



Christianity in a Scientific Culture

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How do we share the gospel of Jesus Christ in a culture shaped by science? This has been a major issue for Christians in the West for at least three centuries.

In popular culture, science and religion are often portrayed as irreconcilable antagonists. From Galileo to Darwin, the church is seen by many as perpetuating superstition and ignorance by continually resisting scientific progress. At the same time, many Christians fear that science undermines their deepest commitments by understanding the world in thoroughly materialistic terms.

This popular perception is a half-truth at best. Many argue that it is the Judeo-Christian concept of a contingent creation, distinct from its Creator, that enabled the rise of modern science in the first place. Devout Christians, many of whom were clerics, did much of the early scientific research. Although the condemnation of Galileo was erroneous and unjust, historians have shown that there was more openness to emerging science on the part of the church than the popular mythology allows.¹ From the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species*

until the present day, most Christians, including many who are theologically conservative, accepted the concept of evolution in some form.

Yet the popular view persists. I myself have been told with confidence that modern science has “disproved” Christianity. On the other hand, another person who was exploring whether to have faith in Jesus Christ reported that Christian friends insisted he would not truly have saving faith unless he also disbelieved in the theory of evolution. Evangelism will have to deal with these sorts of misconceptions when they arise.

Enlightenment philosophers who were not hostile to religion² sought to avoid conflict by placing science and religion into independent spheres. Science was understood to deal with facts, religion with faith. Science was thought to describe the world as it actually is, deriving its conclusions from an objective, disinterested examination of the evidence. In contrast, religion was thought to describe the world in terms rooted ultimately in subjective experience. The implication of this for knowledge was striking. Previously, statements such as, “The earth orbits the sun” and “Jesus is risen from the dead” would have both been treated as facts by Christians in the West. Now, only the former statement would be considered factual. In a scientific culture in which what is factual is that which is most certainly true, this put traditional Christian truth claims at a distinct disadvantage.

In the face of this development, Christians devised varied apologetic approaches. “Liberals” sought to rethink Christian beliefs so that they would fit

more comfortably within a modern scientific culture. Since faith was a matter of spiritual experience, the results of scientific or historical research did not threaten it. Liberal Christians could abandon literal belief in Noah's flood, Jesus' miracles, or even the resurrection without losing their faith. Their evangelistic message to the modern person was that one did not have to believe outmoded doctrines or scientifically incredible claims in order to be a Christian. The essence of Christianity was not doctrinal teachings but an experience of the divine, or the following of Christ's moral teachings.

“Conservatives” saw this as abandoning Christianity rather than saving it. They often sought ways to move Christian teachings into the “fact” column, restoring them to equal status with science. Whether it was seeking evidence for the flood or making a case for miracles, they used reason and evidence to attempt a demonstration of traditional beliefs. Their evangelistic message to the modern person was to examine the evidence and see for themselves that Christianity is factually true, and then on that basis have faith in Jesus Christ.

Ironically, both of these approaches tried to adjust Christianity to a scientific culture, although in different ways. Commendably, they resisted a capitulation to a thoroughgoing materialism or naturalism. Both approaches are still very much in evidence today. Yet while they continue to find resonance in popular culture, they suffer from a fatal flaw: the science they are presupposing no longer exists. **The Enlightenment wall between fact and faith has crumbled.**

Science is now understood to rest upon bedrock beliefs that cannot be tested in themselves. For example, scientists are committed to the belief that the world is rational and knowable, a concept that itself cannot be scientifically demonstrated. Nor is science considered to be a neutral and objective discipline. The way we see science has been radically altered by the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, Einstein's relativity theory, and quantum physics. Even when working in their laboratories, scientists are still human persons with a particular social location. Moreover, science is committed to a number of large-scale theories that serve as the basis for the questions they ask and the lenses through which they interpret their findings. In fact, science itself is a historical tradition that has its own standards of what counts as genuine science.

This means that the Enlightenment ideal of absolute scientific certainty is no longer credible. The universe is far more complex, mysterious, and amazing than the mechanistic world of Isaac Newton. It is known less through simple facts and more by constructing theoretical models. As Thomas Kuhn has shown,³ science operates through major paradigms, which constitute the lenses that enable scientists to see the world and plan their research accordingly. Scientific revolutions (or paradigm shifts) occur when a new imaginative construct better accounts for the evidence than the reigning paradigm. To move from a Ptolemaic to a Copernican system or from Newtonian to quantum physics, is to see the world in a new and very different way.

To say all this is not an indictment of science. Without some underlying beliefs and reigning paradigms, science would not be able to reason or engage in research at all. In this sense, science can be described as a kind of "faith seeking understanding."

If this is true, then science and Christianity are much more alike than has been assumed. It means that the modern quest for absolute certainty is losing its grip on our culture, and with it the pressure for Christianity and other faiths to somehow prove themselves. In other words, Christianity has no need to be defensive within the emerging scientific culture.

There are a number of implications for evangelism in this world of postmodern science. First, a huge apologetic burden has been removed. Christianity is no longer under pressure to either reduce

itself to a subjective quest for meaning or provide objective proof for its claims. Instead, Christianity can be presented in its own terms as a way of understanding the world and its future from a standpoint of the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

To say that science and Christianity are more alike than once thought does not mean they are identical. Christianity provides answers to ultimate questions which contemporary science raises, but cannot answer through its own methods. For example, Christianity sees in Jesus Christ the meaning and future of creation itself.

It also provides a perspective to address the pressing ethical issues raised by scientific research, such as the manipulation of the human genetic code. While we will no doubt continue to have a culture heavily dominated by science and technology, there need no longer be the assumption that science will ultimately supplant or at least reduce the necessity of religion. The perspective of Christianity, along with other religions and philosophies, should be increasingly welcomed and needed.

Increasingly, it will not be science but the other religions and spiritualities that offer competing visions of the meaning and purpose of creation and humanity. The Christian vision stands on the bedrock belief that the crucified Jesus is risen and coming again. It is the one belief that enables us to make sense of creation and its future. It contains the promise of new life for humanity and the creation itself. In sharing our faith we invite others to accept this good news, receive new life in Christ, and make their own contributions to working out its implications in our world.

If there is evidence for the truth of the gospel on this side of the eschaton, it will not be scientific. Instead, it will be a community of persons whose lives have been noticeably changed, who worship God with gladness, and reach out to others in love. Where such communities and persons are found, their evangelism will have great credibility in the scientific culture of the future. □

Notes

1 For a brief account see Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 27-34.

2 I use "religion" here to encompass all human beliefs in divinity. While this probably reflects Enlightenment perspectives, it brackets important issues, including whether such a generic term distorts the highly diverse phenomena it purports to represent. The focus of the article is, of course, on Christianity and the gospel of Jesus Christ, and I shall not be speculating on how others might live out their beliefs in a scientific culture.

3 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).



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• Diogenes Allen

Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction

(Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989). Allen provides insight into the nature of faith in a postmodern world, with an extensive discussion of philosophical and scientific issues. He argues that the world science describes points to the possibility of God, and leads a thoughtful consideration of revelation and scripture.

• Lesslie Newbigin

The Gospel in a Pluralist Society

(Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989). Newbigin examines how we can have confidence in the Christian faith in a postmodern age, and explores the implications for mission. There is extensive discussion of the changing perception of science and belief from the Enlightenment to the present.

• Harry L. Poe and Jimmy H. Davis

Science and Faith: An Evangelical Dialogue

(Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000). A comprehensive and fair presentation of science and faith issues from an evangelical perspective. The dialogue partners are a theologian (Poe) and a scientist (Davis).