

Science and Religion: The New Dialogue

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**Lecture One
“Religion and Science: A New Beginning”
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Introduction

Welcome. I am glad you are here.

The course is: Religion and Science: The New Dialogue. This is the first class, titled “Religion and Science: A New Beginning.”

“Religion,” as found for example in what we say here in church on Sunday mornings in the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

And “science,” as represented for example in a physicist’s brief description of the world’s beginning:

“In the beginning was the big bang. As the world sprang forth from the fuzzy singularity of its origin, first the spatial order formed, as quantum fluctuations ceased seriously to perturb gravity. Then space boiled, in the rapid expansion of the inflationary era, blowing the universe apart with incredible rapidity in the much less than 10^{-30} seconds that it lasted.”

[It goes on, but you get the idea.]

That little science snippet is from the book *The Faith of a Physicist*, by John Polkinghorne, who was a Cambridge University professor of mathematical physics, and who is also an ordained priest of the Church of England.¹

And, again, “religion,” as in Genesis, chapter one:

And God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness. . . . So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.’

And “science,” as in this bombshell from Darwin’s *Origin of Species*.

“In considering the origin of species, it is quite conceivable that a naturalist, reflecting on the mutual affinities of organic beings, on their embryological relations, their geographical distribution, geological succession, and other such facts, might come to the conclusion that species had not been independently created, but had descended, like varieties, from other species.”²

That statement was, and is, an overview of the evidence supporting human evolution.

“Religion” and “Science.”

¹ John Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist: Reflections of a Bottom-Up Thinker* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996),

² Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species: By Means of Natural Selection, Or the Preservation of favored Races in the Struggle for Life*, 1993 Modern Library edition (New York: random House / Modern Library, 1993), 19–20.

This morning, I will speak for two important claims about religion and science.

1. We should want a comprehensive and integrated worldview, where our religious beliefs and our scientific knowledge, cohere and coalesce.
2. Although there were earlier periods in history when religious belief and scientific knowledge, as people understood them then, did cohere and coalesce, we have not lived in such a time.

First Claim

Now, taking up the first claim.

Why should we care whether religious belief, and scientific knowledge, cohere and coalesce?

I am going to answer that by introducing one of several recurring themes³ of this course: the theme of “reasonable faith and faithful reason.”

[For those of you who want to keep track, this class today presents two claims, and two themes.]

And I am going to do that by talking for a moment about Dan Brown.

³ By “theme” I mean an idea that resurfaces repeatedly in different contexts.

The Dan Brown Piece

Recently, *Parade* magazine interviewed Dan Brown, author of *The Da Vinci Code* and other novels where religious authority is sinister and secretive, and faith is the antithesis—the opposite—of reason.

The interviewer asks Dan Brown: “Are you religious?”

He replies:

“I was raised Episcopalian, and I was very religious as a kid. Then, in eighth or ninth grade, I studied astronomy, cosmology, and the origins of the universe. I remember saying to a minister, ‘I don’t get it. I read a book that said there was an explosion known as the Big Bang, but here it says God created heaven and earth and the animals in seven days. Which is right?’ Unfortunately, the response I got was, ‘Nice boys don’t ask that question.’ A light went off, and I said, ‘The Bible doesn’t make sense. Science makes much more sense to me.’ And I just gravitated away from religion.”⁴

Knowing Episcopal clergy as I do, I must tell you that, to me, this story smells a little fishy. I think I may say a bit more about that next week. But, for now, let’s accept the story at face value.

⁴ James Kaplan, “Life after *The Da Vinci Code*, an interview with Dan Brown, *Parade*, September 13, 2009, 4.

It suggests that given:

- (a) The Biblical story of the six days of Creation; and
- (b) Scientific knowledge of the Big Bang; then

- (c) It is better that we not ask questions about what the one might have to do with the other.

That certainly would make faith out as the antithesis of reason; because reason cuts its teeth by asking questions: questions about whether something is true, or why it is true, or what it has do with the truth of something else. A faith that refused to entertain such questions would be, at best, utterly devoid of reason.

The Institute for Theological Studies at St. Margaret's

This lecture series is presented to you by “The Institute for Theological Studies at St. Margaret’s.”

We were given this name by our late Vicar, the Rev. Dr. Peggy Bosmyer, who asked me to return to St. Margaret’s to build a program that *revels* in questions like young Dan Brown’s. Our premise, *faith’s* premise, is that such questions put us on a path toward the discovery of truth, and the truth is of God.

The Institute for Theological Studies at St. Margaret’s has a symbol: a candle. **(Show Two Candles. Have matches.)**

This candle is symbolic of 2 reasonable ways faith and understanding are related.

The first is “faith finding understanding.” We start with a belief (or practice) that we have learned in church, for example belief in the Bible as “the Word of God.” Sooner or later, it occurs to us to ask: “What does this mean . . . and is it true?” Those are good theological questions. Off we go to the library, and there perhaps our research leads us to a book by Karl Barth titled, “The Word of God and the Word of Man.”⁵ We read, and perhaps we find this book helps us understand. We may say “Aha, I get it: so *that’s* what that means. *That’s why* I can believe its true.” We have lit a candle: faith finding understanding.

⁵ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, translated by Douglas Horton (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1978). Original copyright by Sidney A. Weston, 1928.

Often, it might not be our *final* understanding, just a little light to better see the path ahead.

[For example, Dan Brown's minister might have responded something like this.

“Well Dan, that’s a good question. The relation between biblical and scientific accounts of creation has interested theologians for centuries, going back to St. Augustine, who by the way had some very interesting and important insights to offer on the subject. Much more recently, one of the most famous theologians of the 20th century was asked almost exactly the same question you just asked me by his niece, except that instead of astronomy she was wondering about biology and evolution. In school they were talking about evolution and creation: did she have to choose which one she would believe, or could she believe them both? The theologian, Karl Barth, told his niece that she most certainly could believe them both, because the biblical story and Darwin’s science were using different kinds of language and talking about different kinds of thing.

Now it is a long way from the 8th grade to a full understanding of what Karl Barth meant in saying that.

But an eighth grader could appreciate that he had been complimented for asking a good question; he could take the point that his question wasn’t new or unexpected for the church. He would now know better than to assume that the bible and science offer explanations at the same level and are therefore often in competition.

So, if any candle were to be lit over Dan Brown's head at that moment, it would be his understanding that he belonged to an intellectual and spiritual tradition that respected questions and might have some interesting things to say about them that he could learn more about as he got older. In the meantime, there was no need to make a choice between astronomy and faith.]

Thus, reason presses faith toward understanding.

On the other hand, better understanding can prepare the way for faith.

Consider the story of Francis Collins, which perhaps some of you have heard. Francis Collins led the Human Genome project that completed a map of human DNA. This year, he was appointed director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Collins wasn't raised in church—his parents, I believe, more or less hippy academics in Virginia. As a young physician, however, he found himself been impressed, and stirred, by faith in some of his patients, even in times of suffering, and in the face of death. Enter: reason. Dr. Collins began to ask questions . . . and off to the library he went, on an intellectual investigation of Christian faith, and religious claims in general. Down this path he would discover St. Augustine, and C.S. Lewis. These thinkers—one ancient, one recent—helped Collins understand that there was no necessary conflict between his scientific knowledge (including belief in Darwin's theory of evolution) and the Christian doctrine of Creation.

With that potential stumbling block removed, he proceeded down the path that finally led him to his knees, to welcome Jesus Christ into his life as Lord and Savior.

Thus:

Reason presses faith toward understanding. Reason prepares understanding for faith.
In the Holy Spirit, understanding turns to faith.

Justification for First Claim

With these things in mind, I can support my statement that “we should want a comprehensive and integrated worldview, where our religious beliefs and scientific knowledge cohere, and coalesce.”⁶

If reason cuts its first teeth on questions, eventually it learns to chew—to test ideas. With certain kinds of ideas, the point in testing them is to find out whether they are true. [Is what they assert actually the case?]

In “the dialogue between religion and science,” one of the more important questions being discussed is: to what extent are ideas in religion and science subject to any of the same truth tests?

There is room for disagreement here, but the main thrust of the new dialogue has been to say that *some* religious ideas, including important theological doctrines, are similar enough in kind to scientific ideas, such as facts and theories, as to be subject to some of the same tests.

Two of the tests that are important in both religion and science are *comprehensiveness* and *coherence*.

Comprehensiveness: how much of evidence and experience does our idea—theory or doctrine—cover?

⁶ “Cohere” means they are logically fit together. By “coalesce,” I mean to suggest they are joined in a whole that is perhaps more than the sum of its parts.

Coherence: how does it fit with our other ideas—facts, theories or doctrines—that we affirm as true.

The first test leaves us dissatisfied when our understanding of the world doesn't cover everything—when, for instance, it leaves out questions about the ultimate origin and destiny of the universe, of life's meaning, of ethics and responsibility.

And the second test leaves us dissatisfied when something we affirm in one sphere of our lives (“religion”) doesn't seem to square with something we affirm in another sphere (“science.”)

So our interest in a comprehensive and integrated worldview where religious beliefs and scientific knowledge cohere comes from the value that we place on reason. To deny our need for this is no more reasonable than for a priest to say “nice boys” don't ask questions.

As reasonable creatures, we cannot be satisfied until we begin to see how the different fragments of our lives can come together.

Defining Science

Before proceeding further, let us define our terms.

“Science.”

The word is from the Latin, *scientia*, meaning “knowledge.”

Like all words, the use of the term has evolved through the years.

[In the middle ages, two terms were used to describe two different types and degrees of knowing.

Opinio, from which we get “opinion,” was used for judgments based on probability.]

Scientia, meant classical logic. Its goal was certain knowledge, gained by demonstrative reason.⁷

To medieval and classical logicians, judgments based on probability were plagued by a lack of certainty that was unworthy of the term *scientia*.

But beginning with thinkers such as Francis Bacon, methods were found to measure and test and gain greater and greater degrees of confidence in our probable judgments.

⁷ Nancey Murphy, *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 4. This section closely follows Murphy.

At the same time, confidence in certainties born of classical logic began to diminish, because we could never completely secure the premises upon which they are founded.

So a new understanding of *scientia* gained dominance, based on careful observation, the formulation and testing of hypotheses to explain the observations, the deduction of predictions from the hypotheses, and the testing of the predictions by experimentation or further observation.

That yields scientific definitions such as this, from the National Academy of Sciences:

Science: “The use of evidence to construct testable explanations and predictions of natural phenomena, as well as the knowledge generated through this process.”⁸

That is a good definition in my view. I’d like to use it for this course and defer any consideration of the controversies about defining science to our spring course, titled “Christian Faith and Evolution.”

⁸ National Academy of Sciences and Institute of Medicine, *Science, Evolution, and Creationism* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2008), 10. A similar dictionary definition: “Science: systematic knowledge of the physical or material world gained through observation and experimentation.” *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*, 2nd edition.

Defining Religion

Now: “religion.”

If defining science is not as simple as may seem . . . and can be contested, the same is true of religion, to a power of ten.

[In the movie, “Oh, God,” John Denver tells Terri Garr that God has spoken to him in the guise of George Burns. Terri, his loving wife, does not believe this. Why would God be talking to her husband, a grocery store manager, instead of a religious higher up like the Pope or Billy Graham. Well John had asked God the same question, and God had explained that he didn’t really like religion. Exasperated, Terri replies “Well then he sure picked a strange business to go into.” This could be an instructive paradox to delve into, but unfortunately we don’t have the time.]

Keith Ward warns: “When it comes to defining religion, almost anything goes.”⁹

Emil Durkheim’s definition is considered classic among academics who study religion as a sociological phenomenon. According to Durkheim, “a religion is a unified system of beliefs and

⁹ Keith Ward, *The Case for Religion*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2004), 9.

practices relative to sacred things, that is to say things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them.”¹⁰

I am not going to follow Durkheim. Instead, I’m going to suggest a simpler definition I picked up from one of my teachers, Christopher Morse. I prefer his definition for several reasons, one of which is that it is easy to remember. For Morse, “religion is how we position ourselves with respect to that which we hold sacred.”

Be advised that, although that definition is easy to remember, in some respects it will complicate our discussion.

This is because it makes religion roughly equivalent to another term I plan to use from time to time: “worldview.” And that this is going to be a little tricky, because it is more customary for us to think of a “religious” worldview as one kind of worldview, in distinction from others that are *not* religious. That customary treatment has its uses, as we will see for example next week.¹¹

¹⁰ David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin’s Cathedra: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 54, quoting Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 44. Another, more recent, influential definition is that of Clifford Geertz. Ward abbreviates Geertz’s definition to: “Religion is a set of symbols which acts to establish . . . moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence.” Ward, *Case for Religion*, 22. quoting Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*, p. 90.

¹¹ Where I discuss the book by Stephen Barr, when Barr contrasts religion and materialism as competing worldviews.

Here is how we can handle that.

If you hear me talking about religion in the “broad sense,” I am using it as equivalent to worldview. When I talk about it in the “narrow” sense, I am using it to refer only to worldviews that include belief in God.

So we’re going to keep it simple, but not too simple.

[One more time:

Science is . . . “the use of evidence to construct testable explanations and predictions of natural phenomena, as well as the knowledge generated through this process

Religion is . . . “how we position ourselves with respect to that which we hold sacred.”]

“Full Disclosure”

Now comes the time for full disclosure. You are giving me your time—let me be open with you about my religious and scientific beliefs and commitments.

Religious Commitments

Starting with religion:

Given that I am a priest, this should surprise no one, but for the record and as a matter of fact I do believe, as we profess in our baptismal vows, in “God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth,” and in “Jesus Christ, his only Son, Our Lord.”

It may also interest you to know that, at ordination, I took an oath affirming my belief in the Bible as the Word of God. Having been to the library and discovered Karl Barth’s *Word of Man and Word of God*, I was able to take that oath with both faith and a rather specific understanding. I didn’t blink, wink, or cross my fingers.

On my definition, we are all “religious” in the broad sense that we live according to a worldview.

Now you know that I am also religious in the narrower sense, in that I am a believing Christian.

Are we clear on that?

Regarding my *Scientific Commitments* . . .

I will also take this opportunity to confirm that:

- (a) I accept the conclusions of modern cosmology and physics, that the universe began with a bang some 12.5 billion years ago.
- (b) I am firmly persuaded by the two central theses of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution: common descent, and evolution by natural selection. I accept the theory that we are indeed cousins to the chimpanzee, and also to hippopotami, whippoorwills, and persimmon trees.

These scientific and religious commitments lend some specificity to the call for a comprehensive and integrated worldview.

It is rather too easy to affirm that scientific knowledge is compatible with belief in God, as long as we leave our notions of God vague and general.

It becomes more interesting when we ask how specific Christian beliefs and practices cohere and coalesce with specific scientific findings.

Second Claim

Now let's turn our attention to my second claim, where I will also introduce a second theme.

Let me restate the claim:

There have been periods in history when generally accepted religious belief and scientific knowledge did cohere and coalesce—but not in ours.

As to the first part of that claim, the 17th century can be offered as a case in point. Historians talk about the “intricate interlocking of scientific and religious concerns” in that era,¹² with one eminent historian of ideas, Amos Funkenstein, going so far as to suggest that science, philosophy and theology were seen virtually one and as the same occupation.¹³

Those were the days when Isaac Newton, the great pioneer of modern physics, conceived his laws of physics as expressions of the will of God.

¹² David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers, eds, *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter Between Christianity and Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). From the Introduction, page 12.

¹³ Sandra Rudnick Luft, “‘Secular Theology’ in the Modern Age,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56:741-50, winter 1988.

And when Robert Boyle, the great pioneer of modern chemistry, regarded nature as a temple, the scientist as a priest, and “scientific inquiry as . . . a form of worship.”¹⁴

For Boyle, “God was the author of the book of nature and of scripture,” and the two books, though separate were related. Each had implications for the other. “The time of creation belonged to the domain of natural philosophy, but Genesis gave hints about the origin of things which were true over and against the speculations of the philosophers.”¹⁵ [That sounds not unlike what Karl Barth was saying to his niece.]

That was then, this is now.

Certainly for Christians, and also for Muslims and Jews, ours has not been an era, a culture, where religious and scientific concerns could be described as “interlocking.”

¹⁴ John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 18.

¹⁵ John Dillenberger, *Protestant Thought and Natural Science* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 113.

The Murphy Thesis

In this next section, I am going to rely on one of the leading voices in the new dialogue between religion and science, Nancey Murphy. She is professor of Christian Philosophy at Fuller Seminary in California. One of her first books is titled *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda*.¹⁶

That book is an analysis of Christianity's two-pronged response to the modern worldview, specifically to (1) modern philosophical epistemology, and (2) modern cosmology.

Now, bear with me: that might sound imposing, but you can understand it. In philosophy, *epistemology* is the *scientia* of knowledge, our attempt to understand what knowledge is and how we get it. According to scholars, one of the marks of modern epistemology was its rejection of the authority of scripture or tradition. In the modern era, it wouldn't be enough to claim that we know something—about nature, humanity, or God—based on the presumed authority and reliability of scripture, or of the traditional teaching of the church. Knowledge would have to be secured on foundations of evidence and reason. That is “modern philosophical epistemology.” **Are you with me?**

Now, cosmology: by this I mean a conception of the structure and history of the universe. Pre-modern cosmology pictured the earth at the center of the universe, with the sun, the moon, the

¹⁶ Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1996). The following argument relies heavily on this book.

planets orbiting around. (Well they were right about the moon.) Modern cosmology began with Copernicus, who ascertained that the earth in fact revolves around the sun. We will have more to say about this discovery in week four, because it led to a notorious episode in the annals of science and religion, the trial of Galileo. I will explain that, if the church had only stuck to its own best principles, it would have spared itself the embarrassment of rejecting an important scientific breakthrough.

Meanwhile, as modern cosmology matured, it filled in its conception of the universe with a combination of two ideas that was in fact much more deeply problematic for the Christian faith.

The ideas were: “atomism” and “determinism.”

“Atomism” is the theory that the universe is composed of tiny particles of matter: atoms. The Greek philosopher Democritus is credited for having first developed an atomic theory of the universe. The word is from the Greek, *atomos*, which means indivisible. In my mind’s eye, atomism means the world is made up of teensy-weensy bouncing BBs.

“Determinism” is the theory that those atoms move only in strictest accordance to “natural laws,” and if only we could know where all the atoms were, and with what momentum they were moving, we could know the future. Determinism is defined to mean that, “given that the world is a particular way at one moment, its unfolding thereafter is fixed and inflexible.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Wesley Wildman, “Divine Action Project,” 39.

Modern cosmology included human beings in this atomistic, deterministic picture. We are made of atoms too; and so, at bottom, we live and move according to the laws of motion. Our sense that we are free is an illusion.

To the extent that modern science would bind itself to that cosmology, modern science and Christian belief were actually incompatible.

Because Christians believe in human freedom. Hearing Christ's invitation to follow him as the Way, the Truth, the Life, we can answer "no," or we can answer "yes."

Christians believe that God has freedom too: freedom to act, to respond to us, to answer our prayers through acts of special providence and even, once in a blue moon, in miracles.

Modern cosmology left God no room to do this. It was a "closed" universe, even to God. Once God had created a universe consisting of atoms moving according to pre-established laws, God's hands, seemingly, would be tied.

That was a challenge modern cosmology posed to Christian theology.

According to Murphy, Protestant Christianity responded to these epistemological and cosmological developments along two distinctively different—but intrinsically 'modern'—lines: theological

fundamentalism and theological liberalism. Fundamentalism may sound “old” and liberalism may sound “new,” but they are really about the same age, having both been born in the 19th century.

Fundamentalism of course rejected modernism’s denial of biblical authority. It stood four square on the authority of scripture as the divinely revealed Word of God.

Nor would fundamentalists accept the proposition that the world is closed to God. God has acted in the world and can act now in answering our prayers in special providences and—at God’s discretion—in miracles.

Because the universe, left to itself, is physically closed, divine actions were conceived as “interventions,” disruptions of the laws that otherwise would govern atom’s interactions.

[Murphy’s point about Fundamentalism is anti-modern in some obvious respects, Murphy makes a good case that it has let modern assumptions set the problems it must address and even establish the terms of its solutions.]

Liberalism absorbed modern epistemology and cosmology.

It accepted modernism's denial of the presumed authority of scripture or tradition, and instead sought to re-establish secure knowledge of God on the basis of reason and evidence, especially the evidence of religious experience.

With respect to cosmology, liberalism rejected the notion that God would disrupt or override the laws of nature that God had established in creation, and developed a non-interventionist, or "immanentist" conception of God's action in the world. Instead of God's "action," it spoke of God's "presence."

[If you are wondering what that means concerning God's miracles or acts of special providence, we will come to that shortly. I will say here that there was always a range of liberal opinion, but the leading liberal thinkers began more and more to discount miracle stories as legendary additions to the gospel story. A good example is Thomas Jefferson, who used scissors to cut out this legendary material, which he thought distracted attention from the moral teaching that was the pure essence of Christianity. Later, liberals began to reinterpret miracles as insightful symbolic expressions of life-changing experiences of God.]

One of my themes through these lectures is to echo Murphy's case for a theology that goes "beyond liberalism and fundamentalism." I am pressing to look beyond both liberal and fundamentalist solutions—because there are major problems with both.

The problem with fundamentalism.

The biggest problem with fundamentalism is that, after an earlier period when it allowed some room for flexibility in interpreting the Bible, it would eventually settle into a less flexible insistence that the scriptures be interpreted literally at almost every point, including the first two chapters of the book of Genesis.

Ironically, this inflexibility regarding biblical interpretation was a modern innovation. Traditionally, theologians had recognized that the bible cannot be interpreted literally at all points. St. Augustine had specifically warned that Christians shouldn't defend literal interpretations that defy our best knowledge based on evidence and reason. More on that next week.

Because American fundamentalism did commit itself to a literal interpretation of Genesis, its cosmology with respect to the history of the universe became further and further separated from the story of the history of the universe told by modern science.

In church, children learned about Adam and Eve—but not in school.

In school, they would learn about human evolution—but not in church.

Because of the straightforward conflict between the Darwinian explanation of human origins, and the Genesis account on a literal interpretation, it became necessary for fundamentalists to defend their faith by attacking evolutionary science.

[And so they did—first in a program of “Biblical Creationism” that relied on the Bible itself as a source of evidence; and then in a program of “Scientific Creationism” that generated arguments based on problems with Darwinian explanations.

I might point out that the program of Intelligent Design theory may mark an important step for many fundamentalists, because it is not predicated on a literal interpretation of Genesis.

Otherwise,] for the modern fundamentalist, there is no way that religious belief and scientific knowledge can cohere as long as scientific knowledge includes belief in human evolution.

As I have indicated, I accept the science that points to human evolution, so obviously I think that our fundamentalist friends in Christ are barking up the wrong tree.

Problems with Liberalism

[Theological liberalism, on the other hand, has been comfortable with the story mainstream science tells us about the history of the world.

One of the leading Anglican liberals wrote, not long after Darwin's publication of the *Origin of Species*, "in the guise of foe, Darwin came as friend."

So why did liberalism not enable western culture to integrate Christian beliefs and practices with scientific knowledge within a coherent, comprehensive worldview?]

Liberalism has stumbled on two problems, one with regard to its epistemology, the other with regard to cosmology.

The first problem is that while an epistemology based on religious experience seems to be enormously popular, it has never been philosophically convincing.

To save time, I am going to skip this epistemological problem. These notes will be posted on the internet and, if you would like to, you can check them there for my comments, and references, for this problem.

[Starting with the epistemological problem. Among philosophers, there are problems with claims to know God grounded on religious experience. One is the obvious problem that people claiming an experience of God seem to know very different things about him. That gives rise to the suspicion that purported experiences of God are about something else entirely.

Every claim about God based on religious experience seems to be amenable to reinterpretation in terms of a science concerned with human beings. Ludwig Feuerbach wrote: “humanity is the beginning, the centre, and the end of religion.”¹⁸

How do we know that religious experience isn't really only what Durkheim said—a way of forming moral communities? That makes religion reducible to sociology.

Feuerbach prepared the way for Durkheim, and also for Freud, for whom belief in God is reducible to psychology.¹⁹ Feuerbach anticipated Freud's “projection” and “wish fulfillment” theories of religion.²⁰

¹⁸ McGrath, *Science and Religion*, 114. McGrath: “It is probably fair to say that Feuerbach's ‘projection’ or ‘wish fulfillment’ theory is best known today in its Freudian variant.”

¹⁹ Elliott Sober defines reductionism as the thesis that “an ideally complete physics would be able to account for all phenomena.” Elliott Sober, *Philosophy of Biology*, second edition (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press / Perseus Books, 2000), 25. Not only religion, but also sociology and psychology would theoretically be reduced to physics.

In recent years, the problem of reductionist approaches to religion has only intensified, and multiplied. Now religion is subject to interpretations based on neurobiology, genetics, and evolutionary psychology.

So it would turn out that authority of experience for theological epistemology left a lot to be desired.]

²⁰ McGrath, *Science and Religion*, 197.

The second problem with the liberal tradition is its difficulty in defending itself against the charge of theological “equivocation.” Critics accuse liberals of retaining the words and outward forms of traditional Christian faith, only by drastically altering their meanings.

For instance: if the universe is closed, and if God cannot or will not ever intervene, how will one interpret divine providence? Or the miracles of Jesus? Most crucially, what now is the meaning of his resurrection?

From beginning with the great 19th century German Friedrich Schleiermacher and continuing through Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich, liberal theologians have been generated answers to these questions, [and generations of clergy were trained on their answers.

And, frankly, generations of Christians in the pews were often puzzled by their teaching.]

Bultmann and Tillich both almost totally separated the meaning of faith in Christ from belief in facts of Jesus’ life as reported in the scripture. This accommodation struck C.S. Lewis as unwarranted, and he guessed that most Christians, if they became aware of it, would consider it dishonest.

Addressing a class of theological students, Lewis was blunt:

“A theology which denies the historicity of nearly everything in the Gospels to which Christian life and affections and thought have been fastened for nearly two millennia—which either denies the miraculous altogether or, more strangely, after swallowing the camel of the Resurrection strains at

such gnats as the feeding of the multitudes—if offered to the uneducated man can produce only one or the other of two effects. It will make him a Roman catholic or an atheist. What you offer him he will not recognize as Christianity. If he holds to what he calls Christianity he will leave a church in which it is no longer taught and look for one where it is. If he agrees with your version he will no longer call himself a Christian and no longer come to church. In his crude, coarse way, he would respect you much more if you did the same.”²¹

Lewis is by no means alone in making this judgment.

Murphy’s verdict on this project is severe. She delivers it in the form of a pronouncement by the philosopher Jeffrey Stout, who has said that liberal theology is a “dead end—a Schleiermacher will lead inevitably to [the atheism] [of a Feuerbach;]” or, perhaps worse, a Tillich, who is judged to have kept “the terms of traditional theism” while so altering their meaning that “only the words remain.”²²

[Many modern atheists echo this charge, including the philosopher Daniel Dennett, who charges that liberal clerics and theologians maintain “belief in God” only by way of redefining the concept of God beyond anything the ancients would have recognized as such.²³]

²¹ C.S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1967), 153.

²² Murphy, *Theology*, 14.

²³ Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 205–10.

“Full disclosure.”

I think Murphy and Lewis are right on.

I was reared and educated as a Christian liberal, and I wouldn't want to belong to a church that had been untouched by the liberal tradition. But I do not think it is either reasonable or faithful for Christianity to ground itself on widespread theological equivocation.

Conclusion

Neither Fundamentalism, nor liberalism, both conceived on the basis of flawed epistemology and closed universe cosmology, can fully satisfy our hope for an integrated, comprehensive worldview in which religious belief and scientific knowledge coalesce.

So if a first theme for this course is an interplay between reasonable faith and faithful reason, a second theme is the call to transcend liberal and fundamentalist solutions.

[It is tempting to say that one is deficient with respect to faith, the other with respect to reason. But in the last analysis, I think we will find that modern fundamentalism and modern liberalism are both deficient with respect to both faith and reason.]

The purpose of this course is to draw attention to a new dialogue about religion and science that is based on a changed set of assumptions: assumptions about the cosmos, and about epistemology in both theology and science.

Compared with the modern era that gave us liberalism and fundamentalism, we now possess:

A more sound and helpful epistemology arising from new developments in philosophy; and

A new cosmology, based on new developments in science. Today, we can understand the universe as “open.”

With our limited time, we probably won't be spending much time on epistemology, but we will give significant attention to cosmology and the implications of an open universe.

I have begun to name participants in the new dialogue between science and religion—John Polkinghorne, Nancey Murphy, Keith Ward, and Francis Collins. These and other scientists, philosophers and theologians are suggesting that if we understand religion and science correctly; and if we let each have its claims tested by the appropriate criteria, following the truth where it leads, then we will arrive at the comprehensive and integrated worldview where our religious beliefs—specifically, our beliefs as Christians—and our scientific knowledge can cohere and coalesce.

And I believe they're right.

I will look forward to delving further into all of this, with you, in the weeks ahead.

