

# ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth’: What do science and faith have to do with youth ministry?

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Dating back to medieval times, and some would contend even ancient biblical times, scholars of the faith have made significant contributions to scientific discovery. Theology was considered foundational to the understanding of our natural world, and possibly the motivation for scientific enquiry. No tension existed between observation and study of the natural world and faith. In modern times the rift between science and faith, from a conservative evangelical perspective, has been ever-widening with both sides viewing the other with growing suspicion. This article reflected on the impact that this approach to science and faith has had on the faith formation of youth raised within evangelical faith communities. It investigated how conservative evangelical teachings concerning the creation story has hindered the faith formation of youth in this context. We connected this tension between science and faith as we considered connections to environmental justice as it related to youth in marginalised communities in South Africa. This article served as an introductory exploration of why we believe young people are not engaging with environmental issues.

**Contribution:** As part of the special edition on youth, faith and climate change, this article reflects on the impact that the conflicted evangelical approaches to science and faith have on the faith formation of youth raised within evangelical faith communities. It investigates how fundamentalistic evangelical teachings concerning the creation story has hindered the faith formation of youth in this context. Within the context of environmental justice and inequality, this article highlights the need for church engagement on issues related to these conflicted approaches, its effect on how youth engage on issues affecting their environments, and youth ministry practice within evangelical churches.

**Keywords:** youth; faith formation; evolution; creation; ecological justice.

## Introduction

The title of this article plays on the opening words of Genesis 1:1 ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth’ by asking the question: what do science and faith have to do with youth ministry? This article focuses on youth in their mid-teens who are between 15 and 18 years old, and most likely in grades 9–12 of their high school career in South Africa:

For many young South Africans born either just before or after the demise of apartheid, termed ‘born frees’, the ongoing realities of poverty and inequality raise the question of whether they are truly free in this post-apartheid era. (Bowers Du Toit et al. 2021:1–2)

It is the assumption of this article that young evangelical Christians specifically grapple with teachings around creation and evolution taught at school level that may be perceived to conflict with religious teaching, which they are taught within a fundamentalistic<sup>1</sup> evangelical Christian home or church. Youth identity formation cannot be separated from their faith formation and moral formation at this stage in life (Weber 2014:107). Young people who are exploring their Christian identity are simultaneously engaged in faith formation and how they navigate the moral choices they make during this time. Young people growing up in marginalised communities have less social capital to engage with issues concerning their living contexts and environment because of inadequate education within their schools and churches (Bowers Du Toit et al. 2021).

1. Evangelical fundamentalism originates from America with leading proponents like DL Moody, Charles Spurgeon and others (Bebbington 2017:175–194). It is a strict adherence to a set of principles and beliefs, to a literal interpretation of the Bible, which affects all aspects of life and a firm belief that there is only one view of the world possible and their view is the correct one. The leadership is given great authority in this regard (Giddens 2001:557).

**Note:** Special Collection: Youth, Faith, Climate Change and Environmental Consciousness: A Case for Sustainable Development, sub-edited by Jacques Beukes (University of Pretoria), Juliane Stork (Humboldt University, Berlin) and Ignatius Swart (University of the Western Cape).

The Young Earth Creationist view, predominant within the fundamentalistic evangelical tradition, confines creation to a 6-day (24 h) period. Modern scientific consensus supports a 13.8 billion-year-old universe beginning with the Big Bang (Planck Collaboration 2020) with the age of the earth estimated to be around 4.5 billion years. The seeming incompatibility and contradictory nature of these views may be a source of major tension for a formative mind. Young people in the church perceive a dichotomy and often find themselves in the difficult position of choosing to remain 'true' to the faith, thereby disengaging from and denying scientific discovery on the one hand or choosing the scientific view on the other and thereby 'betraying the faith'. This false dichotomy has robbed our youth of a source of tangible evidence of the fingerprint and the glory of God as revealed in His creation or seen them abandon the faith to adopt the seemingly more intellectually sophisticated scientific position.

## Environmental justice as global concern

Youth activists have been engaging leadership structures, varying stakeholders and the broader public sphere on issues that impact the environment they are growing up in. One of the key issues faced by youth in poor communities such as the townships in South Africa is that they do not live in clean, green and safe spaces. Okafor-Yarwood and Adewumi (2020:286) added a further complexity: environmental racism. Reflecting on how communities of mixed race are deliberately targeted as spaces for toxic waste facilities, they argue that:

dumping of toxic waste in the Global South is also made possible by the active collusion of government officials and local stakeholders, and that poor government regulations have made countries in the region an attractive option for exporters of hazardous waste from the Global North. Toxic waste dumping seems to be cheaper in developing countries. South Africa's apartheid history. (p. 286)

Buitendag and Simut (2020) has added to this kind of injustice by displacing many people of mixed race through the *Group Areas Act*. Religious institutions (e.g. churches) have been engaging with issues affecting the environment, but it seems these have not reached local congregants.<sup>2</sup>

This article reflects on the impact that this approach to science and faith has had on the faith formation of youth raised within evangelical faith communities. The overarching understanding of faith formation used here describes faith formation as a life-long process towards spiritual growth (Weber 2014). This process includes how young people develop their Christian identity and also a sense of Christian morality. Two crucial components to enhancing youth faith formation are the freedom of questioning and grappling with the mystery of their faith. Priority is given to the core theological tension we believe these youth and evangelical

<sup>2</sup>Ahmad (2020:5) observed consultations such as the Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders and the international Union for the Conservation of Nature as examples of these. She (2020:6) added that "...attitudes and values that shape people's concepts of nature come primarily from religious worldviews and ethical practices".

church have to grapple with before engaging with issues concerning the environment. The article closes with a few recommendations for youth ministry within evangelical faith communities wrestling with tensions between science and faith, and consequently environmental justice amongst its youth.

## What has faith got to do with youth ministry?

Through Him all things were made, without Him nothing was made that has been made. (Jn 1:3, NIV)

But ask the animals and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish in the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In His hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind. (Job 12:7–10, NIV)

The word 'faith' has developed varied meanings depending on the context in which it has been applied. In some instances, these meanings have not necessarily been connected to the Christian faith. There are various interdisciplinary understandings of faith,<sup>3</sup> but emphasis on the Christian faith is the underlying focus referred to in this article. With this being said, various schools of understanding of this Christian faith also vary within different doctrinal teachings within Christianity. Emphasis will be placed on the development of an understanding specifically relevant to a fundamentalistic evangelical faith context.

The Christian faith promotes trust in and obedience to a gracious God made known in Jesus Christ (Migliore 2004:1–3). The Christian faith is also referred to as a process of continual transformation through the power of the Holy Spirit (Migliore 2004; Dykstra & Parks 1986; Strommen & Hardel 2000). This process calls for continual reflection on one's lifestyle in relation to God's redemption, and this reflection is based on grace as a result of enlightenment by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God, not merits. Faith then becomes the appropriate response of trust and acceptance of God's unconditional belief (Migliore 2004:235–236). The Christian faith involves a commitment of one's mind, will and affection. Strommen and Hardel (2000:75–81), referred to this faith as an affair of the heart, a commitment of the mind and good actions. As an affair of the heart, faith binds us to God. As an affair of the mind and good actions, faith includes our thoughts, will and judgements as Christians. This then means that faith should

<sup>3</sup>Psychological and sociological perspectives refer to faith within the context of all religious groups. Halonen and Santrock (1999:576–577) described religion as the beliefs, practices, feelings and knowledge, which morally and spiritually guide people's behaviour. It is through symbols and rituals that these feelings are encouraged (Giddens 2001:531). It is through religious experiences that people are able to feel, know and understand their faith. Knowledge is thus an essential component to committing to a particular religion because of the awareness that this religion would impact one's daily life. Morality is a prominent feature of all religious groups with different moral codes outlined in the teachings and rules of each group (Giddens 2001:545; Halonen & Santrock 1999:576). Faith is thus about the feelings, knowledge and the outcomes it has on individual life. Social psychology argues that there is a difference between intrinsic religious orientation and an extrinsic religious orientation (Giddens 2001:545; Halonen & Santrock 1999:576). Intrinsically motivated people live their faith whilst extrinsically motivated people use their faith. Sociologist, Giddens (2001:532–533) emphasises that this faith can be both personal and communal.

impact life emotionally, intellectually and practically. The Christian faith is about actively seeking God and his will for life and this includes one's moral behaviour. It stimulates a yearning to know and grow in the understanding of God. As Migliore (2004:410) stated, it goes not only beyond adherence to church doctrines, but it also does not ignore the importance of what the church teaches.

Osmer (1992:16–36), Fowler (1996), Parks and Dykstra (in eds. Dykstra & Parks 1986) agreed that faith has many sides to it. It is about beliefs about God, an ongoing relationship with God, a commitment to God, and an awareness of the mystery that surrounds God and limits our understanding of him. Systematic theologian, H.R. Niebhur called this the faith cube. Youth going through a period of identity formation may experience these different sides to faith at different times in their faith journey. Faith formation in this article is not limited to ecclesial activities used to form young people's faith. In many conversations around this theme catechism or Bible study is mentioned. These are the considered modes through which the church encourages the positive faith formation of these youth (Weber 2014:96–100). Our understanding of faith formation here calls for reflection on these many sides of faith through considering the many changes happening with youth at the ages of 14 to 17 years. The youth considered here are not only discovering who they are in Christ in terms of identity, but also trying to discern where they are in their relationship to this Christ and how the daily choices they make impact this relationship (Weber 2014:96–100). Faith needs to be meaningful for it to be relevant to young people in the varying contexts in which they live (Fowler in eds. Dykstra & Parks 1986:15; Parks 2000:19). Relationally, faith becomes active as these youth grow in understanding their relations to self, others and the world in light of their awareness of relatedness to the ultimate conditions of existence. In these contexts, youth develop relationships, which require an active and loyal trust in their relationship with God as well. In agreement with the many sides of faith discussed earlier and with faith being an affair of the heart, mind and will, faith has both an (epistemological) knowing and a being (loving) component. This knowledge requires that informed and morally appropriate action be taken. For youth, it also means taking the perspectives of the others around you seriously and not merely considering your own (Fowler in eds. Dykstra & Parks 1986:15; Parks 2000:19). The role that parents, church leaders, school teachers and peers play in their lives needs to be considered. These relationships could hinder their faith formation if they perceive a disconnect in foundational truth in this relational community on matters such as science and faith. If the teaching of parents and church leaders contradict what these youth are being taught about creation and evolution at school, they experience a sense of cognitive dissonance and often questions go unanswered. Conversely, these relationships could also enhance the faith formation of these youth by creating opportunities and safe spaces to engage with and question various perspectives on creation and evolution or the broader area of science and faith. Generational theory (Siebel & Nel 2010) observes that the manner in which

faith is transmitted and taught within and between different generations varies. This results in parental views that are fearful of post-modern Christianity. The choice not to engage with the results of post-modernism for our youth is often based on a fear of the unknown. The values, meanings and worldviews of those trusted by these youth should be considered in the context of safe spaces for dialogue. This shared knowledge base gives the youth other perspectives that could inform how they make meaning of their lives (Fowler in eds. Dykstra & Parks 1986:20). An appreciation for nature through faith can provide the foundational basis for alternative legal norms for environmental protection nationally, sub-nationally and internationally through mutual cooperation and action (Ahmad 2020:7).

James Marcia has developed four stages of identity formation; namely identity-diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium and identity-achievement. Stage two of James Marcia's identity formation theory is important to our discussion. This stage, known as one of foreclosure is one in which definite opinions about youth identity come to the fore, but those opinions have been inherited from external influences such as parents, peers, culture and education rather than cultivated from within themselves. At puberty young people tend to question all that they have simply accepted earlier in their lives (Erickson 1995:235). Sensitivity to the opinions of others, mainly peers, often cause youth to abandon their self-love in favour of the opinions of those who influence their perception of happiness (Erickson 1980:19). These youth need the supportive influence of authentic Christian adults in their lives during this time. These adults do not only preach and teach what a Christian life is but live this through example, enabling youth to see how this Christian life is lived. They also need to have strong Christian friendships, which encourage and model Christ-like behaviours during this time. Foreclosed youth are usually the ones who present as if they have it all together at youth group. They are also the ones most likely to be given leadership positions at church (Powell, Griffin & Crawford 2011:57). These external forces can cause youth to remain in this stage through the ways in which interaction takes place. For example, a church that does not invest in teaching its youth biblical principles could hinder them from growing into who they are meant to be in Christ (Root & Dean 2011:71).

Stage three of James Marcia is the period of moratorium in which youth challenge the faith and belief system they have inherited (Powell et al. 2011:58). Youth in the moratorium phase are questioning the faith narrative they had inherited from their family as they encounter new voices from outside influences. As a result they don't fully commit to their Christian identity and faith. Automatically teaching conclusions without sufficient room for contemplation at this stage tends to rob these youth of a healthy faith formation process because Christianity ends up being taught as behaviour management instead of a committed faith. Youth do not grow into a sense of owned faith (Fowler 1987) because

they are not motivated towards lifestyle and heart changes, but towards religious rituals.

Ahmad (2020) referred to research studies conducted on the how Christians perceive their relationship to the environment. She observed that these studies:

[F]ound that Christian fundamentalists are less willing to spend money on conserving the environment than Catholics. Therefore, this study suggests that behavior towards nature is influenced by the type of Christianity. For instance, another study showed that the Maasai people in Kenya who had converted from traditional faith to Evangelical Christianity did not have a positive attitude towards wildlife; in fact they had a higher intent to kill lions. (p. 20)

The young person experiencing these divergent voices during this formative stage in their faith formation may feel the need to remain loyal to what they consider foundational or may sense the need to abandon this security for the tantalising novelty and sophistication of the other voice. I (Brandon) chose at this stage to cling to my Christian faith and upbringing and go through the motions of the university educational process studying science. The further I progressed along this educational path the more of an imposter I felt in that setting, but I consoled myself that at least I was being 'faithful' to the faith. The tension of that dissonant space can be a heavy burden to bear if there are no trusted voices who are able to bridge these apparently disparate perspectives.

Another important aspect of youth faith formation is its connection to moral formation. In this regard, youth faith formation should also not be contemplated without taking their individual and communal contexts into account (Van der Ven 1998:30). This is the time in a youth's life when many decisions are made (career paths, friendships, faith, etc.) that would ultimately mould this youth into the adult that these circumstances cause them to become. Van der Ven (1998:379–384) observed that character formation cannot be dictated by fixed values and behaviour patterns, but should take seriously the paradox of self-concern: concern for the other and caring for what is significant and caring for the significance of the other. Young people need to be confronted with the plurality of values, beliefs and cultures they encounter daily and should not be coerced into only one perspective of the situation. Their families and churches need to enable them to develop the discernment they need in order to make their own life choices. The value of the faith community, their educational and societal community and their familial community lies in them being able to listen to the opinions of others and also share their opinions with others as they process their faith (Van der Ven 1998:384).

In summary, faith formation is then understood as the ecclesial process towards spiritual growth. This process includes moral and identity formation processes and Christian practices used by the faith community in order to promote a Christ-like lifestyle in the lives of its youth (Weber 2014:32). This process is elaborated on throughout this article

but at this point, we would like to highlight that the faith formation of young people may be significantly influenced by the secular school education and the Christian education they receive. We have attempted to demonstrate through sharing briefly a personal narrative, the manner in which these are received and processed could impact the career choices these youth make and more significantly eventual life decisions around issues of faith commitment. We will now consider the interplay between science and faith and the various ways in which young people may be introduced to this complex relationship.

## What has science got to do with youth ministry?

History bears testament to numerous significant contributions to scientific knowledge by men who expressed a belief in God. As early as the 15th century, the Polish astronomer, Nicholas Copernicus, put forward his discovery of planetary motion around the sun. His insights were complemented and validated by the later work of Johannes Kepler and Galileo Galilei. This work was the source of the famous conflict with the Roman Catholic Church at the time. Sir Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes are credited with the development of the scientific method as a result of their philosophical insights and desire for truth. Blaise Pascal, Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle, Michael Faraday, and Gregor Mendel are but a few more notable scientists for whom their commitment to the Christian faith and pursuit for the understanding of the natural order was inextricable. Theology was considered the 'Queen of the Sciences' in which all the diverse forms of knowledge found integrative unity:

Religious worldviews are a contributing factor in creating environmental degradation and human misery in its various forms all over the world, whether today or in centuries past. For the same reason, religious worldviews have the powerful potential to help shape sustainable and inclusive worldviews with the aim of environmental protection. (Ahmad 2020:3)

This compatibility of the Christian worldview and the pursuit of discovery of the natural order in earlier times may be sharply contrasted with the bitter conflict that exists between the endeavours of science and faith in fundamentalistic evangelical faith traditions in more modern times. The divide between our continually increasing scientific understanding of the natural order and certain dearly held literal interpretations of what scripture teaches is progressively widening and driving proponents of each view further apart. Both sides are laying claim to exclusive 'Truth'. The Law of Non-Contradiction states that two contradictory statements cannot be true at the same time and in the same sense.

Saint Augustine is credited with saying that 'Wherever truth may be found, it belongs to the Lord'. Thomas Aquinas was in agreement when he put forth that 'All truth is God's truth' (Gaebelein 1980). It seems presumptuous therefore of secular scientists to claim ultimate truth thereby relegating the claims of faith to nothing more than myth or superstition, basically

falsehood. It is equally reprehensible of the proponents of the Christian faith to ignore the findings of modern science that seem to contradict the teaching of Scripture. This attitude results in polarisation and presents a false dichotomy to those who find themselves considering these spaces.

In South Africa, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement for Life Science education in the Further Education and Training phase (Grade 10–12) requires that learners be taught human evolution and Darwinian natural selection as part of a Diversity, Change and Continuity module in grade 12. This material constitutes about 15% of the examination marks of the final Life Science exam and therefore carries significant weight for student performance. This was introduced into the school curriculum in 2008 to improve the analytical and critical thinking skills of learners. Research focused on the integration and acceptance of this new concept in the curriculum found that a large majority of teachers belonging to Protestant religions, mainstream and Pentecostal, as well as Muslim teachers were creationist in persuasion and expressed difficulty in teaching human evolution to the learners.

Amongst the areas of considerable contention between science and faith is the issue of the age of the universe and the origin of life on earth. Modern science has empirically determined the age of the universe to be 13.8 billion years (Planck Collaboration 2020) and the age of the earth to be 4.5 billion years (Dalrymple 2001:205–221). These estimates are based on the rate of the expansion of the universe and radiometric dating data, respectively. Furthermore, science claims that life on earth originated at least 3.5 billion years ago (Schulze-Makuch 2014:399) through an as yet undefined universal common ancestor. By the process of biological evolution, the progressive mutational variation and natural selection over billions of years, we have the diversity of life forms that have populated the earth. A research poll conducted by the PEW Research Center in 2019 revealed that ‘nearly all scientists (97%) say humans and other living things have evolved over time’ (Kennedy & Hefferon 2019). This scientific consensus contrasts sharply with the assertion by Young Earth Creationists who, based on their interpretation of Scripture and its genealogical calculations, put the age of the earth at not more than 10 000 years (Young and Stearley 2008). This largely stems from a literal interpretation of the Book of Genesis in the Bible and the belief that the world was created in 6, 24-h, periods. The conflict between these ‘truths’, the biblical interpretation and the scientific data, is self-evident. This then creates personal tensions within teachers who are of opposing views and have to authentically teach these youths.

The New Atheists have been quick to claim evolution as an intellectual, purely naturalistic concept and therefore atheistic in nature. They have been ruthless in their assault on what they deem the intellectually deficient view of Young Earth Creationists (Paulson 2010). Fundamentalistic evangelical faith traditions have reacted to this assault by entrenching their position on the opposite end of the spectrum and distancing themselves from this ‘atheistic’ concept of

evolution, clinging ‘faithfully’ to a literal interpretation of the Book of Genesis. Protracted acrimonious court battles in America have been fought since 1925 concerning the content of science education at school level. The infamous Scopes Trial (*The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes*) was the first American legal trial of its kind in 1925. A school teacher, John Scopes, was found to be in contravention of the *Butler Act*, which prohibited the teaching of human evolution in public-funded schools. The ripples of this and other confrontations between science and faith in the West were and are influential in the perceptions of many Christians in South Africa. This is because of the fact that many churches were originally planted by Western missionaries who brought more than just the good news of the Gospel to our context. The increasing divide has resulted in many not exploring the counterargument with much conviction. The result has been that many students have been taught a very one-sided view on this contentious issue and when they leave school and progress to tertiary education they are faced with a ‘false choice’. They feel like they should choose between their faith and the seemingly more rational and intellectual position of science. At this apparent ‘fork in the road’ one of three divergent paths may be taken:

Faith over Science

Faith and Science (separate domains)

Science over Faith

### Faith over science

In the first scenario, the choice is made to hold on to what is perceived to be demanded by the biblical text in the fundamental evangelical tradition and to abandon the apparently heretical assumptions of science. This is the stance taken by Young Earth Creationists and necessitates the denial of the scientific method as it relates to the dating of geological formations and the fossil record. This view makes the development of an authentic and productive career in the natural sciences or even just an appreciation of the findings of science extremely difficult. Proponents have to deal with the incongruities of their faith position and current scientific understanding and presuppositions on a constant basis. An important attribute of faith when working with young people is that faith should be open to questioning (Fowler 1987 in eds. Dykstra & Parks 1986; Maiko 2007; Parks 2000). Allowing safe spaces in which they could question and receive feedback regarding their faith enables the maturity of their faith. Saint Augustine, Anselm, Karl Barth and Martin Luther are amongst the well-known theologians who advocated that faith cannot be separated from inquiry (questioning). True faith should not be confused with fideism (belief without questioning) because this questioning is incumbent of developing a mature faith. These youths need to constantly ask for clarification on God’s understanding of the different situations they find themselves in. This allows them to discover God in their daily lives and include Him in their faith formation process. To fundamentalistic evangelicals, the Christian faith is based on the presupposition that one has realised one’s need for redemption, which encourages that a new life in Christ replaces the old one. This new life is

evidenced (participating in God's redemptive work) through a relationship based on trust, loyalty, belief and commitment. Christian faith presupposes that thoughtful reflection has taken place prior to choosing this path (eds. Dykstra & Parks 1986:58). These youths need to be guided and empowered to make the Christian faith their own responsibly. Psychologists Halonen and Santrock (1999:578) argued that people are often coerced into making a decision for faith and not given sufficient time and evidence to explore this faith. This should not be the way in which youth ministry proclaims the gospel.

### Faith and science: Separate domains

In the second scenario, both areas are held simultaneously but, to resolve the apparent tension, one has to keep them in separate domains of knowledge (non-overlapping magisterial (Gould 1999). This view does little to resolve the tension between science and faith, rather it would seem to want to ignore it in favour of creating harmony for both to exist without the denial of the other. This presents a problem because both domains lay claim to truth and with respect to the creation of the world, seemingly contradictory accounts of its origin. Often in this view, the position of science is held as a public worldview and regarded as factual, whereas faith Bible is held in the private realm and ultimately relegated to myth.

As observed earlier, moratorium is the identity development stage when youth challenge the faith and belief system they have inherited (Powell et al. 2011:58). Young people are faced with tough choices regarding their identity as Christians on a daily basis. They are constantly taking the risk of standing up for what they believe in the face of possibly being isolated. Youth experience salvation as a regular and persistent call to live for Christ because relationships form an integral part of identity formation and also faith formation (Root & Dean 2011:65). The challenge is that many of these relationships are distorted by conflicting views of the biblical text and science. When the people they trust disappoint or mislead them they question who they are and what they believe. The good thing about this period in their lives is that they have a passion for what they do decide to pursue. They use their intuition and free access to information to discern which of these relationships are valuable to their formation processes. Even though these youths do not articulate their desire for salvation, they decide whose message is appropriate and welcome them in their lives because they are not yet concerned with the eschatological (future) aspect of faith but the here and now thereof (Root & Dean 2011:67-68). This is also the time that they have new capacities for faith, for possibility (or) for dread (Root & Dean 2011:69). Parris et al. (2014:75) added that people '...verify their identities in interactions with others, seeking consistency between individuals' perceptions of feedback from others and the identities they hold'. An environmental identity as the extent to which the natural environment plays an important part in a person's self-definition develops one's self-meanings in relation to the environment. 'When individuals make justice evaluations, they draw information from the context in which they are embedded' (2014:75). Identity should then become a

consistent, durable sense of self that gives them confidence that they will gain something to live for. Young people take on different personalities in different contexts during their exploration of personal identity. This is the time when youth synthesise all prior identifications in order to establish their own. This crisis is a time in which safe space is needed to engage with the risks necessary to discover themselves. This crisis is important for the development of young people and requires that they are exposed to the differing and opposing views of science and faith in order for them to make a personal choice. This section reflects how these youths then choose to live a dualistic life keeping faith and science separate; but this choice for dualism affects their faith and identity formation.

### Science over faith

The third scenario lies in the acceptance of the rationality and intellectual integrity of science with the abandonment of the Christian faith as unenlightened superstition. As stated earlier, New Atheists have claimed the concept of evolution as atheistic. The atheistic view is presented as the intellectual view, which then casts aspersions on anyone holding to any profession of faith. Thus far, we have highlighted how late teenage and secondary schooling are affected by the science and faith tensions they are raised in. The reality although is that many youths come face to face with the given choices once they leave the safe environment of secondary school and enter the often overwhelming freedom of tertiary education. It is often here when they are faced with the false dichotomy of science and Christian faith. When post-modern youth, enthralled with the beauty of science, are faced with this unfair choice they feel that the only option is to abandon their 'mythical' Christian faith and choose the intellectual sophistication of atheism. It is ironic that in our fervency to protect the Word we have intensified the divide and disastrously have to accept responsibility for those who have left the faith because of irreconcilable intellectual differences. As mentioned earlier, young people question all that they have blindly relied on earlier in their lives (Erickson 1995:235). Reliance on how the other sees them forces the youth to abandon their self-love to please voices that they feel measure up to them achieving happiness by imitating these voices (Erickson 1980:19). These youth need the supportive influence of authentic Christians and youth identity development takes place within relationships that they trust. By trust, it is meant that these youths depend on the relationships with peers, parents and youth leaders to guide them in their journey as Christians. This trust is also a sense of security that enables them to separate themselves from these relationships in order to discover who they are. Post-modern society seems to have made this easier as many young people end up fending for themselves because the adults in their lives are busy at work, with ministry, and so forth. This is why many label young people's experiential behaviour in an effort to find self as rebellion. Whatever they do that does not conform to adult behaviours is unacceptable. Conflict becomes a necessary part of this detachment process and rebellion ends up aiding the identity formation process through establishing

autonomy from the adults (Root & Dean 2011:73). An important part of the faith formation process is grappling not only with the questioning of one's faith but also discovering the mystery thereof. Theoretical models of faith formation of young people have to take into account the mystery involved in the faith formation process (Powell et al. 2011:51). Each young person is unique and develops in unique ways. Faith formation should teach and train young people to follow Christ through his enabling power of grace (Wilhoit 2008:39). The mystery of faith means that the Christian does not always trust based on evidence. There are times that one cannot explain one's faith or faith experiences (Osmer 1992:37). In his book *Led into Mystery*, theologian John De Gruchy (2013:32–39) said that the mystery of faith is in the very nature of not knowing what will happen next in life. It is this mystery that invites the questioning and exploring of one's faith that is so crucial to finding an owned faith. The more one discovers the more one realises that there is still so much more to learn about God. The mystery of faith is experienced in daily life and the circumstances these youth find themselves in. It is in the raw ordinary details of life as it happens. This mystery of God is given little attention in faith formation programmes to youth (Yust 2004:xxiii). Understanding faith as a mystery also acknowledges that the teacher does not have all the answers. In this instance, the teacher of faith becomes the steward of God's truth and not their truth (Osmer 1992:38). It requires that one's perceptions of faith are changed and the language used to express this faith is also used differently (De Gruchy 2013:37).

### A complex reality

Alister McGrath (2015) described the relationship between science and faith as a complex multifaceted reality that should not be collapsed into a simple two-dimensional dichotomy. Reality is complex and there are tensions that need to be held in navigating the relationship between faith and science. He refers to the insightful analogy proposed by philosopher Mary Midgley as she posits the value of viewing reality through multiple maps or windows. The integration of these perspectives afford us a richer vision of reality as we humbly weave the valuable insights gained from science and faith as we grow in our understanding of each. Faith stands to benefit in its understanding of the nature and person of God as it takes seriously the insights from scientific discovery, and science stands to gain from the theological understanding of the coherence of all things in Christ.

An appreciation of the findings of science should fill us with awe at the creativity and greatness of our God who so intricately created this diverse world of which we as human beings are a part and have the privilege of stewarding and caring for this creation. In early Christian tradition, we find reference to the two books of the revelation of God: *The Book of Scripture* and *The Book of Nature* (scientific observation and discovery). Saint Augustine like John Calvin, Johannes Kepler and Francis Bacon is amongst Christian philosophers who also made reference to these two books when he wrote 'although only the person who has learnt to read can read

Holy Scripture, even the illiterate can understand the book of the universe'. Together these 'books' afford us a greater appreciation of the nature of God. Two examples from a recent study (see Weber 2014) amongst evangelical youth on faith formation proved that youth still believe in the centrality of the Bible but were 'not finding answers in the Bible' (Weber 2014:197). One of the main forms of devotional life encouraged in the evangelical is regular Bible reading. This practice has been motivated as a form of guidance from God through his Word, which is a mode of faith formation. When youths feel that they do not understand this Bible or are 'not finding answers in the Bible', they become discouraged in their faith. How the Bible is read and explained to these youth is important. Another response was:

... when I was newly saved we did the study of assurances like the assurance of prayer and forgiveness but I didn't really understand, there was lots of questions that was unanswered and like for a Christian I was still young. I had a lots of questions that I still wanted to be answered but I didn't really get a chance to ask to you know ask people because I was afraid they are going to think look at this silly girl asking me these silly questions but you know its questions I really wanted to be answered. (Weber 2014:197)

Instead of perpetuating and fuelling the perceived conflict between science and faith, the church would do well to seek opportunities to engage apparent tensions in an open and respectful manner to gain a fuller understanding of the contribution from science. This attitude should be modelled for our youth who would be empowered to critically explore the various views without prejudice and suspicion. This demonstration of intellectual honesty and robustness by the church would contribute to an authentic relationship with young post-modern minds searching for truth. Christians who are scientists have a valuable part to play in bridging the divide by leveraging their trust relationships with the Church to expose the false dichotomy and contribute towards harmony between science and faith. Youths are also linked to many different social media platforms in which they receive inconsistent feedback from peers they have never even met (Powell 2011:53). There are so many opinions to what they post online verbally or visually, opinions that influence their identity and also faith. Another reality is the open access youth have to society. Owning one's faith (which is most likely referred to as spiritual maturity) involves publicly living out one's faith and this is why they are not eager to pursue this route (Johnstone 2009:49). Many young adults turn away from an inherited faith when they leave home for university or to live on their own. This, of course, is not true for all as some continue living out their faith (Powell et al. 2011). The difference is that when a person has internalised beliefs and values at this time they will continue to identify with them despite having moved away from the referent group and social support network. They will however seek out a similar social network in the place of destination (Powell et al. 2011:51). This is an important part of the process of attaining spiritual maturity. Within a Christian context, this is the time when many faith communities are losing youth. These youths have either changed faith communities

based on personal preferences or forsaken their inherited faith. In South Africa, this individuation takes place between 14 and 17 years of age when youths are expected to take the responsibility of growing in their faith upon themselves (Maiko 2007:169). A relational theology is necessary as youths need to experience and understand God and his activity in their lives on a daily basis. Youth are capable at this stage of committing to an authentic relationship with Christ if they experience God's active presence in their life situations (Maiko 2007:15). As young people mature cognitively they are able to better understand more doctrines and theories of faith. They are able to question theologies of their childhood but can only do so critically and responsibly when guided within a safe space (Maiko 2007:59). It is ironic that in our fervency to protect the Word we have intensified the divide between faith and science and, disastrously, have to accept responsibility for those who have left the faith during this crucial stage of faith formation because of irreconcilable intellectual differences.

## Environmental justice for us?

The discussion thus far has focussed on what we believe the core tensions around science and faith to be within evangelical theology. These have been connected to what we believe should be happening when taking the faith formation of our youth seriously. The question mark in the subtitle above serves to highlight the multi-layered tension that youth from conservative evangelical contexts have to deal with. Firstly, they are faced with their own faith formation process. Secondly, they are in church contexts that do not prioritise holistic faith formation, which includes sound theologies of science and faith and then, the challenge to understand and engage with injustice within their environment as Christians.

Concern about clean, green and safe living spaces should not rest solely with the present generation. The current and growing crisis exists at an individual and communal level, which affects perceptions of justice with regard to the environment (Parris et al. 2014:67). As observed in the introduction of this article, focus has been placed on the complex relationship of science and faith as foundational to why youths find it difficult to engage on issues concerning their environment. Youths who grow up in contexts that do not encourage scientific exploration or love and embrace of science, find themselves conflicted in their relationship to nature and issues concerning their environment. These youths grow up not seeing any relevance of such issues or scientific engagement as an integral part of Christian stewardship. This is further complexified when these youths live in marginalised communities offering poor education. It is important to mention that there are varying perspectives on what environmental justice is. For the purpose of our concern here, it seems that environmental justice within communities of mixed race and poverty, which focuses on the unequal distribution of environmental burdens across groups of people has taken place since the 1980s (Parris et al. 2014). This has led to environmental justice advocates paying close attention to the placement

of specific environmental harms in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and the need to include the voices of community members affected by such burdens. Ecological justice, on the other hand, focuses on sustainability and conservation, which raise issues about the fairness of humans' treatment of the environment. Individually, most justice research focuses on the perceived fairness of one's own outcomes, procedures affecting one's outcome or group standing or one's interaction with others. To consider justice for communities affected by environmental burdens requires consideration of procedures, outcomes and treatment for groups of people often distant from the self and for non-human flora and fauna (Parris et al. 2014).

According to Ahmad (2020:2) faith and environmental issues are interconnected as 'faith traditions provide centuries old legal customs and norms for environmental ethics and can add to the understanding of the public trust doctrine and impact various international law'. Ahmad (2020:3) added that '(i) identifying faith-based approaches to environmental protection assists in the conservation of religious identity and the protection of the environment'. It seems then that one's beliefs about justice are affected by the communities of which we are a part of. In this instance, this article highlights the impact of conservative faith communities on youth faith formation.

Parris et al. (2014) further argue that:

Environmental injustice emerge when the actual distribution of harmful environmental consequences and the decisions leading to those distributions fail to correspond to the expectations stemming from abstract rules of procedural and distributive justice, whereas those of ecological injustice refer to disrespectful or harmful treatment of the natural environment. The deliberate suppression of the voices of those affected by the distribution decision violates a central principle of procedural justice – representation and indicates procedural environmental injustice. Moreover, resting decision making in the hands of a few powerful actors potentially threatens other procedural justice principles such as bias suppression, consistency across actors over time, and information accuracy. (p. 69)

Young people living in marginalised communities notice such injustice, want to engage but feel that their being Christian does not allow such engagement. Expectancies based on what individuals believe in general or believe specifically about themselves and what they have done in the past are thus likely to shape how they perceive a situation (Parris et al. 2014:72). This is why evangelical churches should be equipping and empowering their youth.

## A few recommendations for youth ministry

This article has emphasised that the faith formation of youth cannot be holistically understood apart from an understanding their identity, moral and faith formation. The education these youths receive at school and at church and the ways in which it is taught is one of the modes of faith formation, which impacts this faith formation process. The

following recommendations regarding how churches and parents can enhance youth faith formation are made with specific reference to the teaching they receive on creation.

### **Prioritise faith formation**

Faith formation is the central task of the faith community (Ackerman 2001:n1). In his book *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered* James Wilhoit (2008:13) expressed concern for the erosion of intentional faith formation in the church. The church needs to prioritise faith formation as the centre of its activities. Wilhoit believed that it will take a whole generation to revive this. One of the challenges of this endeavour would be addressing the form that faith formation has taken in our churches as youth (and adults) are not growing in their faith because the gospel is not central to the programmes offered (Wilhoit 2008:33). Faith formation through Christian religious education<sup>4</sup> is an essential role of the church with the purpose of helping young people grow in their faith. This task involves making the gospel easily accessible to young people in a way that addresses their spiritual needs alongside the human challenges they face (Groome 1980:73).

Churches in marginalised evangelical communities need to be intentional about how they engage with young people in ways that encourage growth in their faith.

### **Cultivate safe spaces for questioning and debate**

Youths are nurtured in their faith when being engaged in concrete and critical ways (Maiko 2007:8). An environment of interaction, conversation, debate and listening about the Bible would help them as they seek to understand God's role and purpose for their lives. Youth ministry should acknowledge the importance of wrestling with their faith at this stage in their lives and should provide boundaries in which they could do this (Maiko 2007:31). Churches have not been including young people in their faith narratives. Engaging youth constructively through creating safe spaces for questioning and expressing fears and doubts is of greater impact than setting up rules and structures. Young people are admonished to 'be quiet' or 'stay still' in attempts to silence their voices and diminish the effects of their presence. These views and forms of silence complicate and inhibit the exercise of youth agency. This silence could lead to youth feeling disconnected from the faith community (Hyde, Yust & Ota et al. 2010:97). Sadly, as part of their meaning-making, many youth decide not to associate themselves with a church based on past experiences in these churches (Maiko 2007:60).

Churches in marginalised evangelical communities need to be intentional about creating opportunities in which youth can engage with and question complexities related to their faith and the environment they live in.

4. Groome (1980:25) described Christian religious education as a political activity with pilgrims in time that deliberately and intentionally attends with them to the activity of God in our present, to the Story of the Christian faith community and to the vision of God's Kingdom, the seeds of which are already amongst us. Groome (1980:26) described catechesis (oral instruction) as the main medium through which this education happens because this helps form the young Christian through theology and Scripture (see the given discussion on discipleship).

### **Design biblical teaching relevant to real-life tensions faced by youth**

Faith is nurtured by the teachings of congregations of various ministries (Strommen & Hardel 2000:77). Powell and others (2011:72) noticed that efforts to offer relevant and contextual teaching to young people have also resulted in segregated churches in which the youths are separated from the broader fellowship. This has led to teachings that are irrelevant to the life experiences and convictions of these youth and, consequently they do not experiencing their faith as a lived reality. It then becomes an issue of how we challenge these youths to practice their faith (Maiko 2007:91). Biblical teaching that engages with the education about creation and evolution at school should be addressed from an interdisciplinary lens.

Churches in marginalised evangelical communities need to be intentional about teaching and discussing those aspects that youth are facing as an area of tension to their faith.

### **Empower parents to be the primary agents of youth faith formation**

The church can help families to prepare their youth for a Christian life by helping parents understand their own faith formation processes and the role it plays in the lives of their children. In this way, church and home form a partnership in nurturing the spiritual growth of these youths. This type of church ministry includes parents and does not negate their role. The importance of parents in the faith formation of youth is also often highly emphasised amongst growing evangelical and non-denominational churches today. Many parents within the church are neglecting to speak to their children about their moral and spiritual matters or about their beliefs and values, and they are not carrying out central religious practices that nurture faith with their children in their homes. Some parents in two-parent families come from different religious traditions or have little or no religious upbringing and either they are unable to pass on the faith to their children or feel ill-equipped to do so (Bunge 2008:348–349).

Churches in marginalised evangelical communities need to be intentionally partnering with parents of the young people they serve.

### **Contextualise biblical teaching with regard to current scientific knowledge**

Teaching biblical truths to youth needs to incorporate an explanation of the contexts out of which these texts or stories originated. This helps them position their faith in Scriptural truths. Finding out what the latest scientific conversations and discoveries are with regard to evolution should be part of this contextual application of the text. Faith formation is not about emphasising one truth at the expense of others (Powell et al. 2011:51–52). It is not about how much spiritual truth the young person gets taught; it is about whether they are able to practice this truth in their daily lives.

Churches in marginalised evangelical communities need to be intentional about partnering with those in their context engaged with environmental concerns. The interchangeable relationship between science and faith should be included in such teaching.

### **Expand youth ministry curriculum to enhance a focus on the environment**

Youth ministry can open up opportunities for youth to explore topics such as cosmology, aesthetics and ecology as relevant to their perceptions of God and theology. This may lead to a renewed sense of awe of who this God is and the mystery of exploring a relationship with Him. Youth learn behaviours and attitude from their context through peers and community around them. A community that prioritises just environments and living spaces will influence these youth and on what they focus on whilst growing up:

Modeling is a process through which people observe how others act in a given situation, interpret that behaviour as appropriate and in turn use that information to guide their own positive or negative behaviours. (Parris et al. 2014:77)

Churches can educate these youth through knowledge and lived experiences because as an influential voice in their lives, churches (Parris et al. 2014):

legitimise particular social actions, which take on a normative character...When individuals observe that others act in accordance with and come to support a legitimated norm or set of behaviours, they are likely to do the same to avoid negative sanctions for noncompliance. (p. 77)

Communities enact these norms taught and practiced within ecclesial spaces, which in turn impact the larger community towards a culture of caring for their environment. Churches who are:

[C]oncerned with environmental and ecological justice may be able to foster increased perceptions of (in)justice through organizational encouragement, even when students/members do not have a personal sense of connection to the environment... these types of programming signal to students their encouragement of sustainable practices, which we have shown to be related to perceptions of justice. Young adults will be making decisions that will affect environmental conditions for future generations. Institutions that implement programs geared toward strengthening students' environmental identities are likely to insure heightened awareness of both environmental and ecological justice. In effect, when universities cultivate stronger environmental citizenship among their students, they may, in the long run, enhance (environmental) justice for all. (Parris et al. 2014:89 & 91)

Youth should be trained on environmental policy, its impact on local communities and the role faith communities can play in engaging these policies.

## **Conclusion**

This article started out discussing the connection of how youths are taught about the relationship between science

and faith and how these youths experience their faith as active in their lives and relevant to their contextual realities. It further explored how dualistic views on science and faith affect youths' faith formation into their adult years. Young people who do not grow up with an appreciation for scientific endeavour as part of good Christian stewardship do not see relevance of engaging with issues affecting their environments. Youths in marginalised communities grow up in unclean and unsafe spaces, which they seem to have no control over. Not only how the church equips these youth towards understanding who they are as Christians but also how they can engage their communities is critical. Evangelical churches cannot isolate choices these youth have to make from their discipleship process. Young people need to be made aware of and taught to appreciate the plurality of values, beliefs and cultures they encounter daily and should not be coerced into only one perspective to the situation. Their families and churches need to enable them to develop the discernment they need to make their own life choices. The importance of the faith community, their educational and societal community and their familial community lies in them being able to listen to the opinions of others and also share their opinions with others as they process their faith. The tensions of science and faith explored in this article cannot be excluded from this negotiation. It is our belief that more platforms to help Christian leaders, parents, teachers and their learners grapple with the various scientific views mentioned in this article must become a priority for discipleship within a South African context. Exposing these youth to ways in which such scientific views impact their views on caring for their environment should be highlighted.

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## **Authors' contributions**

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