

Has Science Buried God?

I hate the all too prevalent idea that becoming a Christian involves unscrewing top of your head and throwing brain away. I passionately believe that Christianity, as taught in the Bible, makes sense of the world we live in and corresponds to reality we see around us.

The reason I believe that is because I believe that Christianity is true. Not just "true for me" but really, objectively true. True truth if you like. And because I believe that Christianity does provide a coherent explanation for the way the world around us is I've very much enjoyed doing some thinking over the last few years about Christianity and science.

You should know as we start that my academic background is in law so I'm not an expert in any of the sciences but I'm a keen reader of some of the more accessible scientific journals.

Inevitably this will be something of an introduction trying to bring some threads of thought from different disciplines together.

I'd like to start by giving you an overview of how many people in Western Europe, probably a majority, perceive the history of the last few hundred years. This will be in very broad terms and obviously involves some big generalisations but I think it's broadly an accurate reflection of how people understand the development of science and religion in history. It goes like this:

Until about 300 years ago people, in general, believed in God. They were practically enslaved to a controlling, repressive and at times evil official church. Most people in those days were generally pretty ignorant and lived in superstition and bigotry. Throughout the ages there have been scientists who championed truth and freedom against the conservative repressive church – Galileo, Darwin, Copernicus and others. However in the last couple of hundred years the scientists have gained the upper hand. Their contribution has been to liberate people from ideas about God by showing us an alternative world that doesn't require God to explain it. That has left us free to become enlightened and the world has become a much better place, leading up to the technology and freedom that we experience today.

One writer has suggested that "modern science is without doubt the most powerful cultural force ever devised by the human mind."

And it's fair to say that generally people see scientific authority as a good thing. One writer says it is:

"The bright light of human reason triumphant over ignorance, superstition, bigotry and human finitude."

Following foot and mouth or BSE or Chernobyl or the scandals around Western governments selling chemical and biological weapons technology to one Mr S Hussein, Iraq, Middle East many of us, of course, have some suspicion of the world of science.

But generally we tend to see these things as a result of political interference in science and blame the politicians.

Most people, I think, feel that while there may be rogue scientists who are untrue to the principles that guide their profession, those principles themselves are noble and good.

Indeed for many people today science offers objective **solutions** where religion can offer only dogma laden **myth and legend**.

So then what could a Christian, representing what is widely perceived to be one of the more repressive and myth laden religions, possibly have to say in response?

What I'd like to do is to challenge three widely held beliefs about science and its relationship with Christianity. These beliefs are so common that you may find it shocking that I should want to challenge them at all.

But I think that each of the three are, in fact, myths. Persuasively packaged myths, heavily promoted by the media and the abundance of "pop science" magazines, TV programmes and museum exhibitions but, nonetheless, myths.

1 Naturalistic science makes the world a better place.

Now it is, of course, the case that scientific achievements and the technologies they spawn do, quite clearly, have the potential to make the world a better place.

Anybody here who has ever spent any time in a modern, western, hospital is, no doubt, profoundly grateful for medical science and the discoveries that have been made over the last few hundred years.

Thanks to science we now have computers and microprocessors in almost every piece of electrical equipment in our houses. Our cars have anti lock brakes and airbags. We can travel to the other side of the world in a few hours and send messages to the other side of the world in a few seconds.

There is a sense, isn't there, in which you'd have to be incredibly stupid not to recognise that scientific endeavour and the technology that its discoveries have resulted in have profoundly improved our lives in many ways.

But scientific enterprise has a darker side.

The same research that gives childless couples hopes for having children opens up the possibility of designer babies with parents specifying blue eyes, blonde hair and enough intelligence to get into whatever university you choose to mention. All progress? Maybe not.

One of the most science orientated, progress driven cultures the world has ever seen was 1930s Germany. Many of you will, no doubt, have watched the Kenneth Branagh film "Conspiracy" which was shown as part of the first Holocaust remembrance day in the UK. It showed the planning meeting where the SS, National Socialist party and various Nazi government ministries discussed, in dispassionate, scientific and chilling detail, how they proposed to exterminate the 12 million Jews in Europe. And, of course, Auschwitz is joined in the roll call of history of human wickedness by Stalin's death camps, Pol Pot's killing fields, Rwanda, Burundi, Mao's china, East Timor, Zimbabwe, apartheid, Kosovo, Bosnia, Sudan and 100 other places.

Massacres and murders all around the world, every day of every year.

I was listening to Radio 4's Desert Island Discs. Trevor Nunn, former director of the National Theatre was on. The record he would choose to take if he was only allowed one on his desert island was Beethoven's 9th symphony. It's a fine choice. But his reason for taking it was most revealing. He had, he said, been involved in a performance of the symphony in one of the Nazi concentration camps and it reminded him that, "however slowly, the human race is getting better." I was so shocked I almost had to pull my car over at the side of the road. That anybody can look back on the last 100 years, the bloodiest in the history of the world and say that the human race is getting better is to fly utterly in the face of all the available evidence.

Personally I sympathise with the guy who said:

"Of course I believe in progress - in every war they find new ways to kill you."

Of course the world has always been like this. Nero massacred people just as much as Hitler did. Attila the Hun was no better than Stalin. So what can we conclude?

Well it seems to me that the only viable conclusion to reach is that scientific progress, and the technology and wealth it has spawned, hasn't made people any worse than they were before. **But it hasn't made people any better either.**

In the West the C20th was the one when millions of people threw off traditional Christian belief in favour, usually, of practical atheism. That is to say that we may still believe in the existence of a God in some vague sense, but the existence or otherwise of that God makes no impact on our lives or morals. Now it's true that over the centuries some people have used religion as a cover for bloodshed. Sure there have been some wicked hypocrites in the history of the church who have been drunk on power and wealth. But in the last 100 years the people of the western world have thrown off religion and "superstition" in favour of science. And what has been the result? The bloodiest century in the history of the world.

Naturalistic science has not made the world a better place.

2 Science speaks with authority on life's most important questions

None of what I have just said makes me anti-science. I am very positive about science. Science is a great thing.

The problem is people who think science is capable of answering all the great human questions. As author Neil Broom, in his recent critique of naturalistic science explains, much of this is to do with a portrayal in the popular media of an image that there is no problem too hard for science to solve.

But this attitude assumes that the problems of the human race are basically problems of *understanding* and of *economics*.

If that were true it would be the case that science could, potentially at least, solve our problems.

- Science can help solve our problem of understanding by describing ever more accurately the universe around us.

- Science can help solve our economic problems by producing new technologies to utilise more effectively the natural resources of the world around us.

But it seems to me that most people have vastly overestimated the range of topics on which science is qualified to pronounce – and hence the range of problems science is able to solve.

To see how that's so we need to reflect for a minute on what, precisely, the function of science and scientific endeavour is.

The function of science, its job in the world, is to describe the material universe. Scientists do this when, through observation and experiment they produce and test theories.

Science is descriptive. It tells us what **is**. So it can help us to work out:

- What may have happened in the past (carbon dating springs to mind as an example) and
- What might happen in the future (ideas about the lifespan of our sun for example).

The problem comes when we try and make science answer questions that are simply outside its orbit.

For example, basic nuclear physics tells us about the composition of atoms. It helps us understand that awesome power is released when atoms are split. The resulting technology has provided us with means of carrying out that atom splitting. But science and scientists cannot tell us whether we OUGHT to use that technology to generate cheap electricity for hospitals or to make nuclear missiles.

Through their rigorous scientific approach the Nazis discovered that Carbon Monoxide gas was a cheap, efficient way of killing people. But their science couldn't tell them that that **ought** not to do that.

Cosmological physics can tell us much about the origins and outer limits of the universe. We now know an amazing amount about black holes, giant stars, and distant galaxies. But cosmologists are no more qualified than bus drivers or arts students to tell us **WHY** the universe is here, what its purpose is in existing and what our place in it is.

Science, in all its disciplines is very good at telling us what IS, at describing the universe in which we find ourselves. But it is simply not capable of answering moral questions and

questions about ultimate origins, meaning and purpose.

That, if you like, is the "problem" of science. It is, by its very nature, incapable of finding, anything beyond the material universe. It is simply impossible for science ever to find anything beyond the existence of the material universe.

But a significant number of scientists have taken a leap from there and concluded wrongly that because science cannot find anything outside the material universe there cannot be anything there to find.

Much atheistic science uses a linguistic slight of hand and substituting explanations of **how** when people ask questions about **why**.

Let me give you an example. Lots of biology textbooks talk about human beings having evolved as if that were a sufficient answer to the question "why are human beings here?" But that's not a sufficient answer. After all it is entirely true to say that my Pentium IV laptop computer has evolved from an abacus. But that wouldn't really answer the question of why human beings have computers.

To explain how is not the same as to explain why.

In the end science can make us better-informed people. It can make us live more comfortably, but it can never make us better people. I suspect that the vast majority of people in this room recognise that there are a whole pile of very important questions, arguably the most important questions in the universe, that science and scientists are simply not able to answer for us.

That's not a negative reflection on science as an endeavour or on scientists as people – it's just a limitation inherent in science itself.

The disturbing thing is that many scientists seem to think that, metaphorically speaking, wearing a white coat confers special powers and privileges not open to the rest of the human race.

For example James Watson, the Nobel prize winning biochemist, was quoted in the Independent in May 2000 as saying "If scientists don't play god, who will?"

And indeed many scientists do take it upon themselves to make pronouncements on the ethical issues surrounding, for example, human fertilisation and genetic manipulation. But those

questions are not, in fact, related to the science of human reproduction and genetics at all. They are moral questions not scientific questions.

Of course scientists are qualified to pronounce on such issues – but no more so than firemen or retired accountants.

Life's most important questions and the human races most significant problems are, it seems to me, moral problems. Not what we can do, but what we ought to do. And those are questions that cannot ultimately be answered by scientists.

Nor indeed can they be answered by human beings at all. The only person who can ultimately express moral laws and statements of meaning and purpose for the universe is the person who made it – God himself.

And if there is no God then, in truth, there are no moral laws and there is no meaning or purpose. We make some up for the convenience of society or of ourselves. But they will have no intrinsic value or worth – they are just opinions. The materialists universe is, ultimately, an amoral universe.

Science speaks with authority on many things; but not on life's most important questions. For it is not qualified to make statements of morality or meaning.

3 Objective science is incompatible with religious faith.

But, even if you concur with me so far, doesn't the question remain whether religious belief of any sort, and particularly Christian belief, isn't just completely impossible in a scientific world?

After all isn't "faith" simply, as Douglas Adams would have us think, believing 3 impossible things before breakfast?

I quite often meet people who have rejected Christianity for "science" on the basis that science is all logical and provable whereas Christianity is myth and legend. We can know science for certain they say. It's proven.

But that is a massive misunderstanding of the scientific process. There are very few philosophers of science who would say that scientific theories are ever anything more than just theories. And there is a considerable body of evidence that scientists are just as prejudiced about the outcomes of their experiments as any "religious" person is about his beliefs.

Interestingly, that is particularly true in the life-sciences. Thaxton, Bradley and Olsen wrote a paper wrote back in the 1984 looking at the methodology of various origin-of-life researchers. That is people who try and recreate the conditions under which, they suggest, living molecules might have formed spontaneously from a kind of primordial soup of non-living elements. They concluded that most of these experiments involved so much restriction of the possible outcomes by the experimenters that there was no way in which they could be said to provide an accurate reflection of what might have happened in any real world origin-of-life. They concluded that "*it is the character of the constraint that determines the result.*"

In plain English **these scientists found the results they wanted to find because they built the outcome into the experiment.**

The idea that science and scientists are somehow entirely "objective" is, simply, not true. Philosopher of science Karl Popper puts it like this:

"Science never starts from scratch; it can never be described as free from assumptions."

It is simply not acceptable to characterise science and religion as "fact" versus "faith". Because that massively misunderstands science.

And it massively misunderstands Christian belief. Christian belief is not a "leap of faith" into a dark void. Christians are not inviting you, or anyone, to "just believe." Our conviction is that God stepped into history in the person of Jesus Christ. We believe that there is reliable, clear documented evidence for the claims of Jesus Christ to be God himself, come to bring about the possibility of forgiveness of sins by dying on a cross.

There will never be "proof" for the existence of God or the resurrection of Jesus Christ of the kind you can use to show that the angles in a triangle always add up to exactly 180°.

But then there isn't proof for anything in real life of that sort – it only works for theoretical perfect triangles.

And the lack of a particular sort of proof mustn't put us off looking for the truth. There is plenty of evidence for the truth of the claims of the Christian faith. In the lives and experience of billions of Christians through history and, supremely, in the Bible that God has given to us so that we might know him.

Has science buried God? No.

Popular misunderstandings of science have built a web of myth that can stop people looking seriously at Jesus Christ.

But once you look closely many of the assertions and claims of popular naturalistic science are very flimsy. And lots of people refuse to believe Christian explanations of things whilst accepting atheistic explanations that need very considerably more "faith."

Take the issue of creation for example. I meet lots of people who say that they could never believe that this vast universe that we inhabit a tiny corner of it was simply made by God. They cannot believe that God made something out of nothing.

Which is ironic. Because there is now very good evidence that the universe has not been around forever but had a definite beginning. So really the alternatives are believing that there was something or someone who created the universe or believing that it just happened.

As one writer puts it the alternatives are believing that God made something out of nothing or that nothing made something out of nothing. Which of these requires more "faith"?

In fact, of course, the very process of science itself requires a number of non-scientific, one might even say religious, convictions in order to function.

Scientific progress requires a whole host of traits that science itself cannot define – intuitiveness, purposefulness, dogged commitment, honesty and sound judgment.

And every scientist works with the belief that, behind all the difficult and sometimes contradictory patterns of evidence and data in their experiment and observation there is a coherent and meaningful universe to describe.

But that is **not** a scientific conviction. It is a philosophical conviction.

In fact those people who we consider to be the first scientists in the Western mould were driven by that conviction of an ordered universe because they believed that there was a God.

A God who has made the world knowable and who has made us able to understand it.

Modern science as we think of it today grew, in the first place, out of Christian convictions.

Out of the conviction that the world is logical, that it has rules and predictable ways of behaving.

Modern science grew out of the conviction that human beings are rational creatures, capable of observing the world and recording accurate information about it. And the **reason** people believed that was that they believed the Christian conviction that God has made us in his image.

Christians are not asking you to throw your brain away.

We are asking you to look at the evidence, like a good scientist or a good historian, and see what you make of Jesus.

Ask if what Jesus says about the world fits with the way the world is around you. Does it offer reasonable explanations for the way the world is?

I believe it does!

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