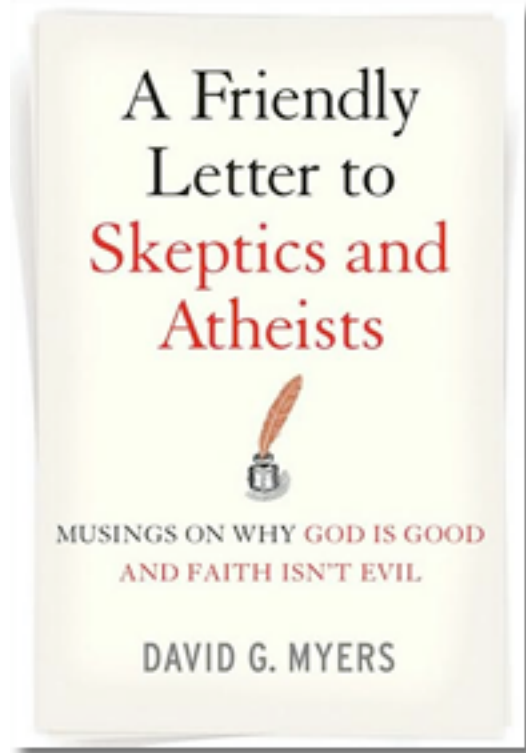


The Heart of Science and Religion

You skeptics remind me, and rightly so, of the church's opposition to scientific advances—of its condemnation of Galileo's heliocentrism and Darwin's evolutionism and of its onetime supernatural explanations of various natural phenomena: disease, earthquakes, storms, and even human behavior. Nevertheless, between purposeless naturalism and antiscience fundamentalism lies a third alternative: a faith-rooted rationality that helped give birth to science.



Many science historians contend, as Harvard astronomer and science historian Owen Gingerich has said, that “the Judeo-Christian philosophical framework has proved to be a particularly fertile ground for the rise of modern science.” The science-fostering theology went something like this: if, as once supposed, nature is sacred—if nature is animated with river goddesses and sun gods—then we ought not tamper with it. However, if nature is not God but God's orderly and intelligible creation, then let us, as rational creatures made in God's image, explore this handiwork and discover the divine laws. We glimpse this idea in both the Psalms (“The firmament proclaims his handiwork”) and Saint Paul (“Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made”).

So let us observe and experiment, believing that whatever God found worth creating, we should find worth studying. Moreover, let us do so freely, knowing that our ultimate allegiance is not to any human authority or human doctrine to but God alone. As the seventeenth-century geographer Nathanael Carpenter wrote, “I am free. I am bound to nobody's word, except to those inspired by God; if I opposed these in the least degree, I beseech God to forgive me my audacity of judgment, as I have been moved not so much by longing for some opinion of my own as by love for the freedom of science.” Science, by putting competing ideas to

the test, helps restrain unchecked illusory thinking among people who are tempted, in the words of Saint Paul, to “turn away from listening to the truth, and wander away to myths.”

Historically, this Christian view of God and nature helped motivate the pioneering scientific thinking of Francis Bacon, Galileo Galilei, Johannes Kepler, Blaise Pascal, and Isaac Newton. Mendel’s genetics were the work of an Augustinian monk. For Copernicus, a cathedral canon, astronomy was a divine science. These scientific Magellans believed that “God did it.” But rather than let that potential conversation stopper shut off their curiosity, they wondered *how* God did it. They thought that by figuring that out, they might glimpse the mind of God. God created the world with an intelligent plan, which was discernible through reason and science; the world—nature—revealed not only useful knowledge but also God’s wisdom and beauty.

Moreover, their aim was to submit their human ideas to the test, knowing that if nature did not conform to them, then so much the worse for their ideas. If scientists’ data indicated that the earth was not stationary, they must abandon the presumption that heavenly bodies circled the earth. Reason, they believed, must be aided by observation and experimentation in matters of science and by spiritual insight in matters of faith. Whether searching for truth in the book of God’s word or the book of God’s works, they viewed themselves in God’s service. They were scientists not despite their faith but partly *because* of their faith. Doing good science was less a right than a religious duty.

And so it is for their intellectual descendants today. Christendom gave birth not only to famous settings that have nourished so much scholarship and science—Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Princeton, and the like—but also to countless other grassroots wellsprings of science. I am writing this book from my office in a \$37 million science building at a place called Hope, a faith-based liberal arts college with Calvinist roots, whose signature departments are in the natural sciences. In one recent summer, 171 students were working around me in full-time research, supported by faculty research grants and by National Science Foundation summer grants to six science departments (more than at any other liberal arts college). Nearly one in four students graduates with a science or engineering degree, and hundreds have earned science Ph.D.’s. One former student, a Nobel laureate for pioneering nanotechnology, reflected on Hope College’s lingering influence on his work, which “is based on the faith that when

God made the universe, he wired into the laws of physics and chemistry a path...All I have to do is go find that path that God put there in the beginning.” My point is not that students are thinking God when walking into a computational biology lab but simply that the image of religion-friendly places’ being unfriendly to science is not the reality I live with.

Indeed, the scientist’s religious mandate, wrote the neuroscientist Donald MacKay, “is to ‘tell it like it is,’ knowing that the Author is at our elbow, a silent judge of the accuracy with which we claim to describe the world He has created.” Disciplined, rigorous inquiry—checking our theories against reality—helps fulfill Jesus’ “great commandment” to love God not just with our hearts but also with our minds. As Jesus intimated, we have much to learn: “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of the truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.”

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