

Has Science Disproved God?

The Dominant Narrative

[Napoleon] *M. Laplace, they tell me you have written this large book on the system of the universe, and have never even mentioned its Creator.*

[Laplace] *I had no need of that hypothesis.* (circa 1806)

It is not necessary to invoke God to light the blue touch paper and set the universe going.

Stephen Hawking (2010)

The Popular Alternatives

1. Religion removed from the realm of the true – religious relativism.
2. Religion seen to trump science – religious fundamentalism. Seen with some Americans, but also crystal therapists, and so on.
3. Separation of science and religion

Stephen Hawking is a remarkable person whom I've known for 40 years and for that reason any oracular statement he makes gets exaggerated publicity. I know Stephen Hawking well enough to know that he has read very little philosophy and even less theology, so I don't think we should attach any weight to his views on this topic. I would support peaceful co-existence between religion and science because they concern different domains. Anyone who takes theology seriously knows that it's not a matter of using it to explain things that scientists are mystified by.

Prof Sir Martin Rees (2010)

Both the dominant narrative and the popular alternatives to it are at best incomplete and at worst just plain wrong.

Discussion Questions

- When have you seen people assuming this story? Why do you think people assume it so easily?
- Which of the popular solutions do you see most often? What are the problems that come from people assuming them?

1. Science Describes How God Runs the World

In the Bible, the authors show that they know some bits of science. But they don't see that as an **alternative** explanation for saying that God did it – it's another side of the **same** explanation.

[God] made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting. You make darkness, and it is night, when all the beasts of the forest creep about.

Psalms 104:19-20

*[God] draws up the drops of water;
which distill as rain to the streams;*

*the clouds pour down their moisture
and abundant showers fall on the human race.*
Job 36:27-28

So what about miracles? The idea of miracles being things that break the laws of nature doesn't seem to appear until the 1600s or so. Before that, the word just meant “amazing sign” or something like that. It's something that shows power and that acts like a signpost. So when Jesus heals people, it is amazing because it shows his power and it points to him and to the inbreaking of the kingdom of God.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.
Exodus 14:21-22

When [a miracle] happens, it appears to us as an event contrary to nature. But with God, it is not so; for him 'nature' is what he does.
St Augustine of Hippo, Literal Commentary on Genesis

"the laws of motion... did not necessarily spring from the nature of matter, but depended on the will of the divine author of things."
Robert Boyle (of Boyle's Law)

Hence some miracles are indeed “contrary to nature”, such as Jesus' resurrection from the dead, and others are not, such as the parting of the Red Sea. The Bible doesn't draw a distinction between the two categories.

2. Without Christianity, Modern Science is Unlikely

Before 1600, and in many cultures, there had been occasional spurts of technological or mathematical advance, but they had rarely been sustained and hardly ever qualified as “science” in the modern sense. What happened in Europe from 1600-1700 was something new. It required several beliefs to be widely held, all of which stemmed from the Protestant culture in post-Reformation Northern Europe.

- a) the world is in some sense rational and by a single author (Creation)
- b) the physical world matters (Creation of physical matter)

To investigate the motions of the heavenly bodies, to determine their positions, measure their distances, and ascertain their properties, demands skill, and a more careful examination; and where these are so employed, as the providence of God is thereby more fully unfolded, so it is reasonable to suppose that the mind takes a loftier flight, and obtains brighter views of his glory.
John Calvin, Institutes, 1.5.2 (1559)

- c) there are underlying patterns to the way the world works (Rationality of God)

Thus says the LORD: If I have not established my covenant with day and night and the fixed order of heaven and earth, then I will reject the offspring of Jacob and David my servant and will not choose one of his offspring to rule over the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For I will restore their fortunes and will have mercy on them.
Jeremiah 33:25-26

- d) people are able to understand those patterns, or at least approximations to them (Creation of People in the Image of God)
- e) although we can understand the patterns, our minds do not work well enough to understand them without the need for experiment and peer review (The Fall)

every man, both from a deriv'd corruption, innate and born with him, and from his breeding and converse with men, is very subject to slip into all sorts of errors.... These being the dangers in the process of germane Reason, the remedies of them all can only proceed from the real, the mechanical, the experimental Philosophy.
Richard Hooke (of Hooke's Law, late 1600s)

- f) it is possible for people's understanding to improve with time.

Christians in the 1600s looked at people like Solomon, who the Bible says knew lots and lots of stuff about nature. They looked at Adam before the Fall, and they thought that they could try to get back there and try to recover some of what had been lost. They also read Daniel 12:4, which says that in the last days, people will go here and there and will increase knowledge, and they thought “that's us!” Scientific progress requires the idea and the mindset of progress, which 17th century Puritanism provided.

A good barometer of the link between science and religion is the Royal Society. Founded in 1660, it is (and was) the world's foremost scientific society and proved to be a great melting pot of ideas. Every single one of its founding members was a committed member of some religious organisation or other, with a clear majority of Puritan Christians. Even throughout the whole 19th century, 30% of members of the Royal Society were clergy.

In the mid 1800s, things began to change:

- the professional scientist started to emerge. The word “scientist” itself was invented in 1833, but only became common in the late 1800s.
- the Great Man theory of history held that history progressed by great individuals (e.g. Newton, Galileo) fighting against the inherent conservatism of culture
- the fact that universities were dominated by Classics and clerics, but the interesting advances were happening in science
- the dominance of both the clergy and the sciences by the gentry and the rise of the educated working-class
- the publication of Darwin's Origin of Species in 1859 provided a plausible alternative to direct divine creation for the origin of life.

As a result of these, the Conflict Myth grew up – the idea that Science and Religion have always been at war with each other. The first recorded reference to the idea is in Washington Irving's *History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (1837), but it was powerfully used by TH Huxley to argue for the secularisation of universities and the ending of the dominance of clergy in science.

3. Science cannot describe the ultimate reality

There are several different ways of defending this proposition.

- a) Science itself rests on a series of assumptions which it cannot prove.
- b) Science proceeds by trying to find out fundamental laws, but they cannot rest on nothing.
- c) Science cannot show us the meaning of what it discovers, only processes – John Lennox's

Aunt Matilda

- d) Science's claims to have shown either that evolution is directionless and random, or that nature itself is random ignore the possibility of a director behind the scenes.

Discussion Questions

1. Which of the three objections to the popular story did you find most persuasive? Why?
2. How has your view of the relationship between science and Christianity changed?

Creation / Evolution

Some facts which are often neglected in the creation / evolution debate.

1. Saying that God created the universe and human life doesn't imply either that he did or didn't use scientific means to do so. After all, he used a wind to part the Red Sea.
2. If the universe was created directly, it must have been created with the appearance of age.
3. Genesis was not originally written to us, or to people especially like us. In particular, they didn't have anything even vaguely resembling modern science.
4. Genesis was originally written in a culture where people believed the following sorts of things about creation:
 - There were lots of gods, including the sun, moon, stars, land, sea and sea monsters.
 - Matter has always existed, and the gods were created out of it.
 - People were created from bits of the bodies of dead gods.
 - People were made to be slaves for the gods and to make food for them.
 - Kings or idols were seen as the image of gods.
 - There was a big struggle between gods and chaos, or good and bad gods.
 - Early on, there was a lot of water and darkness.
5. The original recipients of Genesis were more worried about whether the seasons would keep on working if they didn't worship the right fertility gods than the physical mechanisms by which the universe came to exist.
6. The **primary** meaning of Genesis 1-2 is therefore not that God created the universe directly rather than by evolution, but that he created everything, and did so in an orderly fashion, without the need for cosmic battles and with men and women rather than kings or idols as the primary image-bearers.
7. By and large, the Early Church didn't understand Genesis 1-2 to teach that Creation took place over 6 days of 24 hours each. For example, St Augustine of Hippo believed that the whole universe was created in an instant, but that the 6 days were a way of categorising it.
8. The Big Bang is far from perfect as a theory, and has major flaws. But it is still the theory that best fits what we observe in the universe. If someone came up with one that fit the evidence better, a lot of people would believe it.
9. If creation took place over a period of 14 billion years, I'd still expect Genesis 1 to look much the same.