



Science & Religion



SCIENCE & RELIGION

While Science has a proven record with an in-built capacity for course correction, Religion is here to stay. These are two very strong cultural movements with a following that cannot be ignored.

What is the conflict view?

Alister McGrath With the success of Science & Technology, and the narrowing gap of what can be attributed to the Deity, some people hold on to Science as though it is absolute (Scientism). This position undermines Religion as outdated and superstitious. Contradictions between Science & the Bible in their explanation of this world and its phenomena, along with certain cases where the Church leadership have promoted non-scientific stances have usually been used to promote this Conflict view.

This view (also called warfare motif) was incidentally popularized by two books in the 19th cent. One was by John Draper, titled, 'History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science' and the other, was Andrew Dickson White's, 'A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom'. However, this view is not accepted in academic circles anymore though it is still popular.

Alister McGrath, Former Andreas Idreos Professor of Science and Religion at the University of Oxford observes: "the outmoded notion that science and religion are permanently in conflict—an idea often referred to as the 'warfare' thesis. This is now regarded as quite unacceptable by historians of science, chiefly because it is so difficult to reconcile with the facts of history."

What is NOMA?

This view was promoted by renowned astronomer and atheist Carl Sagan, who was willing to concede that Religion might have some purposes for humankind though not rational as science. He preferred keeping them in separate compartments. While this position seems to help by keeping conflict away, it turns a blind eye to claims made by Science and Religion on common (overlapping) themes – like the beginning of the universe (Cosmogony) and the origin of life forms (Biogenesis).

The more accepted view among scholars is nuanced – admitting that Science and Christianity do share a complex relationship.

Is Science evidence-based, while Religion, superstitious?

Natural Sciences are based on evidence, experimentation, verifiability but a careful observer would realise that everything about Science is not scientific. Science is based on philosophical assumptions / ideas that are important for the possibility of Modern Science. Further, the scientific institution operates on good faith, in the methods and traditions of Science.

Religion on the other hand does not have to be superstitious. The faith talked about in the Old and New Testaments is not blind belief. But rather it is reasonable faith or justified true belief.

Distinguished professor, a theologian and a physicist Stanley Jaki observed: "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind".

Can Science explain all of reality (aka Scientism)?

Science as we know and pursue is called – Methodological Naturalism – and this method is restrictive as it only allows material causes and effects. While this method is effective and fool-proof, by definition it is unable to comment on ‘non-material’ realities – such as purpose of life, romance etc. Besides, this method is a philosophical position and not a scientific statement. The real battle is not between Science and Christianity, but between Scientism and Christian Theism

Should religious people be allowed to explain reality without Science?

Science can help Religion do course-correction, esp. if there are unwarranted assumptions about reality. A superstition is just that. At the same time not all religion promotes blind faith. The Bible upholds truth, reasonable faith and good judgment. Thomas Torrance approaches biblical worldview as Scientific Theology, which approaches the Christian worldview as a reasonable & 'scientific' with its own inner logic.

Some scholars (notably, Alvin Plantinga) have proposed for 'Theistic Science' a method to avoid the reductionism of Methodological Naturalism with the idea being if the evidence points beyond material causes, shouldn't Science pursue those?

The Bible is not anti-Science; in fact, the Bible promotes Science

Del Ratzsch points out how ideas have consequences, with reference to Modern Science: "Some ancient Greeks tended to view the world as not worthy of study. In other ancient pagan cultures nature was seen as a deity, which made poking at it (experimentally or empirically) inappropriate or even hazardous. Many Eastern cultures saw reality as ruled by rigid necessities, making empirical investigation superfluous. Others saw chance or chaos as the ruling principle, making investigation of nature pointless and inevitably unsuccessful."

Hence it is not surprising that Modern Science was born and nurtured in a Judeo-Christian milieu, which provides the philosophical pre-suppositions –

(a) Nature is real, orderly, uniform & intelligible

(b) Validity of the human reason

(c) Mandate to pursue Science

The contribution of the Bible to the birth and nurture of modern science is increasingly recognized by historians of Science. In fact, it could be argued that the Genesis 1: 26-28 and Genesis 2: 15 were the seeds for the birth of modern Science. These ideas were like the philosophical ingredients for Modern Science to happen. Jaki reasoned that the Bible provided the necessary ingredients such as a belief in a rational God and an intelligible created order which also helped desacralize the natural world as being distinct from God. Further, we find there is a mandate for pursuing Science.

The specific verses in Genesis that were the seeds for the birth and nurture of Modern Science read this way:

‘Then God said, “Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” (Genesis 1: 26-28)

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. (Genesis 2: 15)

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” (Genesis 1: 26-28)

No wonder many of the founding fathers of Science were Christians or believers in God. To name a few: Johannes Kepler, Blaise Pascal, Robert Boyle, Isaac Newton, Michael Faraday, Gregor Mendel, William Thomson and many others to this day. Post reformation, the Bible and parts of the Bible were made available as printed copies in Europe and these ideas began to germinate. Not surprisingly, Modern Science emerged in a specific geographical location – Western Europe.

Prof John Lennox reiterates this point from the time point of view:

“Observing that medieval Europe in 1500 knew less than Archimedes in the third century BC and yet by 1700 Newton had written his masterpiece, Principia Mathematica, Sir Alfred North Whitehead asked the obvious question: How could such an explosion of knowledge have happened in a relatively short time? His answer: ‘modern science must come from the medieval insistence on the rationality of God... My explanation is that the faith in the possibility of science, generated antecedently to the development of modern scientific theory, is an unconscious derivative from medieval theology.’”

Further, Michael Polanyi explained how the institution of Science operates on ‘tradition’ in his ground-breaking book: Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy. To make an inference from that work, everything about Science is not scientific. There is a context within which Science operates and flourishes.

The real battle is not between Science and Christianity, but between Scientism and Christian Theism.

Scientism and Christian Theism: A Case study

In the year, 1990, Carl Sagan, a renowned astronomer and an atheist who promoted the view of NOMA made a request for Voyager 1 to capture a photograph of earth from 6 billion kms away (currently 24.9 billion kms from earth).

In that iconic photograph, Earth's apparent size is less than a pixel. He eventually wrote a book called: *The Pale Blue Dot*. In that book he wrote: "Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every superstar, every supreme leader, every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there-on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam...

The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena ... Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.

... It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world."

If what happens in your cranial space is just a firing of neurons, how come you know about it and even articulate it?

From a biblical point of view, David (Psalm 8) had a similar experience although in a much smaller scale when he captured a glimpse of the twilight sky and asked the question: What is man/woman? He then goes to the initial pages of the Bible to explain that humans might be small but we are not insignificant, because we are made in the image of God.

A purely atheistic/ materialistic reading of the cosmos undermines human dignity. If I am just molecules in motion, does it matter if I write a book? I recall a conversation with a student from a premier engineering college. He said – what happens in my cranial space is just a firing of neurons and nothing else. I countered: if what happens in your cranial space is just a firing of neurons, how come you know about it and even articulate it? Clearly, he transcended that experience. A purely materialistic reading is very reductionistic of human experience.

The World of God and the Word of God

Francis Bacon, considered to be the father of Modern Science held to a two-book metaphor in explaining truth in Science and Theology. He explained that God is the author of 2 books – Nature and Scripture. Since both come from the same source there would not be any contradiction, when all truth is known.

Psalm 19 reads – “The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” and talks about the message ringing out from nature (God’s world). Midway through the Psalm, there is a shift to the law of the Lord (God’s Word). And the Psalm ends with this prayer: “May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.”

In the words of Prof McGrath, we invite people to look at the world through a Christian lens. In fact, Jesus told his followers: ‘Look at the birds of the air’ / ‘Consider the lilies how they grow’ / ‘You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times’ - and Paul wrote in Romans: “Ever since the creation of the world God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been seen and understood through the things God has made. So they are without excuse, for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless hearts were darkened.” (Romans 1: 20-21).

In the words When God gave Solomon wisdom (1 Kings 4), it was all-encompassing; including Sociology, Behavioral Sciences, Art, Botany, Zoology, Entomology, Ornithology, Herpetology, Ichthyology & more. Please note, it was not a narrow discipline on interpreting the civil or ceremonial laws laid down for the Israelite community as much as they were important.

The Mechanical explanation and agency

Physicist turned theologian, John Polkinghorne gives a helpful illustration on the role of a scientific explanation and the need for a purpose statement. “He invites us to imagine somebody asking, “Why is water boiling in that kettle?” One person answers, “Because burning gas is heating the water,” and another person answers, “Because I want a cup of tea.” Which answer is right? Well, they’re both right. One person is talking about impersonal, mechanical causes. That’s what science tends to do. The other answer is framed in terms of a person and purpose and intention. It is not scientific in a mechanistic way, but it’s true and it’s terribly important.”

The method in Science & Theology

A student once noted that ‘isn’t Science better off as it is open to change and correction, while theology is a given and it is closed – not open to change. Important’. For the sake of the discussion, it was pointed out that if Science was open and was changing all the time, should we believe today’s Science or wait forever for the ‘final’ conclusion? Besides, theology being closed need not be a bad thing; the real question should be – is that true?



Science and Theology need each other

It is because of that complimenting role that we find many scientists who are also devout believers in God. The first Cavendish professor James Clerk Maxwell, at the University of Cambridge, was a devout believer in God who also is renowned for his work on electromagnetism. His prayer captured in his journal shows how He unified His faith and work. “Almighty

God, Who hast created man in Thine own image, and made him a living soul that he might seek after Thee, and have dominion over Thy creatures, teach us to study the works of Thy hands, that we may subdue the earth to our use, and strengthen the reason for Thy service; so to receive Thy blessed Word, that we may believe in Him Whom Thou hast sent, to give us the knowledge of salvation and the remission of our sins. All of which we ask in the name of the same Jesus Christ, our Lord.”

At the insistence of Prof Maxwell, the entrance to the famed Cavendish laboratory of Physics (a lab that have given the world more than 30 Nobel laureates) at the University of Cambridge carried the word from Psalm 111: 2 at its doorpost in Latin – ‘Great are the works of the Lord; they are sought out by all who delight in them’. The older laboratory is closed and now available as a tourist location. But this Physics lab has new wings elsewhere and the committee chose to retain that verse in English at its entrance.

Truly, the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof!



Reflection Questions:

Are the Bible & Science at war (Conflict view)?

Aren't Bible & Science non-interacting with their own domains of expertise (NOMA; Non-overlapping Magisteria)?

Isn't Science evidence-based while Religion is faith-based?

Will Science be able to explain all reality? (Scientism)

Will Religion have the upper hand to explaining all reality? (Religious Expansionism)



About the Speaker

Neil Vimalkumar is a Senior Apologist and Trainer with Life Focus Society. He is trained as an agricultural engineer from the Allahabad University and was introduced to the saving knowledge of Christ in his college years. With a growing interest in the big questions of life, he pursued an M.A. (Honours) in Theology from SAIACS, Bengaluru, and completed a second Masters from the University of Edinburgh (U.K.), specializing in Science and Religion.

Since 2003, Neil has travelled widely and spoken on varied platforms, both in India and abroad.

His audiences include students and faculty from premier educational institutions, professionals from different walks of life, churches and Christian conferences. Neil and his family make their home in Chennai, India.



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