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### Science and Christian Theology: An Unlikely Duo

In the Western world, especially during the last one hundred fifty years, an ever-increasing rift has been created between the disciplines of science and orthodox Christian theology. This rift represents the general sentiment among theologians, scientists, and the general public that science and religion either conflict with each other or are not related. According to a CNN/USA Today/Gallop Poll conducted for 1,005 adults nationwide between the eighth and eleventh of September 2005, seventy one percent believe that science and religion either conflict with each other or are completely unrelated (“Science and Nature”). This is in comparison to twenty four percent believing that science and religion generally agree. This constructed chasm between these two influential disciplines has caused a war that has intensified as science and technology have become more advanced. Respected professionals in each camp have attempted to discredit the other; some have even resorted to name calling. Richard Dawkins, one of the leading authorities on evolutionary biology has stated, “I think a case can be made that faith is one of the world’s great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate” (qtd. in McGrath 84). On the other end, Russell Akridge, speaking at the 1982 Annual Creation Convention, criticizes astrophysicists and astronomers as “high priests of the decades-old cult of the Big Bang myth,” and as “persuasive speakers [who] have deceived an unsuspecting public” (qtd. in Ross 5). As scientists and theologians fight, it becomes clear that in general, they are “woefully uninformed of each other’s disciplines” (Ross 6). This ignorance is the fuel that generates the flames of conflict between these

opposing disciplines. With an understanding of both specialties, it should be concluded that science and religion can, and do, rest in peace with each other; they should not be at war with each other. One complements the other to reveal a more complete and accurate picture of the reality of nature and humanity.

To determine the relationship science and Christian theology have with one another and how they are interconnected, it is important to know their definitions, the tools they utilize, and the limits they have in terms of answering questions regarding nature and humanity. The definition of “science,” according to Webster’s New World Dictionary, is “systemized knowledge derived from observation, study, and experimentation carried on in order to determine the nature or principles of what is being studied.” Therefore, scientists gain information and knowledge by acquiring tangible evidence and analyzing it. The analysis of this evidence allows them to make conclusions regarding the material world. The acquisition of new knowledge or revision of previous knowledge comes about by an indispensable tool called scientific method. Scientific method is the tool, or body of techniques, in which scientists are able to determine facts and, thus, gain a general knowledge of the world and humanity. “Scientific knowledge relies on the application of the scientific method, a harnessing of curiosity. This research provides scientific information and theories for the explanation of the nature and the properties of humans. It makes practical applications possible” (Hill, par. 1). More specifically, scientific method consists of “the following steps: (1) Careful observations of nature. (2) Deduction of natural laws. (3) Formation of hypotheses—generalizations of those laws to previously unobserved phenomena. (4) Experimental or observational testing of the validity of the predictions thus made”

(“Scientific Method”). By means of science, knowledge is gained by gathering observable, empirical, and measurable evidence that is subject to the standards of logic and reasoning. Thus, hypotheses are made and tested to determine their legitimacy. This combination of gathering and testing in an environment utilizing reason and logic allows science to be the most effective discipline in studying the natural world. In fact, “Science is the only reliable way to understand the natural world, and its tools when properly utilized can generate profound insights into material existence” (Collins 6). Scientific method is the most suitable tool for understanding material existence, but can it be effective in answering questions that relate beyond material existence?

Based on the tool of scientific method utilized in the discipline of science, it is logical to ascertain science’s limits in gaining knowledge. Because facts and knowledge of the world are gained through observation by the five human senses and measurable evidence, only knowledge of the tangible world can be discovered. Science cannot observe, examine, or test through experimentation the spiritual world simply because the spiritual world is not material. Francis Collins, a leading geneticist and head of the Human Genome Project, states, “Science’s domain is to explore nature. God’s domain is in the spiritual world, a realm not possible to explore with the tools and language of science” (Collins 6). A Christian reformed atheist, he understands that science can only go as far as the tangible features of humanity and nature. Thus, science cannot explain or prove important questions such as “Why did the universe come into being?” or “What is the meaning of human existence?” There is no way for scientists to test their hypotheses regarding these questions. Therefore, while science is the only reliable way to

comprehend the natural world, it fails to be helpful in answering questions relating to the intangibility of humanity and nature.

To help understand the questions relating beyond the natural world, it is necessary to call upon another discipline for guidance. In the Western world, Christian theology has sought to answer these questions that science has been inadequate to answer. Because the spiritual world is God's domain, it is logical to infer that religion, specifically Christianity, has the ability to study and explore questions beyond the material since it claims to possess revelation from God. Scientific method, by its definition, cannot explore the spiritual aspect of nature or humanity because it cannot be observed with the five human senses. Since humans cannot observe the spiritual side, they must rely on another being that has the ability to sense this world to reveal it to them. However, this entity, God, has slowly revealed himself to humanity, climaxing to his physical appearance onto earth in human form as Jesus. Christians, recognizing this revelation, thus, possess a knowledge of the spiritual side of reality that could not have been attained otherwise. Therefore, Christians, recognizing and accepting God's revelation, are solely able to accurately explore and discover questions such as "Why did the universe come into being?" and "What is the meaning of human existence?" Thus, in the discipline of Christian theology, revelation and faith are the major tools used for gaining knowledge, rather than scientific method.

Like every discipline, Christian theology also has limits set by the tools it utilizes. Christian theology is able to effectively explore the intangible aspects of nature and humanity because it studies God's revelation pertaining to these issues. However, Christian theology, itself, cannot effectively explore to understand the material world

because God has not sent revelation pertaining to scientific knowledge of the natural world. Christian theology cannot explore how atoms work or how plants receive energy from sunlight simply because God has not revealed the answers to these questions through his word. Thus, interpretation of God's revelation becomes limited to those things which God has chosen to reveal. At this point, it is necessary to utilize other tools that would be effective in exploring and understanding the physical world. Therefore, both disciplines find themselves running into dead ends when they attempt to investigate and discover the reality of humanity and nature; neither discipline, due to the limits set by the tools they use, can examine the whole of reality. Therefore, instead of being unrelated or conflicting with each other, science and Christian theology work in tandem to explore reality closer to its totality; that is, a reality that includes both the tangible and intangible features. This position is held by a minority of people in the United States.

“This potential synthesis of the scientific and spiritual worldviews is assumed by many in modern times to be an impossibility, rather like trying to force the two poles of a magnet together into the same spot” (Collins 3). Much of this is derived by the popular, but false, belief that science and religion are polar opposites by definition. In fact, some, including Christians, believe them to be in conflict with each other. However, as Francis Collins says, “I found it difficult to imagine that there could be a real conflict between scientific truth and spiritual truth. Truth is truth. Truth cannot disprove truth” (Collins 198). If both disciplines work together to understand reality in a more complete sense, then they are neither impossible to synthesize or conflicting with each other. In reality, they overlap more than people recognize.

The first objective is to reconcile Christian theology to the scientific community. The root problem for the conflict between theologians and scientists is their ignorance and misunderstanding of the other's disciplines. Scientists, devoting their lives to determination of truth and fact by scientific method, have a difficult time understanding how faith can be applied to the search for knowledge. Faith, when quickly glanced at, seems to conflict with the idea of gathering evidence and making conclusions based on reason and logic. It seems the definition of faith is simply believing in something regardless of the evidence for or against it. This simple, and misleading, definition conflicts with scientific method, where evidence is observed and tested to determine truth and reality. Unfortunately, with this inaccurate definition of faith, numerous scientists dismiss any knowledge attained by theologians and, sometimes, react aggressively to Christian theologians or Christianity as a whole. Richard Dawkins, a leading figure in the field of evolutionary biology, stated at a science festival in Edinburgh, "Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence... Faith is not allowed to justify itself by argument" (qtd. in McGrath 84). Dawkins' strong reaction to faith portrays his distrust of faith as a means of belief. As a scientist, he cannot understand the trustworthiness of a system which bases knowledge on a "lack of evidence." However, his distrust with faith and, thus, religion, partly stems from an ignorance of the true meaning of faith. According to Dawkins and many others in the scientific community, "Faith means blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence" (qtd. in McGrath 84). On the contrary, there is very little, if any, evidence of this being the definition of faith. Alister McGrath, a PhD in microbiology and church history writes,

referring to Dawkins' definition of faith: "No major Christian writer adopts such a definition" (McGrath 86). While this may be what Dawkins and other scientists believe, this is not what Christians believe. W.H. Griffith-Thomas, a renowned Anglican theologian in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, offers a more accurate definition of faith that is typical of Christian writers:

[Faith] affects the whole of man's nature. It commences with the conviction of the mind based on adequate evidence; it continues in the confidence of the heart or emotions based on conviction, and it is crowned in the consent of the will, by means of which the conviction and confidence are expressed in conduct. (qtd. in McGrath 86)

This definition synthesizes the core elements of the Christian understanding of faith. The most surprising element to many is "the conviction of the mind based on adequate evidence." To equate faith to "blind trust" is inaccurate; most Christians do not advocate "blind trust." Rather, people first come to faith by reason and the evidence given them. Once this faith is planted, it is cultured and grows as an emotional conviction, resulting in a change of behavior. C.S. Lewis and St. Augustine are just two famous examples of people coming to faith because of the evidence supporting Christian doctrine.

Although it is true that faith begins with "a conviction of the mind based on adequate evidence," it is also true that evidence alone cannot prove Christian doctrine. Evidence can point to Christian doctrine, but ultimately, one must take a step and believe without absolute certainty. However, scientists are in the same situation regarding their own discipline. Richard Feynman, winner of the Nobel Prize for physics in 1965 for his work on quantum electrodynamics, said, "Scientific knowledge is a body of statements of

varying degrees of certainty—some most unsure, some nearly sure, but none absolutely certain” (“Role” par. 1). Scientists observe and test evidence to establish conclusions to point to a possible, if not probable, conclusion. According to Feynman, their conclusions are never perfectly certain. Therefore, scientists also rely on “faith” to draw conclusions from their findings. Without having the ability to be absolutely certain, they must take a step of their own to believe without certainty. Therefore, Christian theology is not “blind faith” regardless of a lack of evidence. In fact, it has a closer resemblance to science than it first appears. Christian theology contains characteristics of science; according to the Christian theologian, Gerhard Ebeling, “It is right for Christianity to be critical of itself...because of its character as a science” (Ebeling 190). If scientists investigate the discipline of Christian theology, they would discover that Christian theology is not based on “blind trust” and that there are similarities to the discipline of science.

While scientists should be able to reconcile with Christian theology, likewise, Christian theologians should be able to find peace with science. There is a belief by some Christians that science is an enemy to their faith. “Certain religious fundamentalists attack science as dangerous and untrustworthy, and point to a literal interpretation of sacred texts as the only reliable means of discerning scientific truth” (Collins 5). First of all, there is no reason by Christians to “attack science as dangerous and untrustworthy.” The God who created the spiritual world is the same God who created the natural world. To fear science, the study of the natural world, as if it contradicts God’s revelation to mankind, is illogical because “truth cannot disprove truth.” If there were contradictions to scientific discovery and God’s revelation to humankind, then the only logical conclusion would be that the God of the Bible is not a

true God. Because he claims to be the creator of the spirit world and the natural universe, there should be no contradiction of truth between these two realms. Secondly, “point[ing] to a literal interpretation of sacred texts as the only reliable means of discerning scientific truth” is like looking for a pie recipe in a children’s book; the Bible is not a scientific text. Rather, it is a documentation of God’s interaction with humanity and his revelation throughout history, climaxing with his appearance onto earth as Jesus. The Bible is not an effective tool for possessing a scientific understanding of the natural world.

Great Christian theologians understood the beauty of nature and the importance of gaining an understanding of God’s creation. According to McGrath, John Calvin “commented on how much he envied those who studied physiology and astronomy, which allowed a direct engagement with the wonders of God’s creation” (McGrath 149). To Calvin, science is an essential discipline because it allows for humanity to better understand and appreciate God as a creator. Through the study of science, humankind’s relationship with God can grow to a deeper level because creativity is one of God’s many characteristics. Furthermore, Benjamin Warfield, a conservative Protestant theologian in the nineteenth and twentieth century saw the importance of celebrating discoveries made about the natural world:

We must not, then, as Christians, assume an attitude of antagonism toward the truths of reason, or the truths of philosophy, or the truths of science, or the truths of history, or the truths of criticism. As children of the light, we must be careful to keep ourselves open to every ray of light. Let us, then, cultivate an attitude of courage as over against the investigations of the day. None should be more quick

to discern them then we. None should be more quick to discern truth in every field, more hospitable to receive it, more loyal to follow it, whithersoever it leads. (qtd. in Collins 179)

Christians should not be afraid of science because “a Christian reading of the world denies nothing of what the natural sciences tell us” (McGrath 149); Christians should be the people most excited by scientific discoveries because they bring a more complete understanding of God as the creator.

Although scientists and Christians continue to battle with each other, there are no logical reasons for their fighting except for reasons beyond science or Christian theology. Their ignorance of the other’s discipline prevents them from understanding their actions and motivations. “Science wants to know about the mechanism of the universe, religion the meaning. The two cannot be separated” (Easterbrook, par. 31). They seek to discover truth and neither can afford to lose the other if they truly seek to objectively explore the truth closest to its entirety: the physical and the spiritual. Furthermore, the similarities these two disciplines possess should force scientists and Christians to realize that science and Christian theology do not conflict. On the contrary, science and Christian theology seek the same ends—the truth. These disciplines work beautifully together because they search for truth from two different, but interrelated, angles.

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