate people in our congregations and that our job is to show them that “religious faith is not a question of shutting your eyes and gritting your teeth. It is a search for truth in a different realm.” He challenges preachers to read some of the good popular writing on science, but adds that “nobody can know everything.”

I’m particularly grateful for Polkinghorne’s comments on Darwinism. Sometimes, being convinced that the creationists and advocates of “intelligent design” are leading us down the wrong alley and trying to stir up a fruitless culture war, I find myself defending Darwinism without fully understanding what I am defending. I like Polkinghorne’s observation that we’re able to understand the world—including the subatomic world of quantum theory—in ways that are counterintuitive. He also points out that the human capacity for such knowledge is itself theologically significant: “I can’t believe that our ability to understand and probe and enjoy the structures of that quantum world is simply a spin-off of our ancestors’ learning to dodge saber-toothed tigers. It’s something more profound than that.” It is helpful to be reminded by a scientist that truth is bigger than anything the human intellect can comprehend or theorize about.

Writing in the journal *Image* (Fall 2007) on the topic “Why Believe in God?” poet Sydney Lea recalled the response of a Native American who was asked by a judge if

he promised to tell the court “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” The translator “seemed to struggle, and at length rendered the man’s reply: ‘I don’t know what the whole truth is,’ he said. ‘I only know what I know.’”

Or as Shakespeare’s Hamlet put it to his friend Horatio: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”