



Arie Leegwater

Disentangling Theology and Science: The Instrumentalization of Science

During the past four years as editor of *PSCF*, I have received and read a goodly number of submissions dealing with apologetic and natural theological themes and arguments. Examining and utilizing scientific findings, authors seek to bolster or support a particular view of the Bible, a certain theological doctrine of Christianity, or a coveted theory that is deemed concordant with a particular reading of Scripture. This seemingly omnipresent feature, almost a penchant of evangelical Christian reflection about science and its practices, reflects a desire to look for God in the results of science: finding God as the result of an inference to the best explanation, or if not the best explanation, the most lovely one (in the latest version of Peter Lipton).

Judging from F. Alton Everest's retelling of the early history of the ASA (*The American Scientific Affiliation: Its Growth and Early Development* [Ipswich, MA: ASA Press, 2010]), the very beginnings of the ASA also reflect this type of effort, particularly the "Sermons from Science" films produced by Irving Moon for Moody Bible Institute. A number of these films were initially endorsed by ASA. I still vividly remember how one of these films, "God and the Atom," impressed me as a fifteen-year-old growing up in the Tidewater region of North Carolina. Any reader can undoubtedly come up with many more-contemporary examples of this genre of film. This apologetic effort, of course, is not a recent occurrence. It has a long and intricate history: a movement from medieval forms of natural theology to evidentialist apologetics, generated as a response to the challenges presented by Enlightenment thought.¹

There is a rich diversity of these design arguments, and they are deeply embedded in different

historical contexts. Several "interests" play themselves out in this intricate and difficult apologetic venture. We need to understand who makes these types of arguments, to whom they are addressed, and for what purpose. And the arguments do not all flow in one direction, that is, from "science" to "religion." When comparing our century with earlier ones, Peter Harrison comments:

Given the current status of science, it is natural to assume that the positive interactions of science and religion during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are to be understood primarily as attempts to establish the rational foundations of theistic belief. Arguments from design, thus interpreted, are apologetic exercises intended to support religion. My suggestion is that these are indeed apologetic exercises, but they are apologies for science, not religion, and that their primary function, at least initially, was to provide religious legitimation for the new sciences.²

For some evangelicals today, something similar may be happening, namely, arguing for the legitimation of participation in (secular) scientific work since this allows one to illumine God's nature and parse out his attributes. For others, it may be an effort of using the scientific methods of "secular" science to slay atheistic "religious" dragons. Thus we may encounter apologetic arguments directed to a religious community as well as apologetic arguments shared by a religious community directed at a particular scientific community. Science and religion are seemingly converging in their respective aims.

However, we are beginning to suffer from a "deluge" of these apologetic forays. This particular flood of apologetic theological discourse can be self-defeating. In many popular presentations, science

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and technology are considered to be instruments, as ways of presenting the Gospel message, of enhancing Christian worship, or of establishing certain “theistic” propositions about the existence of God or an (intelligent) designer. We invariably look for the theological potential of science. Science, considered to be internally deficient, is not real science without a theological reason for being. Scientific practices are incomplete unless they bear some theological utility. In these many ways, science becomes instrumentalized. Scientific illustrations, either by positive or negative example, become employed to reinforce already held beliefs. Theology, in turn, becomes a gloss, a veneer, an addition, either after the fact or advanced as a reason to make a particular group comfortable with modern science. To many a Christian, this might imply that science is merely a fiction, a fantasy claiming realist credentials, but needing theology to anchor its meaning. For others, it might be a fight against those who hold that scientific knowledge is transcendent, who advance a form of “scientism,” in which knowledge is discovered not made, placeless, timeless, objective, unaffected by the conditions of its creation or the personalities and biases of its makers.

I am not sure this is the best way of interpreting the world or of framing the issues. We spend an inordinate amount of time and effort attempting to defend Christianity, the Scriptures, intelligent design, and so forth; however, to my mind, far too little attention is spent teasing out what a robust Christian position might mean for scientific practice in a particular discipline. It is as if the major interest is science’s utility for theological purposes, rather than its inherent worth as a creaturely gift in its own right, as its own way of disclosing meaning in the world. Instead of asking scientists to show us God, we should want them to reveal the world in all its subtleness and mystery.

Could we be looking for God in the wrong places or at least in the wrong way? God can sometimes be silent. Are we looking in a way which delimits our appreciation of what scientists and technologists actually do? We stress time and time again the theological potential of science, how science can inform, open up, refresh, and enhance our theology and worship. The church, in turn, appreciates and appropriates science for its theological value. This journal and the Christian community need far more

serious reflection on issues within the disciplines. We need to develop a framework that allows us to discuss issues such as indeterminism, reductionism, theories of bonding, systems thinking, information theory, evolutionary theory, bioethics, philosophy of technology, and so forth in ways that reflect Christian engagement from the start, not as a post hoc justification for participation in the scientific enterprise or as an effort in apologetics.

Notes

¹ See Nicholas Wolterstorff’s essay, “The Migration of the Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidentialist Apologetics,” in *Practices of Belief: Selected Essays*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 173–216.

² Peter Harrison, “Religion, the Royal Society, and the Rise of Science,” *Theology and Science* 6, no. 3 (2008): 268–9.

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In This Issue

This June issue of *PSCF* is characterized by an extremely broad range of subject matter. The five main articles vary in content from a study of evangelical applications of the popular idea of complementarity (Christopher Rios, Baylor University), a comparison of naturalistic versus eschatological theologies of evolution held by two major theologians, the Englishman Arthur Peacocke and the German Wolfhart Pannenberg (Junghyung Kim, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley), a reflection on different approaches to death and pain in the created order (Keith Miller, Kansas State University), a reexamination of the question “Does the Earth Move?” (George Murphy, Trinity Lutheran Seminary), to a close mathematical examination of biblical longevities (Walter Makous, University of Rochester). Clearly, there is sufficiently diverse material for thought and reflection.

The book review section introduces the reader to a number of interesting books, some of which promise to make a distinctive mark. Two letters to the editor written in response to a previously published essay book review complete the issue.

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