

A Christian View of Science and Scientism

It's common to hear people accuse Christianity of being 'anti-science', or to hear about the war between 'religion and science'. In recent years, certain prominent atheists have claimed that reason and science are at odds with religion, which they class as superstition. Is there a genuine conflict between science and religion?

The most common areas of conflict between Christianity and science are over the matters of origins, and over the makeup of man. Evolution versus creation, and the nature of the human being (when life begins and ends, whether sexuality is genetic, whether depression is organic, whether we have a soul), are the most frequent battlefields.

In reality, *science* is too large a generalisation to be helpful. To understand where Christianity and 'science' contradict, we must take the time to rightly define science.

- 1) Rightly defined, science is actually a **method** of investigating the world. It is a *procedure*, not a philosophy. The procedure is made up of three parts:
 1. Observing phenomena
 2. Developing explanatory hypotheses that are predictive in nature
 3. Testing the hypotheses by repeatable experimentation
- 2) Anything which claims to be scientific should be able to show that it is operating according to those three stages of the scientific theory. If the claims that a particular 'science' makes cannot be tested or verified by those, then it is not science. It may be philosophy, history, spirituality, or religion, but it is not science.
- 3) By that definition, any theory of origins is not science. We cannot observe the phenomena, and we certainly cannot repeat what happened at the beginning by experimentation. Evolution or creation are both theories of history. They both offer an explanation of the past. Evolution falsely claims to have the laboratory verifying its claims. But it is ultimately a form of history of biology, posturing as science. Genuine micro-evolution – adaptations within species, and certain species succeeding where others fail, is an observable, testable phenomenon, and qualifies as science.
- 4) By the same token, turning the Creation account into “creation science” falls into the same error. It pretends we can “prove” what happened at the beginning, by using the test-tube and the laboratory. But if evolution cannot do so, neither can creation! This is when Christians fall prey to man-pleasing, seeking to give their faith respectability in the eyes of the world. But the capital error here is not the Bible vs science, it is science vs history. You cannot prove through repeatable experiments what happened once in the past.
- 5) The bigger issue in science and the Bible is the controlling presupposition. This is the worldview, the assumptions that the scientist has before he even begins studying phenomena. Two presuppositions that are particularly hostile to Christianity are:

1. **Naturalism/ materialism.** This is the view that reality is essentially made of matter (no soul, spirits, etc.) On this view, we explain the “natural” world only by what we find within the natural world. If the universe is pictured as a box, you can only explain what is inside the box by what is also inside the box. We cannot assume or even allow explanations from beyond or outside of nature - “*super-nature/ supernatural*”. Therefore, if a scientist is a materialist/ naturalist, though the evidence may point to supernaturalism, he will be forced to find a natural explanation for the same event. His interpretation will always be controlled by ruling out supernaturalism. In other words, this kind of scientist rejects special creation, miracles, resurrection before he has begun to study the evidence. Empty tombs, fossils, will be re-interpreted along naturalistic lines. Darwinism was an attempt at explaining the origin of species through entirely natural phenomena.

“We take the side of science in spite of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, in spite of its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, in spite of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counterintuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.... To appeal to an omnipotent deity is to allow that at any moment the regularities of nature may be ruptured, than miracles may happen.”
Richard Lewontin, "Billions and Billions of Demons," in the New York Review of Books, January 9, 1997.]

2. **Scientism.** Scientism is different from science in that it scientism is an attitude towards knowledge and ultimate questions. Scientism claims that the scientific method is the only safe and sure way of knowing reality, and all other ways are childish, foolish, dangerous superstitions. Of course, it cannot even use its own method to prove itself, it simply makes that claim based upon discoveries about the world, improvement in living conditions, and technological innovations. Scientism is a profound arrogance: believing it can answer questions which the scientific method could never come close to explaining: God's existence, the nature of good and evil, the nature of beauty, the origin of the universe, life after death. It believes that it can collect enough facts to ultimately answer all the great questions. But the more science discovers, the more complex the universe becomes, and the questions multiply faster than the answers. Man will never collect even a fraction of the facts needed to understand the web of facts that makes up the universe.
- 6) Actually, one of science's presuppositions gives much glory to God, though not all intend it. The fact that scientists expect their experiments to be repeatable assumes that the universe is orderly. Why should the universe be orderly if it came to exist by chance? Why should there be 'laws' if everything is random? A predictable universe suggests order, and order suggests a Designer.

- 7) It was Christianity's assumption that the world functioned according to the orderliness of a Creator's commands that led to the science of Isaac Newton and others. The scientific method did not develop in cultures whose gods were arbitrary, unpredictable, unknowable and capricious. For many centuries scientific investigations were carried out by Christians who understood the world as an orderly and understandable place because it was made by God. Studying the creation was an indirect means of studying the Creator. Many of the greatest scientists of western civilization were Christians, or at least held a Christian worldview (e.g., Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Boyle, Pascal, Newton, Faraday, Maxwell)

How Should Christians view science?

- 8) On the one hand, we should be thankful for everything that a true scientific method reveals. It brings glory to our Creator, for the Earth is His (Ps 24:1). We should be thankful for every innovation that enables man to live well before His Creator.
- 9) On the other hand, we must recognise that the world is at war with God, and it will use a God-given method as an excuse to suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18-21). We should distinguish between true science and anti-God assumptions built into some science.
- 10) We must also challenge the idea that facts are separate from faith, or that science is objective while faith is subjective. This comes from Immanuel Kant and the Enlightenment, not from Scripture. By the 1960s, scientists like Michael Polanyi and Thomas Kuhn were recognising that science is also 'subjective' in the sense that scientists have a grid which they apply to whatever they study – they exclude some facts, include others, and all for reasons not related to what they are studying.
- 11) When science claims authority which only God's Word has, Christians should challenge this. The Bible gives us the Creator's personal statement about the created order. The Bible is not meant to be textbook on scientific phenomena, but all interpretations of created phenomena can be judged within the grid of God's Word. The Bible will not help us discover how various diseases affect the human body, how to build a telescope, or how to fly. Neither will science tell us how to be saved or how to behave. Nature does teach us about God (Ps 19:1; Rom 1:19-20) and God teaches us about nature. However, the Bible is not a science textbook and a science textbook is not the Bible. Nature and grace are two different aspects of life, but all of life is unified under Christ. "The judicious theologian must be careful to examine knowledge that comes to us from nature as well as knowledge that comes to us from grace, lest in a misguided zeal he establishes false conflicts between the two."¹
- 12) Christians who enter the sciences can do so for the glory of God. We need Christian botanists, paleontologists, astronomers, physicists etc. We need them to bring the Christian alternative to their investigations, and present these, both to challenge the existing order, and to strengthen the faith of Christians. A scientist's view of the Bible will have an enormous impact on how he functions as a scientist. Christians believe that the Bible is the ultimate source of authority and will be looking for consistencies between the book of God and the book of nature. Thus, when a division arises between Scripture and science, the data

¹ Sproul, *Lifeviews*, 167.

of science must be reinterpreted to correspond with the Bible or discarded as false if such is not possible. Scripture stands in judgment of all other truth claims. The Christian scientist sees the universe as the handiwork of a sovereign God, and scientific data found in God's universe will be consistent with the data found in God's Word. Any observation that appears to be at odds with the Creator or his revelation must be reassessed in a way that does not deny the truth of what God has said. The Christian must never distort the truth of the Bible to make it conform to some current theory in science. Nature and grace are harmonious and compatible because the same God is author of them both.

- 13) We must teach our children the very clear distinction between the scientific method, and the anti-god philosophy posturing as science. It is crucial they receive this understanding before they enter their university years, particularly if their vocational training will be in the sciences or the humanities.