Pizza & Prof: Can You Believe in Science and Religion?

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On February 23, honors students gathered in the CHC Events Hall for a lively question-and-answer with microbiology Professor James Holden on the intersection of science and religion. Is it possible to hold both religious and scientific beliefs? Do science and religion always conflict, or can they be cooperative? Holden tackled these questions and more in his personal and informal conversation with the students.

After briefly discussing his microbiology background, Holden explained how he re-discovered religion as a post-doctoral student at the University of Georgia. A colleague in his lab often prompted discussions about faith, which "re-awoken something" inside of him. Holden explained how he researched several religions before deciding to return to the Christian faith he was brought up in, "kicking and screaming" all the while and wrestling with doubts and questions.

Holden said he still grapples with questions about his faith. "By no means do I have it all figured out in any way, shape or form," he said. As a microbiologist, he studies life on Earth through a scientific lens. As a Christian, he sometimes has to think about life in a different way. Even though these two perspectives don't always match up, Holden said: "I am at peace with them coexisting in my life."

He then took questions from the students, which drove the discussion for the next 45 minutes. Audience questions touched on topics like the existence of God, miracles, death and the afterlife, and the concept of the soul.

Holden often brought the conversation back to the need for understanding and tolerance among people of all religions and people who do not practice religion, adding that the exchange of ideas helps foster dialogue across the board. With the Erasmus Institute he does just that, coordinating dinners that bring 5-College faculty together to discuss science and religion. Past dinners have centered on topics such as the role of religion in food sustainability and life-prolonging technology and death. These conversations are about starting healthy discussions, not debates, he added.
The central question guiding all of this is: “In what ways can we understand each other better?” Holden said.