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Deus Verum

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The Fallacy of the "Science vs. Religion" Debate: Bad Philosophy



So if the Church and science are not historically in conflict are their ideas in conflict today? Isn't it true that evolution eliminates God? Isn't it true that computers have destroyed our conception of the soul? Isn't it true that modern cosmology shows that the universe was not created?

The short answer is no. The long answer is much too long for this paper. However, I will attempt to introduce why these ideas are not in conflict.

Beginning with evolution, it is often claimed by scientists and others that evolution has "explained" the world around us and we no longer need a creator to explain. Richard Dawkins notably wrote a book called *The Blind Watchmaker* on this very subject. The first thing to note in such a discussion is that none of the traditional arguments for God are based on the design of animals or human bodies or other natural phenomena. The traditional arguments are metaphysical in nature, and prior to any such probabilistic observation of nature. They reason from a simple observation about the world such as "Everything that is changed is changed by another." And from there reason to the fact that for there to be change at all there must be an unchangeable changer, and that such a thing could only be God.

Besides this fact it is clear that there is nothing, as Alvin Plantinga has noted, in the theory of evolution itself which shows that God could not have directed it. In the first place there needs to have been the mechanisms of evolution (namely reproduction

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and selection) before evolution could have even begun. But if this is the case then they must have come about in some other way than evolution, because they themselves are prerequisites for evolution. In other words there has to be a non-evolutionary explanation for the origins of life and reproduction. Beyond this fact it is clear that the process of genetic mutation which drives evolution consists of unpredictable “mistakes” in gene copying. Besides the possibility of God himself designing the evolutionary process, it is clear that He could have directed it by choosing which mutations occurred and when. Such an idea is also not in conflict with anything we know about evolution.

When it comes to computers a bit more knowledge of philosophy is required but too put it as briefly as possible the mind cannot be explained in terms of material things like brains or computers. The reason this is so is that the mind manifests qualities which cannot be said to exist in matter. These qualities include most notably perhaps “intentionality” which is the quality of aboutness in the mind. When we think, we think *about* things, and it seems ridiculous to say one piece of matter or state of matter is *about* another.

In addition it is plain that a computer is nothing like the mind. The events which occur in a computer are meaningless until a mind interprets or attaches meaning to them. Take for example a calculator which is programmed to produce pixels in the shape of a four when the buttons “2” “+” “2” and “=” are pressed in that order. But it is clear that the meanings of this equation is not understood by the calculator itself, but by a community of language users which determines that the symbols “2” , “+”, “2”, etc. stand for the mental concepts of numbers and addition. The calculator is merely a series of physical reactions created by human minds in order represent human ideas. It is clear, then, that the symbols produced by a computer must be conjoined with a mind’s act of understanding to have any significance at all. In themselves computers are meaningless.

More classical arguments for the immateriality of the mind rest on the observation that the things we think about are necessarily immaterial and therefore the thing that does the thinking is too. These arguments are very effective, but unfortunately I haven’t the time to go into them now.

Finally there is the claim of Stephen Hawking’s, that the universe created itself out of nothing. This is the most clearly absurd of all and hardly takes any argument to defeat. For it is evident that something cannot come from nothing, and that when scientists speak of nothing they always sneak in a little bit of something to start it all off. For Hawking this little bit of something is gravity. But if there is no space to bend or objects to pull on what would gravity even mean? If gravity is a law about objects in space it is doubtful that there could be gravity if there were neither space nor matter. Besides this difficulty, in saying that the universe causes itself Hawking is claiming what an evolutionist would be if he said “evolution evolved”, namely, that the universe is prior to itself, which is, again, absurd.

The funniest part about all of this however is that Hawking declared in the book wherein he presented this argument that philosophy was dead and that science had killed it, he then proceeded to write hundreds of pages of bad philosophy. But as one famous philosopher once said “philosophy always buries its [would be] undertakers”, and in denying philosophy Hawking has done nothing but make himself look foolish.

Which brings to our final point, which is that science and religion can never conflict because they ask two very different types of questions. All of the above paragraphs are philosophical, not scientific. Science itself has nothing to say on the origins of the universe or the nature of the mind or the existence of God because those are philosophical and religious questions and cannot be empirically tested. Science has a certain method which has as its goal the cataloging of different events in nature and their causes. Religion goes beyond these questions to consider the ultimately spiritual questions which science never can.

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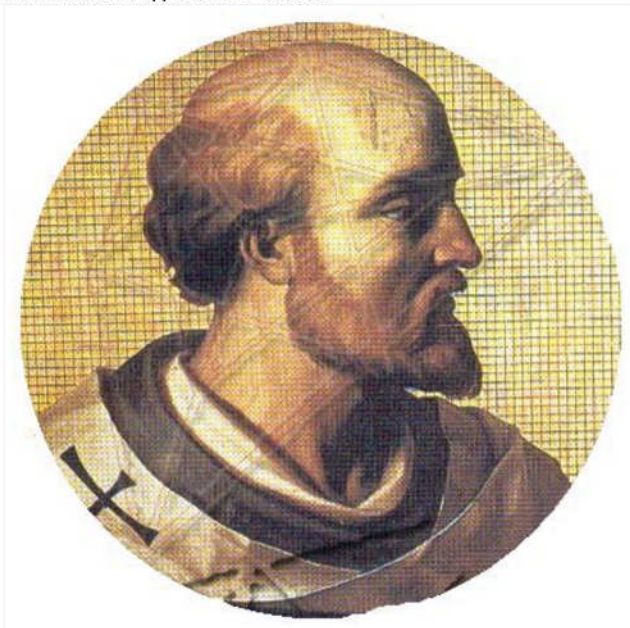
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The Fallacy of the "Science vs. Religion" Debate: Historical Relation

HISTORICAL RELATION.



But before getting in to the philosophical questions about the origins of life and the universe, it will do well to look at the popular claim that the Church has been historically a barrier to scientific discovery. A fine place to start would be with Pope Sylvester II, the man Hawking pokes fun at in his TV special. Pope Sylvester was, in reality, a talented mathematician, logician and scientist. Such a man could hardly be said to have been in staunch opposition to science.



He was born Gerbert D'Aurillac (946 A.D.), to poor, peasant parents. As a young man he entered the monastery, and because of his exceptional intelligence was sent to the school at Cordoba Spain to learn from the Arab teachers. He excelled, especially in the fields of physics, mathematics, and astronomy. He then went on to become a professor at a cathedral school in France and was elevated eventually to the position of abbot at the

monastery of Bobbio. He became the tutor of the King of the Holy Roman Empire, and was eventually made Pope. As Pope he authored texts on geometry, logic and several other subjects, he was a reformer and he zealously worked to put an end to the corruption in local parishes. His most memorable contributions however are the fact that he introduced the abacus, the armillary sphere (a tool used in astronomy), and Arabic numerals (far easier to use than Roman numerals, which held back the study of mathematics in Europe for centuries) to the western world.

The point of taking a look, however brief, at Pope Sylvester's life is that he is not an exception. He typifies the attitude and relation of the Church to learning and science in general. And his case typifies the ignorance on the part of men like Hawking. Going back a few centuries, to the days when Rome still ruled the western world, we find the church already a great supporter of natural science. David C. Lindberg, a U. of Chicago physicist and historian of science, actually says that the early Church was perhaps *the* biggest sponsor of science at the time. Christians like John Philoponus, St. Augustine, and Boethius exemplify the early Church's attitude.

Philoponus (b. 490 A.D.), a Christian, Roman, and scientist anticipated Newtonian mechanics (1,500 years before Newton himself wrote the Principia) in his studies of projectiles and falling objects. St. Augustine was an astute Platonic philosopher and famously wrote against the theories of astrologers (which were popular then, as they now), calling them superstitious. He also wrote that the texts of Genesis were not to be taken literally, and that the message of scripture is theological and moral, not scientific (If only the fundamentalists 1,500 later had read Augustine, or any of the other doctors of the Church, they would never have objected to evolution on the ridiculous grounds that it conflicted with the literal reading of genesis). Finally, Boethius was a great philosopher and statesman. He translated the works of Aristotle in to Latin, and wrote books of his own on logic, natural science, and musicology. He is remembered most today for his Consolation of Philosophy, which has resonated with readers from the 6th century down to the present day.

The age of Boethius however, also saw the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. Europe was overrun with barbarian tribes and for the next 400 or so years the continent was in political disarray as warring clans battled over territories. Without the Roman Empire to keep order much of Europe was in a chaotic state during this period. As time went on however, more and more of these barbarian tribes were converted to Christianity (not by force, I might add, the Church has always been against forced conversions). This political situation, in any case, made it very difficult for learning to progress. The lack of stability in general meant that there could of course be no stable system of education. The one place that learning and civilization did survive was a Church institution, the monastery. In these communities the works of the ancient Greeks and Romans were preserved and translated, and while most of their study was, of course, devoted to theology rather than math, science, or history, it was they who preserved the culture and achievement of the ancient world.

During this age we do see works of science however, and it is no coincidence that the most notable work was done by saints. For example St. Isidore of Seville (b. 560), who wrote works of natural history, astronomy, and other sciences. He is famous for his massive encyclopedia, and his equally impressive history of Spain. Isidore was a man of immense knowledge and also was a great influence on the beginnings of the representative system of government. Another notable figure is Saint Bede the Venerable; known as "the father of English history" he recorded the past of the Anglo-Saxons and wrote on natural science as well. Alcuin of York (b. 730) was a court scholar of Charlemagne's and alongside his works of poetry, theology, and astronomy he is most noted for his famous book of Mathematics. One could go on listing early Christian thinkers in science and math, but I needn't tire the reader.

Finally after this age of political instability we come to the light of the 11th through 13th centuries (a period which truly deserves the names Reformation, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and the Age of Reason). Here we see Christendom coming finally into its own, and the burst of learning and creativity that occurred in this period is incredible. This is the age of the great cathedrals, the great universities and, wait for it, Thomas Aquinas. This age was truly a reformation, in that it reformed Europe from the dusty ruins of Rome, and reformed the Church in order to abolish greed and corruption. It was truly a Renaissance because it saw the rebirth of Greek and Roman learning and culture. It was really an enlightened and reasonable age because of its great thinkers and its dedication to the highest standards of logic and rational inquiry. Many 17th century thinkers pale in comparison to the rigor of the scholastics.

This period, sometimes called the High Middle Ages, began with the rise of the cathedral schools and the reform movement in the late 10th century. As the political order began to stabilize so did the religious and educational. Although cathedral schools had existed since the 6th century (some of them are still operating today in England) they really came to fore during the 10th century. These centers of learning developed into what we know today as universities. In the 11th century the famous university of Paris was established,

along with the Universities of Bologna, Parma, Oxford, Cambridge, and many others. These schools were populated for the most part by middle class students, though there were those with more and less wealth. Some of the schools were actually run by the students who hired the teachers who were most knowledgeable and well thought of. The rise of the University was tremendous and the percentage of the population which attended the university was higher in the Middle Ages than it has ever been since.

A university student in the Middle Ages would pursue undergraduate studies in what we might today call the humanities. That is, logic, rhetoric and grammar. These three subjects would prepare the student to express himself in the clearest, most truthful, and most persuasive way. With this foundation in place the student would move on to get his master's degree by studying mathematics, science, and music. Finally he could get his doctorate in Law, theology, or medicine. The student of the Medieval University enjoyed an incredible amount of freedom, perhaps a bit too much. Academically speaking a teacher and students were not restricted from debating anything (including the possible existence of multiverses and hidden dimensions). The problem was that university students could not be punished corporeally and thus there were instances in which a student might commit a crime but not be punished as an ordinary citizen might.

One of the main things that brought life to the universities was the rediscovery of classical philosophy and science. The medieval professor integrated the work of pagan philosophers like Plotinus and Moslem philosophers like Avicenna into their curriculum, both of whom were widely studied. But no one was so widely studied as the great philosopher and scientist Aristotle. Aristotle's influence was enormous, especially in the areas of metaphysics and logic. The Medieval Europeans parted from their Islamic neighbors, however, in always allowing that Aristotle in his science and his philosophy could be wrong. This allowed for the progression of science beyond what had been taken for granted for centuries. In the field of philosophy however Aristotle's primacy, while certainly not unchallenged, was undoubtedly present.

This age saw the development (by priests of the Catholic Church) of the scientific method and the modern university system. Said development, along with the theological belief that God created nature in a reasonable, ordered manner, and that studying it could be a form of worship set the stage for centuries of unprecedented scientific advance. This age saw the planting of the seeds of modern science. Doctors were performing ambitious procedures like the removal of kidney stones, and were using chemicals in their environment as anesthetics and medicines. Astronomers charted the night sky, Roger Bacon introduced the idea of automobiles and airplanes, and Jean Buridan introduced the physical principles of impetus, which Isaac Newton would later refine in his Principia.

In the fourteenth century the west saw the birth of the Renaissance, which looked down on the preceding Middle Ages as barbaric. That idea is of course false. The medieval far surpassed the Renaissance man in Philosophy, science and general clarity and quality of thought. Still, the Renaissance was a great time of rebirth in the visual arts. But by turning their backs on scholastic philosophy the renaissance thinkers set western thought so far back we have still not recovered.

In the renaissance and beyond, however, the Catholic Church played an ever important role in science. It taught, preserved, and innovated in its universities, and the most notable scientific thinkers of the time (like Copernicus, or Cusa) were themselves priests. Unfortunately the reformation set science back just as the renaissance had set back philosophy. The Protestant thinkers did not have the philosophical foundation that the scholastics had had, and thus turned their backs on reason. In scorning the Middle Ages western man had scorned reason itself. They emphasized the primacy and literal nature of scripture over the role of reason, and therein lie the roots of the fundamentalism we still see today in America. This abandonment of the traditional Christian position truly was a roadblock for science, but the Catholic Church continued to support scientific endeavor nevertheless. In the following centuries the Church produced the fathers of astrophysics, aeronautics, geology, genetics, mineralogy, non-euclidean geometry, and big bang cosmology (and those are just the ones who were also priests! And even then this list is not exhaustive).

But then there is that favourite instance that everyone likes to refer to, Galileo. Galileo, so the story goes, proved that the earth went around the sun, and because that went against genesis the church jailed him for life. In reality Galileo was attempting to prove that the Sun was the center of the universe (he was wrong) and all of his arguments for the movement of the earth turn out to have been false. As we have seen, the Catholic Church has never been for a literal reading of Genesis, so what was the big deal? Well, two things 1) Galileo had insulted the pope and the cardinal who tried him publicly previous to his trial and 2) he was asserting as proven things which educated men (like the pope and cardinals) new to be still nothing but speculation. In the end the stubbornness and insults of Galileo meant that he was convicted and sentenced to house arrest.

So from our very quick glance at the historical relation of the church and science I think

it should be clear that the church has played a role in supporting, not opposing, science. I hope it is clear also that there is no conflict within the scientific individuals between their science and their faith. One need only look at Kepler, or Brahe, or Newton, or Blessed Nicholas Steno (the father of geology), to find that out. If any of the above claims seem extreme, know that they are actually supported by the great majority of academic historians of science. No one educated on the subjected believes the myths mentioned at the beginning of this section, but unfortunately many non historians do. So where has the idea of a conflict between science and religion even come from? Two places: bad history and bad philosophy.

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The Fallacy of the "Science vs. Religion" Debate: Bad History

BAD HISTORY



The history which began to portray the church as the opponent of science first came from the pens of protestant propagandists. This claim was, of course, not found very credible at the time but a few centuries later the theme was gladly taken up by atheist Enlightenment thinkers. In their disgust with the social institution of the "Old Regime" thinkers like Voltaire were the ones who really started the science vs. religion myth.

Influenced by these men an American, A.D. White, was the one who truly engrained this idea into the modern consciousness. His famous book *The History of the Warfare Between Science and Theology* was the most blatant statement of the idea yet. The publication of this book occurred at the same time as Darwin published his *Origin of Species*, and in the confusion that followed Darwinists like T.H. Huxley used White's book alongside Darwin's in order to help their previous anti-religious agenda. The idea of the Church as the enemy of science became the vogue in universities and was repeated so loudly and for so long by so many that the common man came to accept it as common knowledge.

In any case the content of White's book was sketchy at best, it was heavily footnoted, but as the physicist and Benedictine Stanley Jaki has noted, if one bothers to check his sources one wonders how in the hell he could write the things he did. This book and others like it held sway until the early 20th century when several writers gave us a clearer picture of the historical events.

The correction of these popular falsehoods really began with the theoretical physicist Pierre Duhem who, while researching in the universities library found hundreds of forgotten old manuscripts dealing with medieval science and the Church. This resulted in his writing a massive 11 volume history of science called *Le Systemes du Monde*. This groundbreaking research once again opened the historical field to a more accurate view of the historical situation. In America Joseph J. Walsh, a doctor, professor of science at Fordham and a true renaissance man with a doctorate in law as well as an Sc.D (one step above a PhD) in biology, wrote a number of books including *Catholic Churchmen in Science*, and *Science and the Popes*. These men influence the work of several later historians and in more recent times the likes of Edward Grant, David C. Lindberg, and James Hannam, all of whom are physicists and historians, and all of whom have helped to bring clarity and truth to the history of Science.

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The Fallacy of the "Science vs. Religion" Debate

Everyone knows that the Church and science are inherently opposed. Everyone knows they always have been. The Church has smothered science practically since Christ and, dear me, *everyone* knows about Galileo and how he was jailed by the church like so many other scientists. He was probably lucky that they didn't accuse him of being a witch and execute him. Aside from this everyone is aware that modern science has totally disproven religion, specifically the religion of Christianity, or that if it does not disprove it, it certainly disagrees with it.

Of course, what everyone "knows" is wrong. The Church has not historically been in conflict with scientists or their findings, in fact the church has been one of history's greatest supporters of scientific endeavor. The Church never burned any scientist and the Galileo trial not the story it is made out to be, if it is even significant at all. Finally, the findings of science do not conflict with the dictates of the Catholic faith, and they, in fact, cannot.

Despite the fact that the above claims (as I hope to show) are false, they certainly do get a lot of attention. I can think of no other issue than the supposed "science vs. religion conflict" that is the subject of so much ignorance. The fact that our main sources of information are Discovery Channel, History Channel, and our high school teachers doesn't help. For the more educated hipster types the sources may be Richard Dawkins or Stephen Hawking, who are both intelligent men but unfortunately awful historians and worse philosophers.

A case in point is the Discovery Channel special "Did God Create the Universe?" 1.5 hours of ignorance pretending to be knowledge. Here Mr. Hawking presents us with the required stories about corrupt, science-stopping Popes and sinister medieval superstition. But the big idea presented in the show is that Mr. Hawking has "announced" that God could not have created the universe, because the universe made itself. How did it go about doing so? Well "because there is a law like gravity", he has said, and thus the universe can create itself out of nothing. If you think that sounds stupid, you are right, from a logical standpoint, it is absurd.

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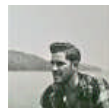
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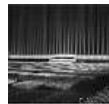
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