



The Scientific Revolution: Its Classical and Christian History

with Dr. Ted Davis

Lecture 25.1: New Interactions between Christianity and Science: Part One

Outline:

New Interactions between Science & Religion

- Christianity interacted with the new science in very important ways. Metaphysical questions are never far from science. Christian beliefs shaped early modern views of scientific knowledge mainly at the metaphysical level, below the surface rather than in your face.

How Theology can Influence Views of Scientific Knowledge

Can science be done? (Why is science of nature possible?)	The possibility question
Why should science be done?	The morality/motivation/justification question
What sorts of theories are acceptable?	The regulative question
How should science be done?	The methodology/epistemology question

Can science be done? (Why is science of nature possible?)

- Einstein and other modern scientists have pondered this.
- “The most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible.”
 - Why should nature make sense to us?
- This question was infrequently asked directly during the Scientific Revolution. The intelligibility of nature was implicitly understood to be a consequence of humans sharing the mind of the Creator, as part of the image of God. Johannes Kepler was perhaps the most outstanding exception to this general pattern.
 - “Geometry, being part of the Divine mind from time beyond memory, from before the origin of things, has provided God with the models for creating the world, models that have been implanted in human beings, together with the image of God. Geometry did not arrive in the soul through the eyes.” – Johannes Kepler, *Harmonices mundi* (1619)

Why should science be done?



- The morality question: what is science good for?
- Three common answers during the Scientific Revolution:
 - (1) To benefit the common good;
 - (2) To obey the Genesis mandate to have dominion over creation;
 - (3) To praise & glorify God for the wonders of the creation
- All three answers had explicit theological support.
- We've already seen how Bacon and Boyle fit perfectly with (1) and (2), and how Boyle, Newton, and Kepler fit perfectly with (3).
- Let's look more closely at natural theology. Although the mechanical philosophy gave a strong impetus to natural theological arguments, it also posed challenges to Christian beliefs. Some founders of the American nation were Deists, who believed in a Creator, partly on the basis of natural theology, yet they rejected Christianity. Historian John Fea helps us understand this situation.
 - This much seems clear: some of the founders were indeed Deists – they had grave doubts about the reality of miracles, did not accept special revelation, and rejected the Christian gospel of sin and redemption.
 - Yet, they were not purely secular thinkers either: they believed in a providential God who does interact with the world to some extent even now: in other words, their God wasn't entirely "hands off" once the creation was finished.
 - As Fea notes, "nearly all of the so-called Founding Fathers believed in a God who controlled the world, intervened in the affairs of humankind, and, at times, even answered prayer." – Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?*, p. 177
 - **Benjamin Franklin** is often seen as a deist, partly because of a youthful claim to have become a "thorough Deist" after reading (ironically) some of the early Boyle Lectures, which were designed to combat deism. As an adult, Franklin clearly rejected the Christian gospel. However, he unabashedly affirmed his belief in "a Providence that takes Cognizance of, guards and guides and may favour particular Persons," and answers prayer.
 - Similarly, **Thomas Jefferson** rejected the gospel, but believed in God's "superintending power to maintain the Universe in its course and order." In the Declaration of Independence, he spoke of "the protection of divine Providence."
 - At the same time, according to Fea, Jefferson rejected the divine inspiration of the Bible and "any doctrines that could not be explained by reason, including the incarnation, the deity of Christ, the atonement, and the resurrection." *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?*, p. 204
 - Jefferson prepared his own private version of the Bible, which he didn't tell many people about. "The Life and Morals of Jesus of



Nazareth, Extracted Textually from the Gospels in Greek, Latin, French and English.”

- Using Bibles in English, Greek, Latin, and French, he cut out the parts he wanted to keep.
- Jefferson assembled the extracts in parallel columns by language and had it bound in leather. Only Jesus’ life and moral teachings from the four gospels remain. Nothing more – the miracles & prophecies are removed. The book ends with his burial, not his resurrection.
- The acceptance of the mechanical philosophy not only encouraged natural theology. Its picture of nature operating with the predictability and regularity of a clock led to a growing tension with theology over the reality of divine providence and the possibility of miracles. Jefferson and Franklin were both very skeptical of miracles – and they were hardly alone.
- Scottish philosopher **David Hume** argued that no miracle stories should ever be believed – that no amount of evidence could ever warrant their acceptance. The uniformity of nature is so well established that we should not believe any claims of exceptions – despite the fact that the uniformity of nature is an inductive inference, and we cannot have complete certainty from induction!
 - This is often called Hume’s problem of induction.
- A similar skepticism was expressed by **Charles Darwin**, near the end of his life. “By further reflecting that the clearest evidence would be requisite to make any sane man believe in the miracles by which Christianity is supported, - that the more we know of the fixed laws of nature the more incredible do miracles become.” – Charles Darwin, *Autobiography*, ed. Nora Barlow (1958), p. 58
- For such reasons, some Christian theologians today are unwilling to affirm miracles, even those involving the creation of the world and the resurrection of Jesus. Others continue to affirm biblical miracles, while showing an appropriate degree of skepticism towards Hume’s skepticism.
 - The late John Polkinghorne (1930-2021), a particle physicist and Anglican priest was an outspoken defender of the Resurrection. In his view, Hume’s “confidence that the laws of nature were known with a certainty that extends into the realms of unprecedented and hitherto unexplored phenomena was certainly falsified by the history of science subsequent to the eighteenth century, and it could never be pressed to dispose of an event like the resurrection of Jesus, which claims to be a particular act of God in a unique circumstance.” – *The Faith of a Physicist*, p. 108
 - Anglican theologian N.T. Wright is equally skeptical of the skeptics. In his view, when the New Testament authors and other “second-Temple” Jews talked about “resurrection,” they could mean only a



full-blown bodily resurrection, not a mere resuscitation or an encounter with ghosts or spirits.