THE HISTORIC ALLIANCE OF CHRISTIANITY AND SCIENCE

By Kenneth Richard Samples

The influential British mathematician-philosopher Bertrand Russell once remarked, "I am as firmly convinced that religions do harm as I am that they are untrue." In his popular and controversial work "Why I Am Not A Christian," Russell leveled the charge that Christianity, in particular, has served as an opponent of all intellectual progress, especially progress in science.[1] Since Russell's time, other outspoken advocates of a naturalistic worldview have echoed Russell's claim, asserting that Christianity is incompatible with-even hostile to-the findings of modern science. Many in our culture view Christianity as unscientific, at best, anti-scientific at worst.

Conflicts between scientific theories and the Christian faith have arisen through the centuries, to be sure. However, the level of conflict has often been exaggerated, and Christianity's positive influence on scientific progress is seldom acknowledged.[2] I would like to turn the tables by arguing for Christianity's compatibility with - and furtherance of scientific endeavor and arguing against the compatibility of naturalism and science.

(1) The intellectual climate that gave rise to modern science (roughly three centuries ago) was decisively shaped by Christianity.[3] Not only were most of the founding fathers of science themselves devout Christians (including Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Newton, Boyle, and Pascal),[4] but the Christian worldview provided a basis for modern science both to emerge and to flourish. Christian theism affirmed that an infinite, eternal, and personal God created the world ex nihilo. The creation, reflecting the rational nature of the Creator, was therefore orderly and uniform. Further, humankind was uniquely created in God's image (Gen. 1:26-7), thus capable of reasoning and of discovering the intelligibility of

the created order. In effect, the Christian worldview supported the underlying principles that made scientific inquiry possible and desirable.

Eminent historian and philosopher of science Stanley Jaki has argued that science was "stillborn" in other great civilizations outside Europe because of prevailing ideas that stifled scientific development, e.g., a cyclical approach to time, an astrological approach to the heavens, metaphysical views that either deified nature (animism) or denied it (idealism).[5]

(2) The principles underlying the scientific method (testability, verification/falsification) arise from the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. The experimental method was clearly nurtured by Christian doctrine.[6] Because the Christian founders of modern science believed that the heavens genuinely declare the glory of God (Ps. 19: 1), they possessed both the necessary conceptual framework and the spiritual incentive to boldly explore nature's mysteries. According to Christian theism, God has disclosed Himself in two dynamic ways: through special revelation (God's redemptive actions recorded in the Bible - "God's book") and through general revelation (God's creative actions discoverable in nature - "God's world"). Puritan scientists in England and in America viewed the study of science as a sacred attempt to "think God's thoughts after Him."[7]

While Christians have plenty of room to grow in the virtues of discernment, reflection, and vigorous analysis, the wisdom literature of the Old Testament consistently exhorts God's people to exercise them, and the New Testament teaches the same message (see Col. 2:8; 1 Thes. 5:2 1; 1 Jn. 4: 1). These principles served as the backdrop for the emerging experimental method.

(3) Some of the philosophical presuppositions foundational to the study of science include these: the existence of an objectively real world, the comprehensibility of that world, the reliability of sense perception and human rationality, the orderliness and uniformity of nature, and the validity of mathematics and logic.[8] These necessary preconditions of science are rooted in Christian theism's claims of an infinite, eternal, and personal creator who has

carefully ordered the universe and provided man with a mind that corresponds to the universe's intelligibility. This Christian schema served as the intellectual breeding ground for modern science. It sustained science and enabled it to flourish. How does naturalism compare? Does it explain or provide fertile ground for the birth and progress of science?

Consider how a naturalist might answer the following questions: How can a world that is the product of blind, non-purposeful processes account for and justify the crucial conditions that make the scientific enterprise even possible? How does naturalism justify the inductive method, assumptions about the uniformity of nature, and the existence of abstract, non-empirical entities such as numbers, propositions, and the laws of logic if the world is the product of a mindless accident? According to naturalism, isn't even the human mind one accident in a series of many accidents?[9] If so, how can we have any confidence it steers us toward truth? How could such a concept as truth even be conceived?

Christian philosopher Greg L. Bahnsen argues not only that naturalism fails to justify its underlying presuppositions but also that naturalists illegitimately rest their scientific endeavors on Christian theistic principles. Naturalists borrow from Christianity. Consider this insightful observation by physicist and popular author Paul Davies:

People take it for granted that the physical world is both ordered and intelligible. The underlying order in nature-the laws of physics-are simply accepted as given, as brute facts. Nobody asks where they came from; at least they do not do so in polite company. However, even the most atheistic scientist accepts as an act of faith that the universe is not absurd, that there is a rational basis to physical existence manifested as law-like order in nature that is at least partly comprehensible to us. So science can proceed only if the scientist adopts an essentially theological worldview.[10]

One may wonder if science would have arisen had the dominant metaphysical views of the time been naturalistic and materialistic. Would naturalism have been able to sustain the scientific enterprise that Christian theism generated? The

eminent Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga gives his opinion: "Modern science was conceived, and born, and flourished in the matrix of Christian theism. Only liberal doses of self-deception and double-think, I believe, will permit it to flourish in the context of Darwinian naturalism."[11]

(4) The prevailing scientific notions of big bang cosmology and the emerging anthropic principle seem uniquely compatible with Christian theism. Since the universe had a singular beginning, we have a logical right and reason to inquire about its cause. Gottfried Leibniz's classic question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" seems even more provocative in light of what we now know about the big bang universe. Is it more reasonable to believe that the universe came into existence from nothing by nothing or that, as the Bible says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"?

References:

1. Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not A Christian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), pp. vi, 22-26.
2. See Charles E. Hummel, *The Galileo Connection* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1986).
3. See Stanley Jaki, *Science and Creation: From Eternal Cycles to an Oscillating Universe* (Scottish Academic Press, 1974); R. Hooykaas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972); and Eric V. Snow, "Christianity: A Cause of Modern Science?", August 4, 1998, http://www.geocities.com.
4. See Charles E. Hummel, *The Galileo Connection.* While Newton was a serious student of the Bible, serious questions have been raised about whether his theological views were thoroughly orthodox.
5. Stanley Jaki, *Science and Creation.*
6. Kenneth L.Woodward,"How the Heavens Go,"' *Newsweek,* July 20, 1998, p. 52.
7. See Charles Hummel, p. 162.
8. See Charles Hummel, pp. 158-9. For a more detailed discussion of the philosophical presuppositions of science, see J. P. Moreland, ed., *The Creation Hypothesis* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p. 17.
9. Richard Taylor, *Metaphysics,* 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice Hall, 1992), pp. 110-12.
10. As cited in Michael Bumbulis, "Christianity and the Birth of Science," August 4, 1998, p. 21, http://www.best.com.
11. Alvin Plantinga, "Darwin, Mind and Meaning", November 17, 1997, p. 8, http:Hid-

www.ucsb.edu.

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