

# SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY: BATTLE BY PROXY

John Alexander

## Introduction

The *World Book Dictionary* defines “proxy” as “an agent; deputy; substitute.”<sup>1</sup> During the Cold War, the United States and Soviet Union often fought so-called “proxy wars” between client states rather than face one another directly. Stockholder meetings regularly hold “proxy votes” in which substitutes for the actual shareholders attend and conduct the company’s business transactions.

In debates between Christianity and secularists, many modern evangelical Christians view science as a proxy for secularists who deny the validity of the Christian faith. These Christians willingly (if ignorantly) cede science to the secularists in the mistaken belief that science and theology constantly, consistently stand in opposition to one another. These Christians have forgotten — or never known — that modern science originated in Christianity and that many of the Enlightenment’s greatest scientific achievements first took shape in the minds of devout believers.

John Polkinghorne is not one of those Christians.

Polkinghorne, an award-winning physicist and Anglican priest, combines the best of both Christianity and science. As a member of the Royal Society, Polkinghorne commands the respect of the scientific community. As a theologian, Polkinghorne demonstrates how orthodox Christianity can incorporate scientific truth into a more comprehensive understanding of God’s creation and work in the universe.

---

<sup>1</sup> *The World Book Dictionary*, Electronic Edition (Chicago: World Book, Inc., 2001).

Many of Polkinghorne's ideas would fail to convince fundamentalist evangelicals of his orthodoxy. Those Christians who reject beliefs inconsistent with their interpretation of scripture will dismiss Polkinghorne outright as a "pseudo-Christian." However, Christians seeking to reconcile scientific truth with theological truth will appreciate how Polkinghorne demonstrates God's use of theology and science to reveal Himself to humanity.

### **Agreements between Science and Theology**

Science and theology share three common traits: a passionate desire for truth, a hesitancy to accept new ideas, and the subjectivity of their practitioners.

Theologians seek diligently to draw the truth from Scripture, constantly building on the work of their predecessors. Any major theological shift usually faces major opposition unless it is proved to fit into the doctrines and tradition of the church catholic. Scientists earnestly follow experiments wherever the evidence takes them. In both science and theology, new insights come only rarely and are accepted only after intense scrutiny.

Polkinghorne understands that these moments — when scientific theory is promoted to law — occur only rarely and after great thought and intensive experimentation. One reason for this hesitation, according to Polkinghorne, is that "the true goal of scientific endeavour is understanding of the structure of the physical world, an understanding which is never complete but ever capable of further improvement."<sup>2</sup> Newtonian physics stood authoritatively for centuries before Einstein demonstrated the necessity for relativity in the subatomic world.

---

<sup>2</sup> John Polkinghorne, *One World: The Interaction of Science and Theology* (London: SPCK, Holy Trinity Church, 1986), 22.

Theology shares much with science in this regard. C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity* of his intent to “expound ‘mere’ Christianity, which is what it is and what it was long before I was born and whether I like it or not.”<sup>3</sup> Lewis could comfortably expound on ‘mere’ Christianity because he knew the beliefs he declared were, with necessary refinements through the centuries, the same as those held by the Apostles. For all the debates of the first five centuries A.D., Christians today can still claim to “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”<sup>4</sup> The faith has been clarified but, on the whole, remains unmodified. Christians still proclaim the ancient mystery of faith: “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.”<sup>5</sup> No theological changes in time since have modified these beliefs. Thomas Aquinas signaled the first major theological shift in nearly 800 years with his *Summa Theologica*; Luther and Calvin were two and a half centuries removed from Aquinas. None of these theologians disproved or modified orthodox Christianity

Scientists hesitate to overturn long-held beliefs for another reason: the subjectivity of the experimenters. Contrary to popular belief, scientists are as subjective as other humans. Polkinghorne recognizes this, saying “the consideration of actual scientific practice reveals a more subtle activity in which the judgements of the participants are critically involved.”<sup>6</sup> Given the possibility of further improvement in the experiments and the acknowledged subjectivity of the experimenters, the reputation of scientists as reckless iconoclasts seems highly overrated.

---

<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers 2001), ix.

<sup>4</sup> Jude 3, English Standard Version (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation), 363.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

Theologians also recognize the humanness of their profession and the subjectivity this implies. One theologian wrote in the Preface to his systematic theology, “while I still hold to the old doctrines, I interpret them differently and expound them more clearly, because I seem to myself to have reached a fundamental truth which throws new light upon them all.”<sup>7</sup> In his book *Thinking about God*, theologian Fisher Humphries says that his theology is “corrigible” and “open to correction.... If we refuse to admit that our theology is corrigible, we effectively place it on the level of the Bible itself.”<sup>8</sup>

Science and theology both recognize the corrigibility of their claims; science because the experimental techniques continually improve, and theology because of new understanding of old doctrines. So why do science and theology so often seem antithetical to one another?

### **Science and Theology: the Wrong Tools in the Wrong Hands**

Scientists and theologians have legitimate points of conflict. Miracles form one such point. Christianity is based on three fundamental miracles: the Incarnation of Christ, the Virgin Birth, and the Resurrection. Scientists cannot explain these miracles, leading to mistrust. Scientists pride their profession on accuracy in measurements. These miracles cannot be explained quantitatively. Given their obsession with objectivity, scientists mistrust miracles as a “cooking of the books” to achieve the desired results.

C.S. Lewis, however, defends the miracles of the Christian faith by reminding his readers of the regularity of God’s creation. Lewis writes in *Miracles* that “Belief in miracles, far from

---

<sup>7</sup> Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1907), vii.

<sup>8</sup> Fisher Humphries, *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (New Orleans: Insight Press, 1994), 11.

depending on an ignorance of the laws of nature, is only possible in and far as those laws are known.... If you have not yet noticed that the sun always rises in the East you will see nothing miraculous about his rising one morning in the West.”<sup>9</sup> Lewis later proves that miracles do not interfere with Nature but are subsumed by Nature to form the present.<sup>10</sup>

Much misunderstanding between science and theology rests on the perception that science consists only of theory, while theology alone defines truth. Conflict frequently erupts when scientists propose theories that seem to contradict the truth theologians perceive from Scripture. The battle intensifies when scientists, finally convinced of the veracity of their theories, begin expounding those ideas as truth.

More than any other reason, science and theology find themselves opposed because of improper usage in the wrong hands. Secularists who use science to disprove Christianity lead many Christians to mistrust scientists in general. These Christians often mistrust theologians as much as scientists, fearing that necessary theological discussions and debates are designed to circumvent the truths and traditions of the church. Even worse, these same Christians malign theologians like Polkinghorne who attempt to reconcile scriptural truths with scientific discoveries, accusing them of compromising the truths of Scripture. Polkinghorne decries those Christians who declare “the true believer must stand by his faith whatever the evidence against

---

<sup>9</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers 2001), 75.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>11</sup> John Polkinghorne, *One World: The Interaction of Science and Theology* (London: SPCK, Holy Trinity Church, 1986), 26.

it.”<sup>11</sup> The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* defines faith as “the human response to the divine truth.”<sup>12</sup> This definition includes belief in God, not in the incredible.

The church needs more “scientific theologians” like Polkinghorne to defend herself from secularists misusing science. Furthermore, more Christians must devote themselves to learning the scientific process and theories rather than relying on misinformed sources claiming scientific truth when only theories exist. The English poet Alexander Pope wrote that “A little learning is a dangerous thing; Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring.”<sup>13</sup> Secularist and Christian alike should take these words to heart, recognize the enemies for who they are and undertake the task of honest debate. Science is not the enemy to theology but, rather, another tool of humanity in search of the truth.

This paper includes 1,300 words at the end of the previous sentence.

---

<sup>12</sup> E.A. Livingstone, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), s.v. “Faith”

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Pope, “An Essay on Criticism,” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Third Edition (New York, London: W.W. Norton and Company 1975), 1131.

## Works Cited

- The Book of Common Prayer*. New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation.
- Holy Bible, English Standard Version. Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2001.
- Humphries, Fisher. *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. New Orleans: Insight Press, 1994.
- Lewis C.S. *Mere Christianity*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers 2001.
- Lewis, C.S. *Miracles*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001.
- Livingstone, E.A., ed. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Polkinghorne John. *One World: The Interaction of Science and Theology*. London: SPCK, Holy Trinity Church, 1986.
- Pope, Alexander. "An Essay on Criticism," *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Third Edition. New York, London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1975.
- Strong, Augustus Hopkins. *Systematic Theology*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1907.
- World Book Dictionary, Electronic Edition. Chicago: World Book, Inc., 2001.