

## **Four Common Confusions about Religion and Evolution**

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There are four common confusions concerning religion and evolution, confusions that have led to serious misunderstandings in contemporary debate. My hope, in these brief reflections, is to indicate what these confusions are and to show what the correct relationship between religion and science actually is, and especially between the scientific theory of evolution and religious belief.

### **The Four Confusions**

The first confusion is the notion that religion and science are largely incompatible and should be independent of each other, that they have nothing much to say to each other, and that neither should be especially concerned with the other. This view suggests that religious believers should keep science separate from the actual practice of their lives. It is not so much that religious believers should not do science, but that they should not use science in connection with religious belief, say to support religious belief, or to challenge it, or interrogate it, and so on. This confusion promotes the view that religion and science are separate enterprises, and should remain so.

There is a long tradition in the history and development of religious belief in the United States of separating science and religion into two mutually exclusive categories. In particular, the emphasis in Protestantism on justification by faith alone, allied to the notions that faith is higher than reason, along with John Calvin's view that everyone has a disposition to believe in God (and if they do not believe, this is due to sin). All of these beliefs have had an influence on the general articulation of religious belief in this country. Religious believers from all denominations will often speak of .having faith. or .believing by faith alone, and so on, and however unwittingly, such phrases suggest that their faith needs no justification, perhaps has no

justification, or at least that they are not especially interested in the issue of justification. And, of course, when opponents of religious belief point out that religious belief is just a matter of faith, or is based on faith alone, or is outside of reason, and so on, they mean this in a derogatory sense, and it is usually part of an argument to exclude religious views from public life. The big disadvantage in keeping religion and science separate is that a religion that does not take account of scientific knowledge runs the risk of not being taken seriously; it will become marginalized from the market place of ideas, and over time, it will be regarded as irrational and not a fit candidate to participate in public political discussion.

The second confusion, propounded by many scientists, is the belief that science and atheism is virtually the same thing; that if one is a supporter of science and is committed to the search for scientific truths, then one cannot really be a religious believer. One might even think that all scientists must be atheists, or that modern science is a form of atheism. It is not uncommon to hear statements like “As a scientist, I don’t believe in miracles or the supernatural,” and so on. (One thinks of the fine film *Contact* here, based on the story by Carl Sagan.) Statements like these are very misleading, as I hope to show.

The third confusion is that the theory of evolution (and science generally) shows or proves that there is no God; in short, that belief in the theory of evolution is really anti-religious, and tantamount to the belief that atheism must be true. And the fourth confusion is that evolution and the notion of intelligent design in the universe are opposed, contradictory notions, that if one is true, then the other is false--that if evolution is true, then this means that there is no need for a Designer of the universe.

It is appropriate to ask who is responsible for these confusions, for it is not irrelevant to the debate. First, the national science advisory groups--such as the National Academy of Sciences

and the National Association of Biology Teachers--must take their share of the blame for seriously muddying the waters on these very important matters. Many of the members of these groups are, I think it is fair to say, closet atheists. They have no real appreciation for philosophical and theological distinctions, and so they promote positions which, however unwittingly, confuse atheism with science and evolution with absence of design. In promoting these confusions they are indirectly denigrating religious belief and elevating scientific knowledge. This, in turn, irritates and alienates many people who would otherwise be actually very sympathetic toward and supportive of the goals of scientific inquiry.

Second, the mainstream media must also take its share of the blame, for they are constantly promoting the view that religion and science are opposed and simply will not give space to a more nuanced position. The media distorts the issues of this debate because, as they say, it is good television. (and also because, I think, they have an anti-religious agenda). Lastly religious believers themselves have often been guilty of promoting confusion either by retreating into a cozy science/religion separation, as mentioned above, or by exaggerating the difficulties that science can present for religion. Either approach leads to unnecessary confusion and sows the seeds for political conflict.

### Negative and Positive Atheism

We can begin clearing up these confusions by identifying two types of atheism, negative atheism and positive atheism. Up until the twentieth century, atheism could almost always be characterized as negative atheism. That is to say, the atheist defined himself, if you will, in opposition to religion, rather than as a positive adherent of a different worldview. Atheism was negative in two ways. First, the atheist, who was very much in the minority, defined himself in terms of what he was not, rather than in terms of what he was. So an atheist in the past might say,

when asked what he believed, “well, I don’t believe in God,” or “I have no time for religious morality,” or “I can’t stand the church,” and he might go on to distinguish himself from all of those religious believers who believed the opposite. Second, atheism was negative not just in the statement of the position but also in the attempt to *defend* the position: the atheist usually defended his view negatively, by attacking religion and arguments for religious belief, a kind of negative strategy. He did this rather than presenting *positive* arguments in favor of atheism. In this way, atheism was usually perceived, correctly it seems, as being primarily anti-religious.

However, in the twentieth century, all of this has changed, and this marks in general the transition from negative atheism to positive atheism. The negative approach was no longer appropriate in a pluralist world, and a new image was needed. Atheists realized that they needed to get more sophisticated, and this in general occurred at the same time as the transition from a traditional religious society to a modern secular society. Today an intellectually sophisticated atheist is much more likely to present his atheism as a positive thesis, one that identifies what he believes, rather than what he does not believe. For example, today the atheist might advocate that .all that exists is physical,. or that .the universe has an actual infinite past (and so does not need a cause),. or perhaps that .human life is the random outcome of a purely physical process..all positive statements stating what is the case, rather than what is not the case. Atheists now want to state and defend their beliefs in positive terms.

Yet, along with a positive statement of one’s position comes a need to *defend* one’s position in a positive way. It will no longer be adequate from a logical point of view to try to defend positive atheistic statements by simply attacking arguments offered in favor of religious beliefs. So now positive atheism needs positive arguments for its positive theses. Where will it get these

arguments? Of course, the answer is: from science, and especially from evolution, and perhaps from biochemistry, genetics, astrophysics, and so on.

Positive atheism is now generally known by the term *naturalism*, which may be defined as the view that all that exists is physical, and that everything has at least in principle a scientific explanation. Some well known +contemporary naturalists are Francis Crick (of DNA fame), Carl Sagan, Stephen J. Gould, Steven Weinberg, and Richard Dawkins.<sup>2</sup> Naturalism is a view that is gaining ground and is particularly influential in science and humanities curricula at our major universities in this country. (This position is also sometimes called philosophical atheism or scientism.)

But it is important to keep in mind that naturalism should not be identified with science; a naturalist usually appeals to science to defend his view, and therefore has great faith in science, but a scientist is not necessarily a naturalist, and indeed most scientists are not naturalists (which in itself is a quite significant point). Most scientists do not believe that all that exists is physical and that science can explain everything. But because of the close alliance between naturalism and science, one can see how they can become confused in the contemporary discussion. As I mentioned earlier, scientists themselves (including many of those who are not naturalists) are often responsible for the confusion. A recent example of this comes from the National Association of Biology Teachers, which up until quite recently included in its guidelines for the teaching of evolution in high schools the claim that evolution is an *impersonal and unsupervised* process, thereby implicitly suggesting that there is no designer or Mind, such as God's, behind it. They were obliged to remove this language after it was pointed out to them by the philosopher, Alvin Plantinga, and the theologian, Huston Smith, that this guideline was really an implied atheism, and went beyond what the scientific evidence for the theory could show.<sup>3</sup> For as soon

as one goes beyond the scientific evidence, and makes a claim about the lack of purpose behind evolution (or indeed the purpose behind it), one is crossing the line from science proper and moving into philosophy/religion and the general area of one's personal worldview. The National Association of Biology Teachers were here confusing evolution and atheism, and promoting this confusion to science students in science curricula around the country.

<sup>2</sup> Some representative works include: Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis* (New York: Touchstone, 1995); Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1983); Steven Weinberg, *Dreams of a Final Theory* (New York: Pantheon, 1992); and Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design* (New York: Norton, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Gene Stowe, "Don't Mix Theology with Science, Professors Urge," *South Bend Tribune*, February 20, 1998. Statement with language removed:  
[[http://www.nabt.org/sub/position\\_statements/evolution.asp](http://www.nabt.org/sub/position_statements/evolution.asp)] (June 11, 2003).

### Science and the Argument for God

Let us turn to the key question of whether science in general provides evidence that there is no God and also to the question of whether the theory of evolution in particular provides evidence that there is no God. I like to approach these questions from a slightly different angle, by asking the following: why would we think that the theory of evolution, for example, is evidence that God does not exist? What is it about the theory that suggests that God does not exist? The usual answer to this question by naturalists is that evolution is supposed to provide a refutation of two popular arguments for the existence of God; the cosmological argument (the first cause argument), and the teleological argument (the argument from design).

One version of the cosmological argument, very briefly put, says that the universe is a finite series of events, and so there must be a first event (say, the Big Bang). Further, the Big Bang needs a cause; a cause that must be outside of the physical universe, otherwise that too will need a cause. The argument concludes that the cause is likely to be a powerful, intelligent, nonphysical agent. The key point of the cosmological argument is that the universe--whatever its structure and history turn out to be--is contingent, and a contingent thing cannot logically be the cause of itself. And the most likely cause, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, is what “everyone understands to be God”. If you are inclined to agree with this line of argument, it would show at the very least that naturalism, as the thesis that everything that exists is physical, is false.

The argument from design says that the universe shows clear evidence of design or order, and therefore it is reasonable to believe that there is an Orderer or a Mind behind the universe. The order referred to in this argument is the *underlying* order in the universe, i.e., the laws of physics (of which more momentarily).<sup>4</sup>

I believe these two arguments are very good arguments, and along with all of the other arguments for the existence of God, such as the moral argument, the argument from mind, the argument from religious experience, the argument from miracles, and so on, they make a strong cumulative case for the probable existence of a Divine Being that is the cause of the universe and the Creator of all life. Yet, even if one is not willing to go quite this far with me, I would say that at very least these arguments show that naturalism is not a very reasonable position and is not very likely to be true. These arguments show minimally, it seems to me, that not everything that exists is physical, and therefore, that science will not be able to explain all of reality.

<sup>4</sup>For more on the arguments for the existence of God, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q.2.3, in Anton C. Pegis, ed., *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Random House, 1945); Frederick Copleston, *Aquinas* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1955); William Lane Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979); Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); R. Douglas Geivett and myself, eds., *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Curtis L. Hancock & Brendan Sweetman, *Truth and Religious Belief* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998); John Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

Naturalists today speak as if evolution, in particular, can explain everything that we want to explain in our universe and that there is no need to bring in God. Evolution is supposed to be a threat to religion because 1) it can explain the design in the universe--how all life came from a single cell, how the various species originated, and, why species, say, are perfectly adapted to their particular habitats; 2) it can therefore explain how order got into the universe; and 3) it shows that human life, in particular, is not special, that it is simply an accident and is not part of any (divine) plan. Contemporary naturalists, for example, distinguish between cosmic and biological evolution and argue that cosmic evolution, which refers to the evolution of the physical universe, can explain all we need to know about the physical universe, while biological evolution can explain all we need to know about life. Both of these claims it seems to me are fanciful at best and quite irrational at worst. For there are crucial questions which evolution cannot explain, which the theory proper is not even trying to explain, and which it will never be able to explain. Let me now turn to why I think this is so.



The first point I want to emphasize is that in the contemporary argument from design (very nicely developed by the philosopher Richard Swinburne of Oxford University), it is necessary to distinguish between two types of design in the universe, things that look designed to us (e.g., a car engine, a steady downpour of rain, or the human cell), and things that are designed in the sense that they follow the laws of the universe, i.e., the laws of physics. Of course, *everything* in our universe is ordered or designed in this second sense (with the exception, I would argue, of the human mind, especially the freedom of the will). It is a fact of remarkable fascination that our universe is lawful, and not lawless or chaotic. One only has to think of the remarkable complexity of the structure of galaxies, the organization of the planets, the nature of life itself, the existence of rationality, the existence of morality, the nature of mathematics, the existence of spirituality, to appreciate the sophistication of our universe.

I like to use the example of spilling a can of alphabet soup on the floor by accident, a metaphor for how modern atheism claims our particular, ordered universe came about. What are the chances that the letters in the alphabet soup would spell out “Welcome to Boston,” or “Arsenal Soccer Club,” or even “God exists,” if the can is toppled over by chance? Not very likely, I suggest. Yet that is what happened in our universe; of all the possible universes we could have ended up with, if it truly was an accidental occurrence, we ended up with a lawful one, an ordered one, one that follows laws consistently, laws that make life possible, one that, in short, spells out fairly clearly “God exists.”

My point is that evolution cannot explain the laws of the universe, not because it has no evidence to do so, or because some other theory must do that, but simply because the theory of evolution and all scientific theories, *must presuppose these laws*. The theory of evolution might be true in every respect but it will still presuppose the laws of physics: whenever A evolves into

B, it will be following the laws of the universe. And it is *these laws* that evolution cannot explain and that suggest a designer.

The second thing that the theory of evolution cannot explain--and here I am talking about cosmic evolution--is the existence of matter. This again is simply a logical point. Because in order for the matter and energy involved in the big bang to evolve into galaxies, planets, rocks, and human beings, that matter and energy first of all have to exist. Evolution obviously cannot logically explain their existence, for have you ever seen something evolving which did not yet exist? My overall point is that even if the theory is completely true in all respects, it still cannot explain, nor can science generally explain, the main things we want explained: the origin of the universe, the order in the universe, the origin, nature, and significance of human life, and so on. As a strong supporter of scientific enquiry, I am prepared to go wherever the scientific evidence for any theory points, including the theory of evolution, but I do not think, *for the logical reasons* I have given, that the goal of explaining everything through science has any chance of succeeding.

Religion and science are not incompatible, and need not be, because many key issues cannot be explained by science.<sup>5</sup> Evolution is not evidence for atheism, and gives us no reason to think that atheism is true. So given that there is some good evidence to think that God exists, I believe that 1) religion and evolution are compatible with each other; and 2) that, more generally, religious belief is a much better explanatory theory overall than naturalism. It explains in a much better way all that an honest, human mind quests to explain in a fascinating universe, a universe which, as the Irish poet Gerard Manley Hopkins reminded us, is “charged with the grandeur of God.”

<sup>5</sup> For good general discussions of the relationship between religion and science, see Ian Barbour, *Religion and Science* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, c2000)