

Is Christianity Unscientific?

Atheist Sam Harris: ‘James Watson, the co-discoverer of the structure of DNA, a Nobel laureate, and the original head of the Human Genome Project, recently [asserted] in an interview that people of African descent appear to be innately less intelligent than white Europeans. A few sentences, spoken off the cuff, resulted in academic defenestration... Watson’s opinions on race are disturbing, but his underlying point was not, in principle, unscientific... there is, at least, a *possible* scientific basis for his views. While Watson’s statement was obnoxious, one cannot say that his views are utterly irrational or that, by merely giving voice to them, he has repudiated the scientific worldview and declared himself immune to its further discoveries. Such a distinction would have to be reserved for Watson’s successor at the Human Genome Project, Dr. Francis Collins.’¹ After developing some relevant definitions, this session will proffer a schema for understanding the range of issues raised by the claim that Christianity is "unscientific".

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I. What is Science?

Scientia = Latin for ‘knowledge’ – modern usage narrower – ‘scientism’ ignores this

Atheist Peter Atkins: ‘the scientific method is the only means of discovering the nature of reality... the only way of acquiring reliable knowledge.’²

Atheist Stephen Hawking: ‘philosophy is dead... scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge’³

John Lennox: ‘Hawking’s statement about philosophy is itself a philosophical statement. It is manifestly not a statement of science: it is a metaphysical statement about science. Therefore, his statement that philosophy is dead contradicts itself. It is a classic example of logical incoherence.’⁴

II. Beware ‘Methodological Naturalism’

Paul de Vrie distinguishes between ‘methodological naturalism’, as a disciplinary method that is *neutral* concerning God’s existence and ‘metaphysical naturalism’ which ‘denies the

¹ Sam Harris, www.project-reason.org/archive/item/the_strange_case_of_francis_collins2/

² Peter Atkins, *On Being* (Oxford, 2011), p. xiii.

³ Stephen Hawking, *The Grand Design*.

⁴ John Lennox, *God And Stephen Hawking: Whose Design Is It Anyway?* (Lion, 2010) p. 18.

existence of a transcendent God.’⁵ He states: ‘the natural sciences are committed to the systematic analysis of matter and energy *within the context of methodological naturalism*.’

Nancy Murphy: ‘Science qua science seeks naturalistic explanations... Anyone who attributes the characteristic of living things to creative intelligence has by definition stepped into the arena of either metaphysics or theology.’⁶

Atheist Bradley Monton: ‘If science really is permanently committed to methodological naturalism, it follows that the aim of science is not generating true theories. Instead, the aim of science would be something like: generating the best theories that can be formulated subject to the restriction that the theories are naturalistic... science is better off without being shackled by methodological naturalism...’⁷

Science is *not*: a) to be confused with 'scientism', b) to be defined as 'methodologically naturalistic'.

Science is: a first-order discipline involving systematic inquiry into the physical world, the primary aim of which is to know (understand, explain and/or predict) as much as we can about physical reality.

III. What is Christianity?

Christianity is a spirituality: *a way of relating to reality* - to ourselves, to each other, to the world around us and (most importantly) to ultimate reality – *via worldview beliefs, attitudes and behaviour*. cf. Acts 2:37 & Mark 12:30.

IV. Is Christianity Unscientific?

Yes – but so what?! So is philosophy. So is Art, Jam...

⁵ Paul de Vrie, ‘Naturalism in the Natural Sciences,’ *Christian Scholar’s Review* 15 (1986), p. 388-396.

⁶ Nancy Murphy, ‘Phillip Johnson on Trial: A Critique of his Critique of Darwin’, *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, 45, no 1 (1993), p. 33.

⁷ Bradley Monton, ‘Is Intelligent Design Science? Dissecting the Dover Decision’, 1,2 & 9-10 http://philsci-archive.pitt.edu/archive/00002592/01/Methodological_Naturalism_Dover_3.doc

V. Is Christianity Anti-Scientific?

No! Being ‘anti-scientific’ means: *being committed to a position* (a belief, attitude and/or action) *in tension with something that unifies participants in the scientific project* when they have scientific disagreements. The charge of being ‘unscientific’ boils down to the charge that one is *irrational* (note how Harris slides from calling Collin’s faith ‘in principle, unscientific’ to calling it ‘utterly irrational’), that one is flouting or rejecting one or more epistemic virtues.

Stuart C. Hackett: ‘Science in this narrower sense cannot function without employing the universal criteria of knowledge.’⁸

One’s only options for rebutting a charge of irrationality are as follows:

- a) Show than one isn’t flouting or rejecting the relevant purported epistemic virtue.
- b) Show that the relevant purported epistemic virtue should be limited (qualified/overridden) in such a way that it isn’t flouted by one’s position.
- c) Show that the relevant purported epistemic virtue should be rejected.

The Christian should grant the *unscientific* status of Christianity whilst assigning critics the burden of justifying assertions about Christianity being *anti-scientific*. Critics must demonstrate that the Christian *necessarily* flouts a *genuine* epistemic obligation *qua* Christian.

Ask two questions of objections:

- 1) *Does being a Christian require one to reject this supposedly essential epistemic virtue* (notwithstanding the actual beliefs, attitudes and actions of Christian individuals and institutions)?
- 2) *Is the accusation grounded in a sound, properly formulated and properly ranked epistemic virtue essential to the scientific project* (and not merely in a disagreement about particular scientific theories)?

The burden of proof rests with the critic to establish that both criteria are fully satisfied if their objection it is to carry any weight.

VI. Overlapping Interests

The fact that Christianity is unscientific in the modern sense *doesn’t* mean that Christianity has nothing to do with science, as if they lived in hermetically sealed compartments (the same thing could be said of philosophy, art and Jam making)...

⁸ Stuart C. Hackett, *The Reconstitution of the Christian Revelation Claim*, p. 313.

Thomas Aquinas called theology the ‘queen of the sciences’ who was assisted by her ‘handmaiden philosophy’. The area of study we now call ‘science’ was called ‘natural philosophy’.

J.P. Moreland: ‘Christianity claims to be a knowledge tradition and it places knowledge, not merely truth, at the center of proclamation and Discipleship. The Old and New Testaments, including the teachings of Jesus, claim not merely that Christianity is true, but that a variety of its moral and religious assertions can be known to be true (Luke 1:4, John 10:4, Romans 1:19).’⁹

According to the ‘New Atheists’ faith = ‘blind trust’. This is incorrect (cf. 1 Peter 3:15). Faith is trust, and everyone – including scientists – exercises trust (and sometimes with good reason)!

C.S. Lewis defined faith as: ‘the art of holding onto things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods.’

VII. God & Science: From Coherence to Consonance

In each instance that science and Christianity have overlapping interests, one can ask if their perspectives are:

•**Incompatible** (because science or Christian theology or both are wrong in this instance?)

Or

•**Compatible**

§**Coherence** (the lack of conflict)

§**Consonance** (the presence of support, whether mutual or in either direction)

Atheist Thomas Dixon: ‘Although the idea of warfare between science and religion remains widespread and popular, recent academic writing on the subject has been devoted primarily to undermining the notion of an inevitable conflict...’¹⁰

Alister McGrath: ‘The idea that science and religion are in perpetual conflict is no longer taken seriously by any major historian of science.’¹¹

Atheist Paul Davies: ‘The worldview of a scientist, even the most atheistic scientist, is that, essentially, of monotheism. It is a belief, which is accepted as an article of faith, that the

⁹ J.P. Moreland, www.scriptoriumdaily.com/2007/11/19/christianity-as-a-knowledge-tradition/

¹⁰ Thomas Dixon, *Science and Religion: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford), p. 2-3.

¹¹ Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism* (Rider & Co, 2005), p. 87.

universe is ordered in an intelligible way. Now, you couldn't be a scientist if you didn't believe these two things. If you didn't think there was an underlying order in nature, you wouldn't bother to do it because there's nothing to be found. And if you didn't believe it was intelligible you'd give up, because there's no point if human beings can't come to understand it. But scientists do, as a matter of faith, accept that the universe is ordered and, at least partially, intelligible to human beings; and that's what underpins the entire scientific enterprise. And that is a theological position. It's absolutely clear, when you look at history, it comes from that theological worldview... it is very, very significant that, in historical terms, that that is where it comes from and that scientists unshakably today retain that worldview *as an act of faith*... And scientists just take this for granted for the most part, but I think it's a really important point that needs to be made.'

Some philosophical presuppositions of science:

- The natural world exhibits a rational order
- The human mind is, to some degree, able to understand the rational order displayed by the natural world
- Human cognitive and sensory faculties are generally reliable
- The rational order displayed by the natural world cannot be deduced from first principles, thus observation and experiment are required
- There are knowable objective values (truth, goodness, beauty)
- The natural world isn't divine (i.e. pantheism is false) and so it is not impious to experiment upon it
- The natural world isn't governed by multiple competing and/or capricious forces (i.e. polytheism is false)

Steve Fuller: 'While I cannot honestly say that I believe in a divine personal creator, no plausible alternative has yet been offered to justify the pursuit of science as a search for the ultimate systematic understanding of reality... atheism as a positive doctrine has done precious little for science... science... makes sense only if there is an overall design to nature that we are especially well-equipped to fathom, even though most of it has little bearing on our day-to-day animal survival. Humanity's creation in the image of God... provides the clearest historical rationale for the rather specialised expenditure of effort associated with science.'¹²

¹² Steve Fuller, *Dissent Over Descent* (Icon, 2008), p. 9 & 70.

VIII. Is Christianity Unscientific?

Yes – in that Christianity isn't science

No – in that Christianity isn't anti-science

No – in that science isn't epistemologically or ontologically omniscient

No – in that Christianity is a knowledge tradition

No - in that Christianity helped give birth to science

No – in that theism provides metaphysical warrant for the scientific project

Recommended Resources

Video

Ayala v. Craig, 'Is Intelligent Design Viable?'

www.youtube.com/watch?v=BxK_Xs10Ung&feature=related

John Lennox, 'Has Science Buried God?' www.cis.org.uk/upload/cis20080428.mov

John Lennox, 'A Matter of Gravity: God, the Universe and Stephen Hawking'

www.dundee.ac.uk/externalrelations/events/lectures/2010/religion.htm

Alvin Plantinga, 'Science & Religion: Where the Conflict Really Lies'

www.veritas.org/Media.aspx#/v/280

Alvin Plantinga, 'Science and Religion: Why Does the Debate Continue?'

www.veritas.org/Media.aspx#/v/283

Alvin Plantinga, 'An Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism'

www.veritas.org/Media.aspx#/v/454

Alvin Plantinga v. Daniel Dennett, 'Science & Religion: Are They Compatible?'

<http://apologetics315.blogspot.com/2009/02/alvin-plantinga-daniel-dennett-debate.html>

Audio

William Lane Craig, 'Has Science Made Faith in God Impossible?'

www.reasonablefaith.org/RF_audio_video/Other_clips/A97TAMU01.mp3

John Lennox, 'God and Richard Dawkins' [www.bethinking.org/science-](http://www.bethinking.org/science-christianity/advanced/god-and-richard-dawkins.htm)

[christianity/advanced/god-and-richard-dawkins.htm](http://www.bethinking.org/science-christianity/advanced/god-and-richard-dawkins.htm)

Alister McGrath, 'Has Science Eliminated God?'

www.bethinking.org/resource.php?ID=176&Topic=&Category

Bradley Monton, 'Think Lecture: Intelligent Design'

http://web.mac.com/cookj3/Intelligent_Design/ID_Podcast/Entries/2008/10/29_Sounds_at_the_beach.html & 'Q & A Time'

http://web.mac.com/cookj3/Intelligent_Design/ID_Podcast/Entries/2008/10/29_Dr._Brad_Monton%2C_Q_%26_A_after_lecture.html

On-Line Papers

Robert C. Koons, 'The Incompatibility of Naturalism and Scientific Realism'

www.leaderu.com/offices/koons/docs/natreal.html

Angus Menuge, 'The Role of Agency in Science'

www.4truth.net/fourtruthpbscience.aspx?pageid=8589952943

Stephen C. Meyer, 'A Scientific History and Philosophical Defence of the Theory of Intelligent Design' www.discovery.org/a/7471

Stephen C. Meyer, 'The Origin of Biological Information and the Higher Taxonomic Categories' www.discovery.org/a/2177

Bradley Monton, 'Is Intelligent Design Science? Dissecting the Dover Decision'

www.arn.org/docs/monton/is_intelligent_design_science.pdf

J.P. Moreland, 'Is Science a Threat or a Help to Faith? A Look at the Concept of Theistic Science' www.afterall.net/index.php/papers/18

J.P. Moreland, 'Complimentarity, Agency Theory, and the God-of-the-Gaps'

www.afterall.net/index.php/papers/490579

J.P. Moreland, 'Scientific Creationism, Science, and Conceptual Problems'

www.afterall.net/index.php/papers/490578

J.P. Moreland, 'Scientific Naturalism and the Unfalsifiable Myth of Evolution'

www.afterall.net/citizens/moreland/papers/jp-naturalism1.html

Alvin Plantinga *et al*, 'Dialogue: When Faith and Reason Clash: Evolution and the Bible'

www.asa3.org/ASA/dialogues/Faith-reason/index.html

Alvin Plantinga, 'Religion and Science' <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/religion-science/>

Alvin Plantinga, 'Methodological Naturalism?' www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1997/PSCF9-97Plantinga.html.ori

Alvin Plantinga, 'Darwin, Mind & Meaning: Daniel Dennett's Dangerous Idea' www.calvin.edu/academic/philosophy/virtual_library/articles/plantinga_alvin/darwin_mind_and_meaning.pdf

Peter S. Williams, 'The Design Inference from Specified Complexity Defended by Scholars Outside the Intelligent Design Movement – A Critical Review', *Philosophia Christi*, Volume 9, Number 2, 2007, p. 407-428, available on-line www.bethinking.org/science-christianity/advanced/the-design-inference---a-critical-review.htm & www.discovery.org/a/4499

Peter S. Williams, 'Atheists Against Darwinism: Johnsons' "Wedge" Breaks Through' <http://epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=66>

The Alexander-Williams Debate on Intelligent Design Theory

1) Denis Alexander, 'Creation and Evolution?' www.bethinking.org/resource.php?ID=193

2) Peter S. Williams, 'Theistic Evolution & Intelligent Design in Dialogue' www.bethinking.org/resource.php?ID=216&TopicID=2&CategoryID=1

3) Denis Alexander, 'Designs on Science' www.bethinking.org/resource.php?ID=260&TopicID=2&CategoryID=1

4) Peter S. Williams, 'Intelligent Designs on Science: A Surreply to Denis Alexander's Critique of Intelligent Design Theory', Part I www.bethinking.org/science-christianity/part-1-intelligent-designs-on-science-a.htm & Part II www.bethinking.org/resource.php?ID=530&CategoryID=8; or as one paper www.iscid.org/papers/Williams_IntelligentDesigns_073106.pdf

Books

William A. Dembski & Jonathan Wells, *The Design of Life: Discovering Signs of Intelligence in Biological Systems* (Foundation for Thought and Ethics, 2008)

Phil Dowe, *Galileo, Darwin and Hawking: The Interplay of Science, Reason, and Religion* (Eerdmans, 2005)

John C. Lennox, *God And Stephen Hawking: Whose Design Is It Anyway?* (Lion, 2010)

John Lennox, *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?*, second edition (Lion, 2007)

Angus Menuge, *Agents Under Fire: Materialism and the Rationality of Science* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004)

Bradley Monton, *Seeking God in Science: An Atheist Defends Intelligent Design*, (Broadview Press, 2009)

J.P. Moreland, *Christianity and the Nature of Science* (Baker, 1989)

Terence L. Nichols, *The Sacred Cosmos: Christian Faith and the Challenge of Naturalism* (Brazos, 2003)

Del Ratzsch, *Science & Its Limits: The Natural Sciences in Christian Perspective* (IVP, 2000)