
Pro Rege

Volume 47 | Number 4

Article 8

June 2019

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Recommended Citation

Hayes, Ben and Walicord, Sacha (2019) "Science vs. Faith: The Great False Dichotomy," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 47: No. 4, 36 - 40.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol47/iss4/8

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Science vs. Faith: The Great False Dichotomy

One of the recurring themes in Christian higher education is the perceived challenge of integrating the biblical Christian faith with science. We are told that there is a contradiction between much of what is found in science and a plain reading of Scripture. Because of this apparent contradiction, integrating science and the Christian faith has become one of the biggest challenges for both Christian higher education and for believers who seek to understand what God's Word has to say about reality. Although we are told that the Bible and science are at odds, nobody ever seems to critically analyze the perceived axiom itself. But what if there is no need for such integration because the perceived dilemma does not really exist? What if it is really a *false* dilemma? What if the axiom that science and faith cannot be reconciled is altogether wrong? That is exactly the point of this paper. We will prove that the perceived dichotomy between science and faith is really a false dichotomy, and that there can logically be absolutely no tension between the Christian faith and true science.

The perceived dichotomy between science and the Christian faith is, in reality, a false dichotomy. The falsity can be explained by the different *presuppositions* that each side chooses to believe. According to Greg Bahnsen, a presupposition is an elementary assumption in one's reasoning¹

or in the process by which opinions are formed. Every scientific outcome will be determined *a priori* by the presuppositions that the scientist, who is engaged in the scientific endeavor, holds by faith. Nobody is presupposition-free, but we all *need* presuppositions, by way of worldview, in order to make sense of reality. In other words, **before** a person—Christian or non-Christian—begins any scientific endeavor, he or she already holds basic presuppositions concerning *metaphysics*, *epistemology* and *ethics*. A person holds these presuppositions or assumptions *by faith* since he or she cannot gain any knowledge or understanding without having a concept about reality (*metaphysics*), knowledge (*epistemology*), and morality (*ethics*) first.

For the purposes of this paper, we define science as the process of gaining knowledge of any kind. The particular field or kind of science is irrelevant for our purposes, as this endeavor, with its underlying presuppositions, refers to all kinds of human thinking and reasoning. The outcome of any scientific endeavor will always be determined by, or based on, the specific presuppositions that a person has adopted *beforehand by faith*. Persons who, for example, have subscribed to the metaphysical concept of secular naturalism have made an *a priori commitment* not to accept the supernatural at all, and so their research outcomes will always be interpreted according to this *a priori faith-commitment*. Does this mean that a scientist who has adopted a secular naturalistic worldview can never discover anything true or useful?

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Such a scientist can of course discover or develop things that are true or useful for mankind but is limited in two major ways. The first is that, while he or she can find and discover *fragments of truth*, like a new and very helpful fact about genetics, he or she will never *fully* know. This person does not know why this fact exists or to what ultimate end it exists. This person does not accept the existence of God in his or her thinking at all and, therefore, will never accept Him as the source and His glory as the end of all reality. At this point it might be noted that the secular scientist can only do any kind of science because he or she “steals” or makes assumptions that can only be assumed through the existence of the immutable, unchangeable, and faithful Creator of the universe. Such a scientist, for example, assumes reliable laws of nature without logical justification and works with them, assuming repeatability without ever being able to account for such an orderly universe apart from the God of the Bible (Romans 1:25).

Second, as soon as any research object is rooted in a supernatural act of God, the secular naturalist scientist will necessarily always be wrong. This is also where the Christian scientist who has adopted naturalistic presuppositions for his or her “science” will be wrong in exactly the same way. And that’s exactly from where the perceived tension comes. It is not to be found between Biblical faith vs. science but between Biblical faith vs. a “science” based on naturalistic, counter-Biblical presuppositions. It is therefore, not a battle between an “irrational faith” vs. “rational science” but a battle between the reasonable Christian faith vs. an unreasonable competing faith.

We must understand that there is no such thing as *neutrality* when it comes to scientific endeavors, and therefore it is of the utmost importance to make sure that a scientist is aware of his or her particular biases and presuppositions. J. Gresham Machen comments on the nature of neutrality and science: “the liberal attempt at reconciling Christianity with modern science has really relinquished everything distinctive of Christianity ...[.] in trying to remove from Christianity everything that could possibly be objected to in the name of science, in trying to

bribe off the enemy by those concessions which the enemy most desires, the apologist has really abandoned what he started out to defend.”² About those who claim neutrality, Bahnsen adds that “they do not approach any issue neutrally. Any claim to neutrality is a pretense, and it is philosophically impossible.”³ While secular scientists constantly claim neutrality, the opposite is true. Romans 1:18-19 describes the mindset of the unbeliever and therefore also the mindset of the unbelieving scientist:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them.

The scientist who thinks that he is neutral, or “facts-only,” as is often claimed, has already fallen into the trap of his own biases without even knowing it.

What then does this mean for the Christian scientist? Has the Bible anything to contribute to the scientific endeavor at all? Or, is God’s Word only useful for salvation and personal piety as is often claimed? If the Bible were useful only for personal salvation, there would be no difference at all between a Christian scientist and a secular scientist. And that exactly is the very sad part in all this. Many scientists in the Christian realm, apparently in order to find acceptance with secular Christian academia, utilize the same secular-naturalistic presuppositions as non-Christian scientists and then claim that their supposedly “neutral” research has rendered results that conflict with the perceived teachings of God’s Word. But that claim is not true, as we have already showed. Of course, some still might ask why it should even be considered a problem if there were no difference between secular science and Christian science.

The problem is that those Christian scientists who do not see any difference between the two approaches are engaging in the fallacy of *circular reasoning*. All thinking and therefore all scientific activity is all about starting points. Just like secular scientists, such Christian scientists start with secular counter-Biblical assumptions and then

are surprised to often receive results that clearly conflict with the Scriptures. If such scientists, for example, are confronted with supernatural claims in the Bible, they will find themselves constantly busy with searching for alternative explanations in line with their naturalistic presuppositions; and they tell the people in the pew or their Christian students that “science has found contradictions in the Bible”—or the “milder” form of, “we need to rethink our theological or interpretative paradigms.” Now the problem is that the Christian in the pew or their students lose trust in the Word of God and, with it, in God Himself; and all this eventually will destroy churches and whole denominations. It is exactly this kind of fallacious circular reasoning that has actually created the whole (perceived) tension between science and the Bible. Jason Lisle comments, concerning the nature of such circular reasoning, that “it is fallacious if used in arguments that do not involve necessary foundational truth claims.”⁴ Secular scientists and Christian scientists who work on the basis of the same secular materialistic presuppositions love to claim “neutrality” and keep assuring us that they’ll go “wherever the facts lead,” but, as we have already seen, in reality the outcome of their research has already been determined by their *a priori faith-commitment* to secular-naturalistic assumptions. Bahnsen used to tell the story of a man who went to see a medical doctor, claiming that he was actually dead. The confused doctor first thought this to be a joke but then realized that the man was dead-serious (literally!). After much back-and-forth between the two, the doctor lost his patience, took a needle, and pricked the man’s finger. As one can imagine, blood dropped on the floor. Confident of victory, the doctor smiled, only to hear his patient exclaim, “It is true after all—dead people do bleed!” This humorous example actually gives us a serious lesson: it demonstrates how powerfully one’s presuppositions affect one’s reasoning.

Similarly, we are often confronted with the notion that scientists can neutrally interpret “general revelation” in an unbiased way, apart from Biblical presuppositions, in order to find real truth. We are then told that because Scripture

allows for different possible interpretations, we must look to general revelation to find Scripture’s intended meaning. But such a notion is nothing less than preposterous. Of course, people can interpret Biblical texts differently, but to use the possibility of different interpretations as an excuse to abandon Biblical validity for doing science apart from (=contrary to) Biblical principles means to engage in the *abusus non tollit usum* fallacy.⁵ Occasional abuse does not render the proper use invalid. A researcher *needs* a worldview, consisting of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics, in order to interpret general revelation. If he or she is not using the Biblical worldview, the alternative is a non-Biblical worldview—which will, of course, lead to non-Biblical results.

Such is the whole problem at hand. Even if we consider some differences in the interpretations of some passages of Scripture, how many different interpretations are there of general revelation apart from Scripture? How often have scientists erred about all kinds of things in the history of the world? Furthermore, it should be clear to all that propositional Word-truth is much clearer than secular truth, as it comes directly from the mind of God and is not affected by the fall, as general revelation is. More and more we are hearing from Christian academics that we need the natural scientist’s “unbiased” interpretation of general revelation in order to understand Scripture properly, and we are pushed to declare them a new class of priests, who can tell us how to (re-)interpret God’s Word properly. Thereby the Christian scientists, with their counter-Biblical presuppositions, lift themselves and their personal interpretation of general revelation above God’s Word. Again, we see that it is all about starting points. The so-called “scientific method” itself is biased because it is based on naturalistic empiricism—it does not allow for the supernatural at all. The “scientific method” itself, therefore, is a *faith commitment* and was not determined through any valid, scientific process. Therefore, we can see that the “scientific method” itself is not all that scientific but is based on counter-Biblical philosophical assumptions, which are themselves held *by faith*.

All of this of course raises a question: since we

now know that the non-Christian is by no means neutral, what about us? Can we, as Christians, claim neutrality in our research? The answer to this question is a loud and clear “no.” Neither non-Christians nor Christians are unbiased in their interpretation of reality since they both *need a worldview* (consisting of *metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics*) in order to *even begin to interpret reality*. The non-Christian, as we now know, is not neutral, but neither is the Christian. Cornelius Van Til rightly stated that the Bible is “authoritative on every subject about which it speaks. And moreover, it speaks of everything.”⁶ Since it is the only source of special revelation about creation from God, it should be the starting point from which any scientific interpretation is developed. If science is done from the basis of the affirmation of the divine inspiration and infallibility of Scripture, it requires scientists to develop and analyze their theories and interpretations according to what has been revealed in God’s Word. The problem with many Christians today is not one of outright denying the truths of Scripture, but of trying to accommodate secular interpretation of reality over against Biblical truth. Schaeffer warns that “here is the great evangelical disaster - the failure of the evangelical world to stand for truth as truth. There is only one word for this—*accommodation*.”⁷

From here, the question no longer becomes one of neutrality, but it becomes one of judging correct or incorrect presuppositions. On the issue of judging presuppositions, Van Til commented:

There are two mutually exclusive methodologies. The one of the natural man assumes the ultimacy of the human mind. On this basis man, making himself the ultimate reference point, virtually reduces all reality to one level and denies the counsel of God as determinative of the possible and the impossible. Instead of the plan of God, it assumes an abstract notion of possibility or probability, of being and rationality...⁸

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This helps us get to the core problem at hand. To say it in the words of Van Til, “facts and interpretation of facts cannot be separated...facts without God would be brute facts. They would have no intelligible relation to one another. As such they could not be known by man.”⁹ All “facts” need interpretation and every interpretation is based on a person’s worldview which is held *by faith*.

To show an example, we will look to the account of the floating axe head in 2 Kings 6. There, we encounter a miraculous account of an iron axe head floating in the river Jordan. If we were to utilize the naturalistic worldview of a secular scientist, and applying the scientific method trying to reproduce this event, we would have to come to the conclusion that

an iron axe head can never float. Therefore, the Bible would need to be irrationally reinterpreted, or called a book of lies. The main presupposition behind such an interpretation is a secular, naturalistic concept of metaphysics. Such an approach would introduce a method of Biblical “interpretation” which we are now obliged to consistently apply to the whole Bible. And the new principle is this: there are no miracles. If there are no miracles, then there is no resurrection from the dead. And if there is no resurrection of the dead “then Christ is not risen, and if Christ is not risen then your preaching is empty and your faith is also empty...and if Christ is not risen, then your faith is futile; you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:14-15,17). We often hear that this whole problem is “not a salvation issue,” but we have just shown that it ultimately and consistently is. It will ultimately lead us down the road of the German liberal theologian Rudolf Bultmann and his concept of the *demythologization of Scripture*¹⁰ whereby everything in the Bible that cannot be explained by a naturalistic worldview must be considered a myth. That would be the end of Christianity in the minds of men.

Understanding that all scientific interpretation is berthed out of presuppositional biases,

Biblical or not, necessitates a need to determine which revelation must gain priority: general or special. All beliefs are supported by other beliefs and all reasoning is initially circular (=by faith!), and it ultimately comes down to the person's most basic presuppositions. If persons cannot support their worldview beliefs, they engage in unfounded circular reasoning. So, the question arises: is there an ultimate standard by which to judge all truth claims? As Christians, we recognize that the Bible is the only source for objective truth, and we accept it as the ultimate standard for everything (2 Corinthians 10:5). As Lisle points out, an ultimate standard must be assumed to be true and also affirm its own truth.¹¹ Lisle says that "all of our chains of reasoning must be finite. Therefore, everyone must have an ultimate standard: a proposition (upon which all others depend) that cannot be proved from a more foundational proposition."¹² Not only must it prove itself, but it must provide a basis for all knowledge. Knowing this, everyone must recognize the need for an ultimate standard by which to test all truth claims. Therefore, every Christian must come to the conclusion that Scripture must be used as the final authority by which to assess every bit of reasoning in the universe. If something interpreted from general revelation seems to conflict with Scripture, we must always give the written Word priority—because we use it as the ultimate standard of reasoning. From this basis, it is the Christian system alone that provides meaning for science in the first place.¹³ Because science must build itself upon the foundation of faith (as we have shown), it is of absolute necessity that the foundation upon which it is built is the truth of God's Word. Because God must have dominion over every square inch of our lives, we have to make sure that we are doing science according to His will.

To summarize, we can say that the perceived dichotomy between the Bible and science is a *false dichotomy*. The real dichotomy or the real

antithesis lies between the Bible and all scientific endeavors operating on anti-Biblical presuppositions—between truth and lie. Or to say it in the words of Abraham Kuyper, "Notice, that I do not speak of a conflict between faith and science. Such a conflict does not exist. Every science in a certain degree starts *from faith*."¹⁴ Or to put it in the words of St. Paul, "For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?" (2 Cor. 6:14-15).

Endnotes

1. Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1998), 2, note 4.
2. Machen, J. Gresham. *Christianity & Liberalism*, (Michigan, WM. B. Eerdmans, 1923), 7-8.
3. Bahnsen, Greg. *Pushing the Antithesis*. (Georgia, American Vision, 2007), 28.
4. Lisle, Jason. *Discerning Truth*. (Arkansas, Master Books, 2010), 27.
5. The possible abuse of something does not cancel its proper use.
6. Bahnsen. *Van Til's Apologetic*, 36.
7. Schaeffer, Francis. *The Great Evangelical Disaster*, (Illinois, Crossway, 1984), 37.
8. Bahnsen. *Van Til's Apologetic*, 63.
9. Bahnsen. *Van Til's Apologetic*. 38.
10. "Entmythologisierung der Bibel"
11. Lisle, Jason. *The Ultimate Proof of Creation*, (Arkansas, Master Books, 2009), 141.
12. Lisle, Jason. *Ultimate Proof*. 143.
13. Bahnsen. *Van Til's Apologetic*. 90.
14. Kuyper, Abraham. *Lectures on Calvinism. Six Lectures Delivered at Princeton University under the Auspices of the L. P. Stone Foundation*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975). 131.