

Myth 3: Religion Is Opposed to Science

A Theologian Answers the Atheists

by Father Thomas Williams, LC

One of the most common objections to religious belief today is its supposed incompatibility with scientific knowledge. The age of science was supposed to replace the age of religion — or so the story goes — since it provided a better explanation of the natural world that we live in. We no longer "need" God, since science has explained how things really are. Religion is "an enemy of science and inquiry," writes atheist Christopher Hitchens (*God Is Not Great*). The logic behind this accusation runs like this: Religion hates science, because religion is about power. Once people learn how nature really works, they won't need God anymore and they won't need churches or church leaders to tell them what to do. Church leaders will lose their influence and power, so they cannot let that happen. Therefore, church leaders will always try to thwart science. Thus atheist Richard Dawkins writes: "Mystics exult in mystery and want it to stay mysterious. ... One of the truly bad effects of religion is that it teaches us that it is a virtue to be satisfied with not understanding" (*The God Delusion*).

Both Dawkins and Hitchens declare that religion is inimical to science. Science and religion cannot peacefully coexist — they say — since they offer contrary explanations of reality. Since only one can survive, one must go, and the two are in a struggle to the death. The example to be trotted out is always, of course, the case of Galileo Galilei. Though the Galileo affair was hardly a molehill, it wasn't nearly the mountain it has been made out to be. Real errors were made — scientific, theological and moral — and injustices committed, and no one disagrees with this. Still, one historical case (Isn't it interesting how Galileo is the only example ever cited by the atheists?) hardly negates the enthusiastic support that the Church has given to the natural sciences over the course of two millennia.

Religion's supposed hostility to the natural sciences extends to other related disciplines, as well. Christopher Hitchens writes: "The attitude of religion to medicine, like the attitude of religion to science, is always problematic and very often necessarily hostile." He adds that medical research only began to flourish once "the priests had been elbowed aside." Oddly, in the very next line he fondly quotes Louis Pasteur as an example of this enlightened research, without acknowledging that Pasteur was a pious Catholic! A closer look at the facts reveals a much different reality than that painted by the atheists. History shows that the natural sciences grew out of Christian culture. As the sociologist Rodney Stark has so convincingly shown (See especially *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery*), science was "still-born" in the great civilizations of the ancient world, except in Christian civilization.

Why is it that empirical science and the scientific method did not develop in China (with its sophisticated society), in India (with its philosophical schools), in Arabia (with its advanced mathematics), in Japan (with its dedicated craftsmen and technologies), or even in ancient Greece or Rome? The answer is fairly straightforward. Science flourished in societies where a Christian mindset understood nature to be ordered, the work of an intelligent Creator. Science grew where people assumed that the natural world is intelligible and bears the handwriting of its author. Far from being an obstacle to science, Christian soil was the necessary humus where science took root.

Christianity's unapologetic support of science is borne out by the immense direct contribution of the Church to science itself. To take but one area — that of astronomy — J.L. Heilbron of the University of California-Berkeley has written: "The Roman Catholic Church gave more financial aid and social support to the study of astronomy for over six centuries, from the recovery of ancient learning during the late Middle Ages into the Enlightenment, than any other, and, probably, all other, institutions." With this in mind, Hitchens' claim that "the right to look through telescopes and speculate about the result was obstructed by the Church" seems especially disingenuous. What can be said of astronomy can be said equally of medicine, physics, mathematics and chemistry. Just as the Christian church patronized the arts, so it vigorously supported scientific research. The caricature of an obscurantist, ignorance-promoting church simply doesn't correspond to historical truth.

Some of history's greatest scientists — Newton, Pasteur, Galilei, Lavoisier, Kepler, Copernicus, Faraday, Maxwell, Bernard and Heisenberg — were all Christians, and the list doesn't stop there. Some important scientists, such as astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus, were actually Catholic priests! Christianity is not against science, but against an absolutist reading of science. The empirical sciences cannot do everything, and hold no monopoly on knowledge and truth. Many important questions — the most important, really — fall outside the purview of science. What is the

meaning of life? How should people treat one another? What happens to us when we die? No matter how long a white-coated scientist toils and sweats in his laboratory, his instruments will never reveal the answers to these questions. Science is the wrong tool for the job. You cannot scale Mount Everest by using a microscope and scalpel. You cannot write poetry with a Vernier caliper. You cannot answer life's ultimate questions through scientific investigation.

One wonders, in fact, for all their protestations how much atheists truly desire to advance the needed dialogue between religion and science. Hitchens writes that "[a]ll attempts to reconcile faith with science and reason are consigned to failure and ridicule." If this is the foreordained conclusion, there is no sense continuing to dialogue. It would seem that the imaginary "faith-science divide" originates not with believers, but with atheists trying to pick a fight with religion.

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