

An incomplete discussion

Three Views on Christianity and Science

Christopher Reese and Paul Copan
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How do the Bible and science relate? What place does ‘methodological naturalism’ (MN—limiting explanations of natural phenomena to natural causes) have in the proper practice of science? Is science the only way to know anything? What about miracles? Can we use science to argue for God and Christianity? What role did God have in human origins? The relationship between science and Christianity is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon. And there are many different visions of how they relate, both within the church and without.

Capturing that spectrum is not an easy thing to do. Editors Christopher Reese and Paul Copan opt to use the famous attempt of Ian Barbour. He proposed a four-part taxonomy for the relation between science and ‘religion’: conflict, independence, dialogue, and integration. However, since this is a *Christian* book, concerned mainly with how *Christians* see the relation, the conflict view is set to the side. But not without reason: despite its popularity, it is based on faulty philosophy¹ and an even faultier understanding of history.²

So, we are left with three. And thus, three contributors. Championing independence is Michael Ruse, former Lucyle T. Werkmeister Professor of Philosophy at Florida State University and professor emeritus at

the University of Guelph in Canada. For dialogue, Alister E. McGrath, the Andreas Idreos Professor of Science and Religion, University of Oxford, director of the Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion, and Gresham Professor of Divinity. And for a form of integration, Bruce L. Gordon, Associate Professor of the History and Philosophy of Science at Houston Baptist University and a senior fellow of the Center for Science and Culture at Discovery Institute.

Michael Ruse: independence

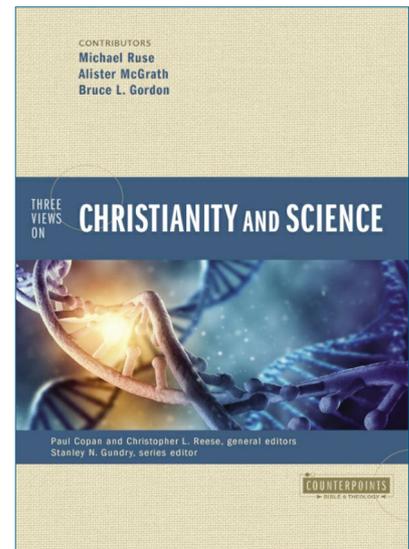
Ruse was an odd pick for this volume, since he is not a Christian. He describes himself as an ‘agnostic’ (although he prefers ‘skeptical’) (p. 19). Nonetheless, his essay is perhaps the most entertaining of the book. It is an amusing romp through the subject from an ‘independence’ perspective (figure 1).

‘Independence’ for Ruse means Christianity and science have no relation. Science is all about reason and evidence, whereas religion is about ‘faith’; a non-rational leap in the dark.

This leads to some interesting consequences. For instance, Ruse is not worried about apparent conflicts between the Bible and science. What should we do with them? “Ignore them!” (p. 22). For Ruse, there cannot be any conflict between the two since the Bible is not about science. It is just about ‘faith’.

Does Ruse reject God because of science? No. He regards MN as a rule for science, but it also limits science. Science cannot answer the big questions, like ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’, ‘What is the ultimate foundation for morality?’, ‘What is consciousness?’, and ‘What is the meaning of it all?’ He rejects Christianity because he rejects its answers to *these* questions, which are theological and philosophical, not because of some conflict with science.

As such, Ruse has little time for the ‘God’ of natural theology. God cannot



be *proven* by reason and evidence. It may teach us a lot about God and our possible relation to him, but it cannot lead us to God. You just have ‘faith’. Or not, as is the case for Ruse.

For Ruse, ‘God’ is an ‘I don’t know what’ so wrapped in mystery that, if you have ‘faith’, all the paradoxes fade into insignificance in its light. Even the problem of evil, which Ruse clearly considers a powerful objection against God. After all, ‘faith’ is like falling in love; it is an unconditional awareness of the transcendent. Ruse’s only problem with that sort of ‘faith’ is that he simply does not have it.

Miracles? They do not matter to Ruse. They cannot be proved to his satisfaction. But even if they could, he would not see any religious significance in them. Attempts to show that Jesus’ resurrection really happened? He calls them “bad science, bad history, and bad philosophy” (p. 40).

Human origins? He knows that if you need God for it, you’re no longer doing science. And he’s pretty confident that a natural explanation will suffice. He explores a few ideas that suggest evolution progresses toward humans. His basic assessment of these proposals? “Basically, the more Darwinian you get, the less likely you are to get humans” (p. 45).

But ultimately, it does not matter for Ruse. Science will do its thing regardless of faith, and faith can see an eternal value in it. That is what faith, what Christianity, should do.

Interaction

The reactions from Gordon and McGrath to Ruse’s essay seem to be as much a feature of their contrasting temperaments as they are a reflection of their contrasting views.

McGrath was genteel, though he demonstrates some of the strengths of his own ‘dialogue’ perspective compared to Ruse’s ‘independence’ model. Gordon, however, goes toe-to-toe with Ruse, and for the most part deconstructs Ruse’s view quite effectively. Ruse’s rejoinder most mused on how “I and they are so very much in different worlds, paradigms if you like. They are believing, practicing Christians” (p. 70). For Ruse, science is primary, and constrains what religion can say.

Alister McGrath: dialogue

McGrath’s essay is a *tour de force* of contextualization; one is not short-changed on the history of Western thought on Christianity and science. But how can McGrath turn that into a *constructive* dialogue relating science and Christianity (figure 2)? That is the burden of his essay.

First, McGrath points out that the relationship between Christianity and science has had a complex history. The relation has often been oversimplified. He considers Christianity and science to be distinct ways to understand the world, but they can interact in a critical and constructive *dialogue*. This is not just a friendly chat between chaps. It is a hard, long look at the commonalities, strengths, and weaknesses of each as we seek to build towards a more unified knowledge base of reality.

So, McGrath says we need to recognize that each field develops its own methods of inquiry shaped for dealing with its unique subject matter. For science, ‘methodological naturalism’ is one of them (p. 79). But this does not limit reality to what can be uncovered this way. Basically, once we’re not using MN, we’re no longer doing science. Theology has its own unique methods for investigating reality; they are simply different from science. But since both fields speak to the same reality, they can and do interact.

But *how* do science and theology interact? McGrath speaks of different metaphors. His preferred one is the ‘two books’ metaphor. In other words, the ‘book’ of nature and the book of Scripture, both written by God and ‘readable’ (but requiring interpretation). This metaphor depends crucially on God being the author of both books; a *theological* assumption that informs our science and reading of Scripture.

What about natural theology? For McGrath, it does not prove God, but aims to show the rationality of the Christian worldview. We can argue from nature to God, or God to nature (which he seems to prefer). But we can also use it to critique other world-views. McGrath uses scientism as a case study.

On the science-Scripture relationship, McGrath suggests the ‘two books’ approach, though it has limits, is the most fruitful way to deal with conflicts:

“Any conflict between the actual facts revealed in nature (as opposed to extravagant scientific speculation about nature) and the biblical texts should lead the responsible exegete not to reject a scientific account of nature nor to doubt the truth of Scripture but to seek a better interpretation of Scripture in the light of these facts” (p. 97).

He highlights the approach of B.B. Warfield, who tried to harmonize Genesis with evolution, but said the Bible teaches God must have guided it.

On divine action, McGrath points out the problem we have talking about it is a peculiarly modern one. It arose after the success of Newton’s ‘mechanical philosophy’ and the rise of deism. So, how do we reintroduce special divine action back into the conversation? Science is methodologically naturalistic, but *limited*. Other frameworks can be superimposed on the same events to give them a reasonable interpretation of special divine action. But then he appeals to Jesus’ *death* to show this. An odd choice; we need to know what to do in cases like the origin of life and Jesus’ resurrection.

He then applies this framework to the test case: the origin of humanity. Evolutionary science may explain a lot, but it does not explain everything. Moreover, reductionistic approaches seem ill-equipped to explain the rise of organizational structures (such as the human brain and the associated mind) that are more than the sum of their physical parts.



Figure 1. Is there a brick wall between science and Christianity, making them independent of each other?

McGrath is a great ‘tour guide’ through the history of Western thought. He even picks out a few gems that can help the science-Scripture conversation along. However, for all his talk of the need to engage in the crucial and critical conversations, they are strangely absent. What do we do when science and Christianity make conflicting causal claims of the same reality? The dialogue fails if we fail to address the most important issues.

Interaction

Ruse’s imagery of walking with McGrath effectively conveyed the commonalities and distinctions in their approaches. Gordon’s response, however, seemed to go on a tangent. He noted the agreements and disagreements well enough, and even scored a few points on McGrath, especially on methodological naturalism. But most of his response went off on a tangent on the philosophy of time McGrath did not even address. McGrath was genteel in his response. He did note that much of the disagreement between him and Gordon may be more cultural than substantive; Oxford dons do things a little differently from American professors.

Bruce Gordon: constrained integration

Gordon’s essay is not an essay *about* the integration of science and Christianity; it is a *proposal* for integrating the two (figure 3). And it is a conceptually dense *tour de force*. He weaves his way through many subjects with considerable verve and ingenuity.

First, the epistemic cornerstones of Gordon’s approach are a principle of sufficient reason (every contingent state of affairs needs an explanation) and that our cognitive faculties cannot simply be blind nature at work, but must aim at producing true beliefs (when working properly). He argues that together the possibility of knowledge is grounded in God, and cannot be grounded in naturalism.

However, Gordon’s philosophy of revelation has serious weaknesses. He notes that in the Bible God speaks through human authors, so we can distinguish between the intended meanings of God and the human authors. While true, it does not give us licence to say the two can conflict. However, this is precisely what he does in several cases, all to accommodate ‘God’s meaning’ to deep time.

The most egregious example is Gordon’s treatment of the Fall (pp. 142–143). He champions William Dembski’s ‘retroactive death’ idea.³ Basically, it says God imposed the effects of the Fall on creation *before* as well as after Adam sinned. However, this reverses the Bible’s order—God making a “very good” world, and *then* God subjected the world to futility *in response* to Adam’s sin (Genesis 3:17–19; Romans 5:12–21, 8:19–23). It also implies God never *actually* created a “very good” world. Moreover, it puts the punishment for the crime before the crime is committed. Furthermore, God *hides* the suffering-filled world from Adam until he sins *so that He can blame Adam for it*. This is deception of the worst kind. Anything but “very good” and ‘God’s intended meaning’.

More positively, Gordon attacks methodological naturalism as a constraint on scientific explanation. He points out its circularity; it assumes what is ‘natural’ to limit the study to what is ‘natural’. This leads us

nowhere. Instead, he invokes “uniformitarianism” as the basis for scientific explanation: “Modern uniformitarianism circumscribes scientific explanations by uniformly operating regularities or extrapolations from them” (p. 146).

But what about miracles?

“In Christian perspective, some developments in the history of the universe might require extraordinary providence [miracles] for their proper explanation, while most may be explained by its ordinary course. Information is always generated from a reference class of possibilities, so which mode of providence prevails can be discerned from the informational properties of the phenomenon in question” (p. 147).

But notice the limit to discerning the mode of divine action: an examination of “the informational properties of *the phenomenon in question*”. But does not Scripture also provide relevant data? After all, Scripture plausibly implies e.g. most of the rock record resulted from *non-uniformitarian* causes.⁴

Gordon also argues that quantum mechanics undermines any sort of necessitarian approach to the laws of nature. As such, the regularities of nature are irreducibly *contingent* features of reality needing an explanation. Naturalism cannot explain this, but God and His will can. However, Gordon then pushes this into an argument for a type of idealism, according

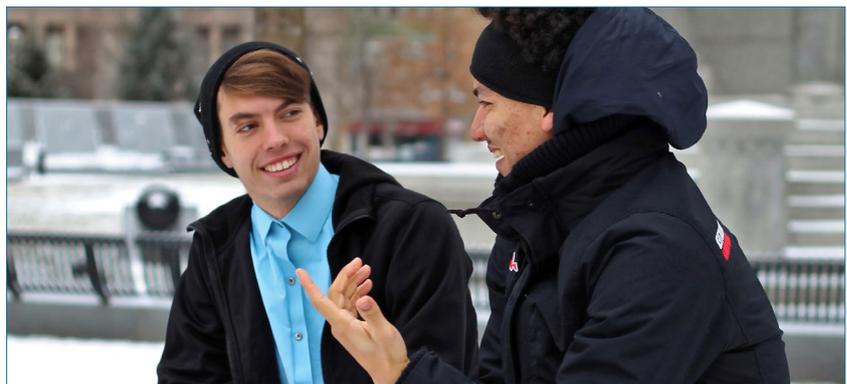


Figure 2. Are science and Christianity dialogue partners that bring together different perspectives on God’s world?

to which there are no enduring mind-independent material substances. This is a controversial metaphysic, even among Christians.

Finally, using his ‘uniformitarian’ approach to science, Gordon says that we can detect some instances of intelligent agency, such as the origin of humans, the origin and development of life, and the origin and structure of the cosmos. There is much here that the biblical creationist can agree with. We can even agree that the strongest empirical cases for intelligent agency arise from these issues, and less so with e.g. the rock record. But this does not negate Scripture as data for reconstructing the history of nature, and creating a research apparatus on that basis.

Interaction

The interaction revealed quite clearly the differences between the views.

Ruse in his lively style did not pull punches. He did not like Gordon’s whole project, since it is grounded on the *knowability* of God, which Ruse’s apophatic/agnostic approach decries. McGrath, in contrast, was much more cordial and much closer to Gordon in content. McGrath is even quite open to a sort of ‘metatheory of design’. He does, however, want to stop short of calling it *scientific* and maintain MN as a practical ‘rule of thumb’ for science. Gordon’s rejoinder is largely an effective response. He points out the fundamental irrationalism in Ruse’s

Darwinian apophaticism. And he gives good reasons why McGrath should be more open to considering design explanations within a scientific context.

Editors: Christopher Reese and Paul Copan

The editors Christopher Reese and Paul Copan provide a preview (Reese) and post-mortem (Copan) of the interaction between Ruse, McGrath, and Gordon. They give the standard summation of the views, with Reese explaining the rationale for the book in the introduction, and Copan exploring some of the questions that arise out of the interaction in his post-mortem.

Some biases are evident, though, in these sections. For instance, since both are Christians, they are pretty clear that they both reject Ruse’s independence view. Christianity is a historically falsifiable religion, based on miracle claims, and so it must appeal to historical evidence for miracles, which clearly forces a direct engagement with science. We cannot separate Christianity and science into two completely distinct realms. They also reject the conflict view (which is the fourth of Barbour’s famous four categories) as inadequate both philosophically and historically, though it does tend to dominate the modern cultural consciousness.

Most interesting, though, was Reese’s rationale for the book in

distinguishing it from other multi-views books that address matters of science and Christianity.⁵ Reese recounts his experiences moderating a Christian worldview forum, he found it necessary to ban discussion of certain science-related topics because of the heat they generated. So, he backtracks to make sure that we’re all “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity” (p. 11). As an example, he singles out the interpretation of Genesis 1 as a non-essential we should have liberty on, quoting the ‘wise observations’ of pastor/theologian Gavin Ortlund:

“We can happily coexist within the church amid differences on this issue. Our unity in the gospel is not at stake. Instead, we should put more focus on the aspects of the doctrine of creation that Christians have classically emphasized and that are distinctive to a broadly Judeo-Christian worldview, such as creation ex nihilo, the historicity of the fall, and the fact that human beings are made in God’s image. These are better hills to die on” (p. 11).

Is it surprising, then, that we do not find a young-earth creationist contribution to this volume? This is despite the fact that they are the only ones who really believe ‘the historicity of the fall’ in the sense of introducing death into the human world and to *nephesh chayyah*.

Assessment

The exchange was lively; it brings up many important questions for how science and Christianity relate, and the contributors offer many keen insights on the topic—especially Gordon and McGrath. For all this, the book is a worthwhile read.

However, is it a fair assessment of the spectrum of views on science and Christianity that actually exists within the church? Not by a long shot. A Bible-first approach was left out. Indeed, though both Gordon and McGrath are from Protestant traditions, there was no application of *sola*



Figure 3. Do we need to integrate science and Christianity like a jigsaw to devise an optimally coherent worldview?

scriptura to this question. Hermeneutical gymnastics were used to avoid the real potential for conflict between the Bible and the consensus of modern scientists. Even Ruse, a non-believer, was guilty of this!

After all, when we substantivize that *consensus* as ‘science’, we paper over the fact that it is a *human* discipline that can go wrong. Even *systematically* wrong. We forget that the assumptions which control the sciences that have the most direct bearing on Scripture—the historical sciences—may often be at odds with the assumptions we would use if we started from Scripture. And if we start from the wrong place, we’re very likely to go to the wrong destination.

Instead, the contributors were allowed *carte blanche* to take pot shots at biblical creation that, frankly, were woefully misinformed. For instance, the one place in McGrath’s contributions where his tone seems to rise above room temperature is in discussion of a biblical literalism that he clearly finds embarrassing:

“What science does exclude is the idea, resting on a *highly questionable* biblical hermeneutic, that the world was created about six thousand years ago. This belief, which gained much support in England during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, rests on a *specific and deeply problematic* way of reading the Old Testament, making certain controlling assumptions that can now be seen to be wrong and that are not demanded or legitimated by the biblical texts themselves. This *spurious* dating of the origins of the world and humanity rests on a *flawed* interpretation of the Old Testament and is *not in any way* normative for Christians [emphases added]” (p. 56).

Compared to everything else McGrath wrote, this is positively vitriol! Nor is it even true. The chronological reading of Scripture that forms our ‘controlling assumptions’ has a long and venerable history in biblical

interpretation that dates back to the church fathers.⁶ Besides, he overestimates the need for ‘chronological specificity’ to demonstrate a conflict between the Bible and deep time. If Jesus put humanity’s origins “at the beginning of creation” (Mark 10:6); if fossils conflict with a “very good” pre-Fall world (Genesis 1:31; cf. Romans 8:18–23)—then we have theologically crucial conflicts that do not depend on the sort of ‘chronological specificity’ McGrath aims at.

In a footnote, Gordon chided biblical creationists for our supposedly “arbitrary” application of “literalism” (p. 163). Apparently, we take the Genesis 1 days literally, but not the cosmography of Genesis 1. But cannot some parts be literal while others are figurative? And there are good reasons to take the timespan of Genesis 1 as literal history that do not exist for its depiction of cosmology.⁷ This does not necessarily mean the cosmography is figurative,⁸ but it shows that we do not hold to the literalness of aspects of Genesis 1–11 that conflict with deep time arbitrarily.

And it should surprise nobody familiar with Ruse that he has no time for creationists. He has spent much of his academic career fighting any hint of creationism from being taught in US public schools! Although, a while after these fights, he admitted that the creationists were right that evolution is a religion.⁹

The only other view that comes in for this sort of vitriol is the conflict view, for which they direct almost all their ire at one representative: Richard Dawkins. Only Ruse interacts with an actual philosopher who holds this view (Daniel Dennett), and when he does, he notes his disagreement, but does so more constructively than anything else. (Much earlier, Ruse wrote a blurb in his fellow contributor McGrath’s book (with his wife) *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist fundamentalism and the denial of the divine* (2010) saying: “*The God Delusion* makes me embarrassed to be an atheist, and the McGraths show

why.”) But at least the ‘conflict’ view is afforded the dignity of actual human faces to deconstruct! Biblical creationists are not even afforded that dignity. Effectively, we end up portrayed as the unnamed ‘masses’ too ignorant to warrant a personal mention.

Conclusion

Three Views on Christianity and Science is an incomplete book. What it covers is interesting and illuminating at many levels, but it fails to canvass the full spectrum of Christian thought on this question. Instead, it looks outside the church to dialogue. One is left to wonder: is there any room for biblical creation at the ‘big questions’ discussion table of science and Christianity?

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