

# CHRISTIANITY, THE NATURAL SCIENCES AND THE HUMAN SEARCH FOR MEANING

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I have a very brief time to deal with a complex subject so I propose to get down to business straight away. I have been given the responsibility of suggesting how Christianity and the natural sciences might be related so I put forth this thesis: On a Christian account of the world (creation), the natural sciences and Christian theology are two mutually supplemental ways of exploring and attempting to understand the created order. While different (in terms of methods and object) the natural sciences and Christian theology each possess a particular rationality, each is motivated by a desire to make sense of the world and our experience of it and each is *necessary* to understand the multi-layered reality in which we live, a reality which includes rationally discernable deep order as well as religious, moral and aesthetic experience. On a Christian account of the universe, since creation is formed by the Logos or Word of God (cf. Proverbs 8:1-9, 22-31; Hebrews 1:1-4; John 1:1-5), that is God's rational and wise principle of ordering all things, the natural sciences and revelation are both necessary to achieving an understanding of creation's design and meaning.<sup>1</sup>

Attempting to understand the relationship between the natural sciences and Christianity requires some mental discipline, particularly the suspension of all overly self-confident forms of both secular rationalism and religious fideism and the willingness to take the surprising nature of the universe seriously *in all its dimensions*. As the quantum physicist turned theologian John

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<sup>1</sup>The best argument for this position that I know of is John Polkinghorne, *One World: The Interaction of Science and Theology* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2007).

Polkinghorne reminds us “If the story of science teaches one anything, it is that it is unwise to try to lay down beforehand by pure thought what will actually prove to be the case. Reality is often so much more subtle than we imagine.”<sup>2</sup> Those who confidently know beforehand that light simply can not be both a wave and a particle and those who confidently know beforehand that resurrection simply can not occur will discover that reality is much more subtle than they had imagined. And the subtlety of reality offers a clue as to its origin.<sup>3</sup>

At the moment, the relationship between Christianity and the natural sciences is somewhat distorted by a struggle between some atheistic scientists and some conservative Christians. This culture war has created the impression in minds of many that not only are Christianity and the natural sciences at odds with one another but also that they *should* be at odds. To clear the air a bit I propose to examine some commonly held notions about the relationship between the two which are not true.

**1. Science has disproved Christianity:** This idea has been put forward by atheists for some time and in many circles it is simply *assumed* to be true. The big question here is that of *how* science may be said to have disproved Christianity. Prestigious scientists such as cosmologist Stephen Hawking and zoologist Richard Dawkins have written popular scientific books in which they attempt to move from the conclusions of their disciplines to atheism. The point of their work is that the

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<sup>2</sup>John Polkinghorne, *The Way the World Is: The Christian Perspective of a Scientist* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2007), p. 26.

<sup>3</sup>It is important to notice how radically quantum physics has altered our view of reality, rendering the older view of mechanistic universe composed of “solid” material substance obsolete. The quantum physicist Freeman Dyson reflects this new approach when he says “Speaking as a physicist, I judge matter to be an imprecise and rather old-fashioned concept. Roughly speaking, matter is the way particles behave when a large number of them are lumped together. When we examine matter in the finest detail in the experiments of particle physics, we see it behaving as an active agent rather than as an inert substance. Its actions are in the strict sense unpredictable...We have learned that matter is weird stuff. It is weird enough so that it does not limit God’s freedom to make it do what he pleases.” Freeman Dyson, *Infinite in All Directions* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), p. 8.

natural sciences *inherently* lead to atheism. (Richard Dawkins is on record as holding that agnosticism is for the muddle-headed.) Here is an example of this effort from his book *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* in which he clearly wants to move his readers from his account of evolution to atheism: “The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.”<sup>4</sup> Is Dawkins’ view that the universe is *meaningless* a scientific conclusion? Does the National Science Foundation award grants to scientists attempting to determine whether the universe is meaningful or not? The answer to both these questions is a definite “No”. What would be the means by which a scientist could come to this conclusion? As the Oxford mathematician John Lennox notes, this conclusion is not a conclusion at all but is actually a *presupposition* which Dawkins has smuggled into his work. Dawkins and others like him do not arrive at their atheistic views via science but, rather, their atheism is an *assumption* that they bring to their scientific work and which they present as its conclusion.

When atheist scientists tell us that the natural sciences have *demonstrated* that the supernatural can not exist, that evolutionary processes account for the whole of life without remainder and that the universe is devoid of meaning they are really using science and their scientific credentials to camouflage their naturalistic *worldview*. This is an important point. As Lennox notes, “science carries no compulsion within itself to force materialism upon us...the real battle is not so much between science and faith in God, but rather between a materialist, or more broadly naturalist

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<sup>4</sup>Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p. 133.

worldview and a supernaturalist, or theistic, worldview.”<sup>5</sup> Dawkins seems to be hoping that we will not notice that he has moved by intellectual sleight of hand from the modest statement “Science does not deal with questions of meaning” to the metaphysical assertion “Meaning does not exist”.

The idea that the natural sciences necessarily imply atheism or materialism and are inherently antagonistic to Christianity does not enjoy universal support among scientists. In her recent book *Science vs Religion: What Scientists Really Think*,<sup>6</sup> sociologist Elaine Howard Ecklund presents conclusions drawn from survey and interview data she obtained from 1,700 scientist at the nations 21 premier research universities. According to Ecklund, 53% of the scientists surveyed identified themselves as having no religious belief while 47% of scientists identified themselves as religious in some way. Ecklund also discovered that for most of the scientists who identified themselves as having no religion “science itself had little influence on their decision not to believe. In fact, for the majority of scientists I interviewed, it is not the engagement with science itself that led them away from religion. Rather, their reasons for unbelief mirror the circumstances in which other Americans find themselves.”<sup>7</sup> The reasons atheist scientists gave for their atheism were similar to those of atheists who are not scientists.

Ecklund also found that of the 53% of scientists who identified themselves as having no religion 22% also identified themselves as “spiritual”. She discovered that this “spirituality” stems

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<sup>5</sup>John Lennox, *God’s Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford: Lion, 2009), p. 36. See also, Alister E. McGrath, *Surprised by Meaning: Science, Faith and How We Make Sense of Things* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2011), pp. 30-37.

<sup>6</sup>Elaine Howard Ecklund, *Science vs Religion: What Scientists Really Think* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup>Ecklund, p. 17.

from a wonder at the complexity and beauty of the natural world.<sup>8</sup> There is no necessary connection between scientific seriousness and atheism and I would argue that Ecklund's "spiritual atheists" are not really atheists at all and that they vindicate the claim of St. Thomas Aquinas that unbelief is not natural to human beings.<sup>9</sup>

**2. Christianity and science have been in perpetual conflict:** This is a view put forward by Andrew Dickson White in his book *The Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896). The book is less about the history of science and more about White's ideology of science. On his account, the history of science is the history of the conflict between scientific reason, enlightenment and progress and Christian fanaticism, bigotry and obscurantism. Today, no historian of science accepts White's account for the embarrassingly simple reason that it is not true. This, of course, has not prevented atheists from repeating White's obviously incorrect conclusions as fact.

A case in point is the trial of Galileo in 1633. We all know that Galileo was put on trial for his support of the Copernican theory of the heliocentric solar system over the traditional geocentric theory espoused by Ptolemy. White portrays this episode as a battle between a courageous, truth seeking scientist and an ignorant and fundamentalist Church. For White, the Church simply denied on religious grounds an *obvious scientific truth*. The truth is far more complicated. Galileo came not up against religious blindness but the entrenched authority of Aristotle, an authority still accepted by many astronomers in the seventeenth century. Galileo had much support for his conclusions within the Church, including the Jesuits. And while Galileo's views eventually triumphed, it is important to note that proof for his position would not come until the eighteenth century and the

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<sup>8</sup>Ecklund, p. 59.

<sup>9</sup>St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II.II, q.10, a.1.

work of Isaac Newton.<sup>10</sup>

### **3. Science is based on reason and evidence while Christianity is based on blind faith:**

This is another commonly accepted notion which those who have studied and compared theological and scientific reasoning reject. The physicist John Polkinghorne has written several books on this subject and he argues that this view is based on an outmoded view of science and a complete ignorance of theology.<sup>11</sup> First, he notes, most scientists and philosophers of science now agree that scientific theories are not established beyond doubt and that science does not simply move from one indisputable conclusion to the next. Rather, science proceeds by abduction or inference to the best explanation. This is what is known as the under-determination of theory by data: a theory is accepted not because evidence provides an absolute demonstration of it but because it is able to account for the widest range of phenomena and because it opens up new insights. For Polkinghorne, scientific knowledge can not be seen as completely different from all other forms of knowledge because it, like all other forms of knowledge, involves personal judgment and insight: “We are to take what science tells us with great seriousness, but we are not to assign it an absolute supremacy over other forms of knowledge so that they are...relegated to the state of mere opinion.”<sup>12</sup>

Polkinghorne reminds us that blind faith has never been accepted, much less prized by, the mainstream of Christian theology. Rather, faith has been seen as a means of understanding, meaning that genuine faith is *motivated belief* and not blind. Genuine faith has its reasons and it genuinely

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<sup>10</sup>For a helpful account of the Galileo affair, see Philip Sampson, *6 Modern Myths About Christianity and Western Civilization* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), pp. 26-46.

<sup>11</sup>See John Polkinghorne, *Reason and Reality: The Relationship Between Science and Theology* (London: SPCK, 1991).

<sup>12</sup>Polkinghorne, *One World*, p. 31.

seeks to know the truth about reality. As a quantum physicist, Polkinghorne knows that one of the basic principles of science is that phenomena must be approached in a way appropriate to them—the particles studied by quantum physics can not be approached as if they could be comprehended on the basis of classical physics. Likewise, because God is not simply one of the objects within the universe but, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, the *universal cause of being*, God must be approached in a way which is appropriate to his unique status. Faith is not an intellectual shortcut or a crutch for weak minds; faith is the only way that the reality of God can be truly known. This points to the rationality of revelation.

Belief in God succeeds as knowledge in the same way that scientific theories succeed, by gathering the disparate aspects of our experience into a coherent order and by illuminating reality so as to give us genuine insight into it. Belief in God succeeds as rational knowledge because it is able to illuminate the connection between the *intelligible* universe and the *intelligent* human mind, because it can account for the finely tuned nature of the universe which seems to have anticipated life from the moment of its origin in the Big Bang and because it can account for the deep human experiences of moral goodness, aesthetic beauty, religious experience and the search for meaning and purpose.<sup>13</sup>

The only way to deny that Christian theology is rational is to say that only the natural sciences possess a real rationality and, consequently, that only they give us real knowledge. This view is known as scientism. As Polkinghorne reminds us, there are a number of problems with scientism, not the least of which is that it is not scientific.

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<sup>13</sup>For a helpful elaboration of this argument, see John Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 1-24. See also, McGrath, *Surprised by Meaning*, pp. 58-65.

Genuine faith is not blind; it wants to *know* and it seeks the *truth*. Blind faith is finally *idolatry*. The truth sought by faith is not anti-scientific but *trans-scientific*; Christian faith seeks to know the God whose ordering of the universe makes science *possible*. As St. Thomas Aquinas maintained, the purpose of revelation is not to destroy reason or to make it unnecessary; the purpose of revelation is to *fulfill* reason. In knowing God we come to the font and well of reason.

In their book, *The Privileged Planet* Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay Richards come to this conclusion: “And as we stand gazing at the heavens beyond our little sun, we gaze not into a meaningless abyss but into a wondrous arena commensurate with our capacity for discovery. Perhaps we have been staring past a cosmic signal far more significant than any mere sequence of numbers, a signal revealing a universe so skillfully crafted for life and discovery that it seems to whisper of an extra-terrestrial intelligence immeasurably more vast, more ancient and more magnificent than anything we have been willing to expect or imagine.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay Richards, *The Privileged Planet* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2004), p. 335.