

Science & Religion or Science VS Religion?

It is a commonly held view in society today that science is incompatible with religion, particularly with Biblical Christianity. The media supports scientific theories such as evolution, natural selection, the earth being billions of years old, etc, while giving airtime to such militant atheist as Prof. Richard Dawkins who views religion is mere superstition. Dawkins believes that since we have modern biology, we have no need “to resort to superstition when faced with the deep problems: Is there a meaning to life? What are we for? What is man?”. More recently (September 2010), the theoretical physicist, Stephen Hawking moved from a nominally theistic to an atheistic position when he wrote that “Because there is a law such as gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing. Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist. It is not necessary to invoke God to light the blue touch paper and set the universe going.”

What is the Christian’s response to such views? Many use scientific evidence to prove the valid claims for Creation (e.g. Institute of Creation Research, Answers in Genesis, etc). To complement this, one can also prove that science is very much compatible with Christianity, by demonstrating that the scientific studies of today are greatly indebted to Christianity, specifically Protestant Christianity.

Pre-New Testament era

Greek philosophers dominated the thinking of the Pre-New Testament period. Their ideas laid the foundation for modern day astronomy, Maths and the other scientific disciplines. However, science at that time was mixed with philosophy, mysticism and superstition. Nature was deified and the world was viewed as an organism that gave “birth” to all creatures. Plato, for example, believed that the visible world was created by a “personal creator” but not *ex-nihilo* (“out of nothing”) and was bound by certain laws and ideas. Hence Plato’s “god” regulated creation but did not create anything. Though he acknowledged a “creator”, Plato did not have a proper concept of God. As he wrote, “to find the maker and father of this universe is very difficult”. How important it is for Christians today to understand God’s revelation, as witnessed by Holy Scriptures. Other

philosophers view created beings as evolving to “the end of its individual development”, a form of Pre-Darwinian teaching of evolution.

Medieval Age

By the post-New Testament, post-Apostolic period, not much had changed in the field of sciences. Despite being largely under the control of the Church and State, much of science was still steeped in Greek Philosophy, hence the discipline sometimes being known as “physical theology”. Nature was still regarded as sovereign over all things, although some lip-service was paid to the sovereignty of God in creation. The 12th century Platonist, Bernard Silvestris for example, called Nature “*by God’s grace the vice-gerent and lieutenant of the kingdom of the world*”. It is interesting to note that even today, the concept of “Nature” still persists, with phrases like “Mother Nature” and “Nature did it” being found in everyday language.

Scientific research in the medieval Church had to co-exist in the environment of Roman Catholicism and scientific concepts had to be derived from the Bible. A classic case is heliocentrism (the Sun in the centre of the Universe) versus geocentrism (the Earth in the centre of the Universe). Traditionally, the medieval Roman Catholic Church taught geocentrism, based on verses such as Joshua 10:13 (“And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies... So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hastened not to go down about a whole day.”) and Ecclesiastes 1:5 (“The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose.”). Hence, it persecuted Galileo Galilei (1564 – 1642) and like-minded scientists, who, in their attempts to independently study the stars and universe, came to, and advocated, heliocentric views.

The Reformation

During the Reformation, the Bible and its doctrines were “returned” to the people as the Scriptures were translated into the language of the common people. Sound principles of biblical interpretation

and the chief doctrines of the Bible were taught and slowly but surely, society changed and the church reformed. Likewise, scientific research was also reformed. Although even the likes of John Calvin held to geocentricism (e.g. see his comments on Psalm 93:1), he acknowledged that the Biblical writers accommodated their writings to the “man-on-the-street”, a teaching commonly known as Accommodation Theory.

Reijer Hooykaas (1906 – 1994) Professor of History of Science, University of Utrecht, notes that “What strikes one most about the early Protestant scientists is their love for nature, in which they recognise the work of God’s hands, and their pleasure in investigating natural phenomena”. The Reformers recognised that the Bible was not written like a science textbook. They stressed literal interpretation (over and against the fanciful allegorical interpretation of the Roman Catholic Church), but they did not apply that principle throughout the whole Bible. For example, Philips Van Lansbergen (1561 – 1632), an astronomer who held heliocentric views, believed that the Bible does not teach astronomy “according to the real situation but according to appearances” (i.e. from the human author’s perspective). Elsewhere he taught that “Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, but it is not meet for instruction in geometry and astronomy.”. Hence verses such Joshua 10:13 or Ecclesiastes 1:5 could be interpreted “according to appearances”. From Joshua and Solomon’s perspective, it was the Sun that stopped or moved, though in reality, it was the Earth that was in motion, under the power of God!

Even before the Reformation, there were those who had attested to inconsistencies between what the Church was teaching and what was commonly observed. For example, tropical regions were held to be uninhabitable due to heat and humidity, but this was refuted by navigators who passed the Equator and found the tropics to be populated. Similarly, the belief in the unchangeable nature of the universe was contradicted by the observations of farmers who witnessed the appearance of new stars “born” in the sky. As William Watts, the English clergyman comments, “*The thoughts of the philosophers have been contradicted by the unexpected observations of the navigators.*”.

Scientists concluded that scientific fact there must be based on empirical demonstration (through observations and experimentation) rather than on philosophical ideas, wrongly interpreted from the Scriptures. This became the basis for the “scientific revolution” or a new “philosophy of science”. Francis Bacon (1561 – 1626), Viscount of St. Alban, English philosopher, scientist, lawyer and Lord Chancellor of England is a name generally associate with the Scientific Revolution. Bacon’s basic premise was “out with Aristotle, and in with the Bible” (The Philosophy of Francis Bacon, Benjamin Farrington). He rejected the influence of Greek philosophy in science and popularised the idea of two books of God’s revelation, namely, the Bible and Nature [“Here are two books laid before us to study; to prevent us falling into error; first, the volume of the Scriptures which reveal the will of God; then the volume of the Creatures, which express His power.”]. He was, however, not the first to believe this. The astronomer, Johannes Kepler (1571 – 1630) wrote that astronomers, as God’s custodians to the Book of Nature, “ought to keep in their minds not the glory of their own intellect, but the glory of God”.

People like Bacon introduced a study of science, known as “experimental science”. This study of science starts with, 1) the premise of sound hypothesis; 2) the collection (experiments), analysis and interpretation of data; 3) the formation of a sound model of how the hypothesis works; and 4) the refining of the model by further hypothesis, and so on. This forms the basis of modern day methods of scientific research.

What did the Reformation and the Scientific Revolution achieve?

One of the common features of the Reformation and the Scientific Revolution and was a return *ad fontes* [“to the sources”] “.... passing by the corrupt copies, and referring themselves to the perfect originals for their instruction; the one to the Scripture, the other to the large volumes of the creatures” (History of Royal Society, Thomas Sprat). The Protestant Christians believed that it was their duty, if able, to study Nature, out of love and gratitude to the Creator, and those who failed to do so, according to Calvin, were guilty of forgetting God! Initially the Church was slow to recognise the influence of scientists working independently from the Church, but soon it could not stop the tide of change. It is said that during the Reformation, the majority of eminent Botanists were

Protestants, and some were friends with the Reformers. Their Roman Catholic counterparts made slower scientific progress, preferring the status quo.

Post-Scientific Revolution Era

Sadly, the post-scientific revolution era has seen both a decline in the studies of Scriptures and an over-elevation of the “wisdom” of Man. Perhaps the rejection of the Church/State dominance over scientific research went too far and, from a healthy view of the Bible and Nature, we have come to a complete rejection of the truths of Scripture and the celebration of the achievements of Man in scientific discovery. A lack of discernment has swept the scientific world with respect to new discoveries and so when Charles Darwin popularised the theory of Evolution, very little was done to check, test, and question his findings. Today, we are in a situation where scientists are giving themselves over to relatively small discoveries (despite what the media and the scientists themselves are saying!) because they refuse to give all the glory to God. To paraphrase one writer, “Nonbelievers may hear all the notes of science, but without God, they will not hear the song.”

For further reading

Religion and the Rise of Modern Science, Reijer Hooykaas (1973, currently out of print)