

GOD AND SCIENCE



People often say that “God is nice for some people but I’m more scientific.” This is not a new thought. A mathematician was once asked by the king of France how his theories related to God. ‘God?’ he replied, ‘I have no need for that hypothesis!’ The idea is that science and God are incompatible or that science has disproved God or that now we don’t need a “God” concept.

WHAT IS SCIENCE?

First, we need to make a critical distinction. According to the dictionary, science is ‘systematized knowledge about the physical world, developed by observation and experiment’ (The Cassell Concise Dictionary). In other words, science seeks to identify the laws of the physical world by making observations and measurements, developing theories and testing those theories with experiments.

Christianity has no inherent conflict with science. The first universities were set up by Christians who saw the natural sciences as the branch of theology studying God’s creation. The Bible is not opposed to science, but a philosophy called Naturalism. Naturalism is defined as ‘a philosophical or theological system that explains the universe as being produced and governed entirely by physical laws.’ (The Cassell Concise Dictionary).

Naturalism claims that there’s nothing beyond the laws of nature, that those laws explain everything. This is very weak philosophically and fails to account for much of reality as we know it. Science is a powerful tool to help us understand some aspects of reality, but it has very clear boundaries beyond which it has nothing to say. Naturalism is a philosophy which some people try to pass off as science.

THE BOUNDARIES OF SCIENCE

There are many things in life that transcend science: love, the concepts of good and evil, meaning, ideas, morality, character, value, hope or self-consciousness. Science starts by limiting its study to the physical world. Science can’t test beyond that limit because its methods don’t deal with non-physical reality. Science generates theories or ideas, non-physical things that are themselves beyond the realm of strictly scientific enquiry. Pure science cannot explain the very thing it generates!

As an example of non-material reality, Dallas Willard cites human character and personality in his book *The Divine Conspiracy*:

"You cannot find me or any of my thoughts, feelings or character traits in any part of my body... If you wish to find me, the last thing you should do is open my body to take a look... For many years in Moscow there was a scientific institute where the brains of great Communists - leaders, scientists and artists - were preserved and slices taken to be analysed under the microscope. Technicians hoped to find the secret of great Communist personalities right there in their great Communist brains. Of course, they found nothing of personal greatness there. They were looking in the





wrong place and in the wrong way. To be sure, the brain is a relatively more important and interesting piece of flesh, but nothing of intellect, creativity or character is to be found in it."

For science to deal only with the material realm is fine so long as we don't take science to be a complete explanation of reality. There are many more disciplines than science in a university because there's much more to reality than the purely physical. For example, psychology isn't a pure science because pure science doesn't deal with nearly enough of the data.

In the middle of the last century Naturalists believed that humans were determined machines that could be fully understood in terms of the physical, chemical and biological processes that took place within their bodies. This has been widely discredited both academically and in popular culture. Science is a very powerful and useful tool to explain some aspects of reality, but it's wholly inadequate to explain everything. It is an amazing servant but it makes a hopeless god.

HOW DOES GOD RELATE TO SCIENCE?

The Bible teaches that God is spirit, in other words, non-material reality. This tells us that science can't directly address the question of God's existence of because the question lies beyond its limiting assumptions. The Bible also teaches that God created the physical reality that exists. The natural laws of the physical world were invented by God and are subject to him. God is above and beyond science.

In the New Testament, Jesus is understood to be God in human flesh. To check the credibility of Jesus we turn not to science, but to history. A classical objection to Jesus and the Bible are the miracles it records, particularly his virgin birth and resurrection. These are claimed to be impossible because they override the laws of nature. This objection totally misses the point of miracles, which is precisely that they are impossible unless there's a God who's above the laws of nature.

The first witnesses of the miracles were just as astonished as we would be as they were no more used to seeing miracles than we are. Miracles are designed to demonstrate that there is a God who's in charge. You don't rise from the dead after being crucified and buried for three days unless God intervenes. That's the point, miracles are only possible if God rules over science. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the ultimate authentication of his identity as it couldn't have happened without God intervening.

CAN A SCIENTIST BELIEVE IN GOD?

There's not an inherent contradiction between being a Christian and being a scientist. Many of the greatest scientists of history, including Newton, Faraday, Pascal, Pasteur, Darwin and Einstein believed in God. The conflict is not with science, but with Naturalism. Unlike Naturalism, Christianity offers an explanation for the order we see in the universe. The Christian sees the beauty and order that science observes as being a reflection of its creator.

