

Scientism and Accommodation

By William H. Burnside

Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives, by John Hedley Brooke The Cambridge History of Science Series (Cambridge University Press, 1991) 408 pages, index.

Contra Mundum, No. 6, Winter 1993

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Is there a conflict between “science and religion”, a “power struggle” between “powerful cultural forces” or are these two aspects of life complementary and mutually beneficial if properly understood? John Hedley Brooke, Senior Lecturer in History of Science at the University of Lancaster, examined the historical relationship between organized science and institutional religion and found that relationship far more complex than is commonly perceived. In his words, “There is no such thing as *the* relationship between science and religion. It is what different individuals and communities have made of it in (many) different contexts.” (p. 321)

Brooke's approach is more sociological than philosophical. He did not emphasize the critical analysis of claims and counter-claims, but sought, instead, to see the historical relationship between organized groups speaking for “science” or for “religion”. In the seventeenth century, the century of the origins of modern science, he found it difficult to find the two separated. Typically the seventeenth-century “scientist” thought of science as part of “natural philosophy”, which, of course, “involved a discussion of God's relationship to nature.” (p. 321) During those formative years those developing the scientific method were, more often than not, devout theists and Christians.

Brooke found in popular literature of the ensuing three centuries three views of the relationship between science and religion. One was the conflict model, a caricature with two clear-cut categories. Those who believed in “testable facts” opposed those who were “deserting reason for faith”. The one “relished change” through science; other “found solace in eternal verities”. “Religion” (never clearly defined), was always “forced into retreat by more sophisticated theories coming from science.” (p. 2)

A second view was the “separationist position” that religion and science are not “contending forces” but “essentially complementary, each answering a different set of

human needs.... Scientific and theological language have to be related to different spheres of practice. Discourse about God, which is inappropriate in the context of laboratory practice, may be appropriate in the context of worship, or of self-examination.” (p. 2) This view separates the two spheres into compartments, one dealing with the physical world and the other with the “spiritual” world of “values”.

Some thought science could be reconciled with the doctrine of creation if theologians would “properly formulate” that doctrine merely to show “the ultimate dependence of everything that exists on a Creator.” Rudolph Bultmann even suggested that “the doctrine of creation has nothing to do with the physical world.”! “Its correct application is to the creation within men and women of an authentic stance toward their earthly predicament.” Brooke commented, “By such means the spheres of science and religion are *insulated* one from the other.” (p. 4)

A third view finds science and religion complementary and mutually beneficial. “Certain religious beliefs may be conducive to scientific activity”, but it would be within the authority of science to “purge religion of superfluous and obsolete imagery.”

Brooke acknowledges that there are “many variants of these positions”, but, intriguingly, accepts their comprehensiveness. Apparently he overlooks the many conservative Bible believers throughout the centuries who simply could not identify with any of the three or its “variant”. None are descriptive of many of the early scientists whose lives he sketches in his book, e.g., Bacon, Newton, Kepler, Boyle, etc. The traditional, Biblical doctrine of creation sees God not only as Creator, but as sovereign preserver of His creation, active daily in the physical world. The early scientists saw the exploration of nature as the exploration of God's creation, possible only because of the consistency and wisdom of the sovereign God who held it together by the word of His power. Brooke's study is seriously flawed by leaving out a major category of conservative Christians who consistently for centuries have rejected the presupposition of an autonomous scientific community. This fourth historical category is present in the pages of his book, but Brooke doesn't seem to recognize it as such.

This term *science* originally referred to all knowledge (Latin *scientia* from *scire* = “to know”) and theology as “the queen of the sciences.” Isaac Newton thought it part of his task “to discuss such questions as the attributes of God and His relationship to the physical world.” Since “very few physicists today would conceive their role in such terms”, (p. 7) Brooke dismisses the validity of Newton's concept. However, since there exist such two different approaches, it would have been better to have included as a category those scientists throughout history who have rejected the assumed autonomy of science. The seventeenth century “holistic” view is worthy of closer scrutiny, and Brooke does, in fact, discuss it.

The structure of the book is clear. Chapter I considers interrelated statements about God and about nature. Brooke suggest that religious beliefs functioned “*within science*”, rather than the other way around. Chapter II discusses the Scientific Revolution of the

seventeenth century, with “the subordination of science to theology” still continuing. Chapter III examines the relationship of the reform of learning through scientific inquiry and the Protestant Reformation. Chapter IV looks at the clockwork image which originally showed God as sovereign creator and then was used by deists to present a mechanical view of nature and of the universe. The Enlightenment is the theme of Chapter V: Skepticism vs. Christianity. “Natural theology” appears in Chapter VI and Darwinism in the next two.

Many nineteenth century scientists also saw God as sovereign creator of “nature”. Michael Faraday echoed Newton when he described science as the study of the Book of God's Works, complementary to Scripture as the Book of God's Words. But Brooke dismisses these people as “literalists”, some of whom believed in the historicity of the “legend of Noah's ark.” He maintains that the proliferation of new species, discovered by scientists, “sank the ark by the sheer weight of numbers.” Brooke's quarrel with “literalists” who are unwilling to allegorize the historical record appears on many pages of his book.

Brooke recognizes the distortion of what constitutes religious faith by scientism and secularism. Conflict there is between those isms and Biblical truth, but the contest has often been stated in broad, sweeping terms as “science” vs. “religion”. “Science” and “religion” do not automatically “conflict”. The real conflicts are between people holding different belief systems or within the mind of a person seeking to reconcile ideas.

Is “government of the world by incessant divine intervention or by the operation of unchangeable laws”? How can God “intervene” in what is already His by right of creation? God's actions are not “intervention”, but the exercise of His divine power. If God chooses to be directly involved in the rising of the sun, the movement of the tides, and the feeding and clothing of the animals, then so be it. If He chooses to operate through “Second Causes” or “natural law”, then that, too, is His divine prerogative. If those opting for the second choice recognized that God was He who put those laws into place and worshipped and served Him as Creator, there might not be too much difference in effect, but almost always those who elevated “natural law” as supreme also sought to remove God from His throne, or at least wanted Him to say away from theirs.

In all generations, it seems, there were those who recognized these issues. Frederick Temple, archbishop of Canterbury, argued in 1860 that “the finger of God was to be discerned in the laws of nature, not in the current limits of scientific knowledge.” (p. 41)

Brooke is aware of the argument that “much of the perplexity of our modern age is due to the severance of science (knowledge) from the religious values that once *shaped* it.” (p. 42) He worries, however, that “the idea that there is some correct and timeless view, against which historical controversies can be judged, can prove an insensitive guide to the issues as they were perceived at the time.”

That is a peculiar statement for a scholarly work. Certainly the traditional belief of

Christianity is that Scripture possesses a “correct and timeless view” as the revelation of a “correct and timeless” God. Not only so, historical controversies, science, religion, and everything else will ultimately be judged by that “correct and timeless” standard.

The confusion is intensified when the author warns against “hijacking” the history of science “for apologetic purposes”. He grants that “religious beliefs were relevant to the rise of science”, but emphasizes that no “particular religion, or religious tradition, was uniquely propitious.” (p. 43) The contradiction should be self evident: people are never simply “religions”. Their religious views always take a particular form, according to the tradition with which they identify. Indeed, it is impossible to be religious except in a particular format and theological expression, be it ever so unique to the individual.

But the author does emphasize that it is “almost impossible to exaggerate the extent to which belief in [divine] intervention once permeated European societies.” (p. 44) Why, one may ask, did most of the people of those generations find supernaturalism so persuasive? They lived in an integrated society and did not compartmentalize their lives. Brooke complained “how difficult it was to *achieve* a full separation [of science and scripture] even by the end of the seventeenth century.” Now, as the twenty-first century approaches, some of their intellectual heirs are seeking to “integrate science and scripture.” Their seventeenth century forefathers would have been amazed. Why should one have to integrate what is already of one piece? The tapestry of life is an integrated whole, that which actually *is*.

Nature was not autonomous. Boyle and Descartes both accepted the clockwork image of the universe rather than the universe as a living organism, but they denied the autonomy of the clockwork. Divine preservation held it in being. Nature had no inherent powers, but was always subservient to God's immediate will. When Boyle distinguished between the two books of Scripture and nature, he did not set them in opposition to each other. “Man had been made in the image of God”, he wrote, “not in the image of nature.” (p. 77)

Deists protested that the universe was too perfect to allow divine “tinkering with the mechanism”. But miracles, as Leibniz insisted, were for God to deal graciously with His people, “not to remedy second-rate clockwork.” (p. 162) The Swedish taxonomist Linnaeus (1707-78) saw science as fulfilling one of the purposes for which God had created man. “Man is made for the purpose of studying the Creator's works that he may observe in them the evident marks of divine wisdom.” (p. 197)

Darwinism Brooke accepts at face value without differentiating between empirical observation and theoretical reconstructions of non-repeatable historical events. He categorizes it as “science” rather than a philosophy of science and therefore thinks of it as a part of the corpus of belief that a modern person must have. He even referred to “the historical reality of evolution” (p. 284), without identifying which historical event(s) he meant.

Throughout his book Brooke seems to assume the validity of arguments he reports as if

they were unanswerable. The writings of David Strauss in the nineteenth century, e.g., were “shattering” because they “showed that one could give a plausible account of the gospels without admitting the historicity of the miracles to which they referred.” (p. 268) The “science of history”, required people to reject “an outmoded view of the verbal inerrancy of Scripture.” (p. 268) The Christian layman “who was prepared to listen” to nineteenth century science had to “adjust” his ideas to accept the new scientific dogma. “He had to contemplate a new and blurred image of Christ—one in which he was divested of miraculous power.... Above all, he would learn that one could understand the Scriptures only by regarding them as the work of ordinary men whose beliefs and aspirations were products of the period and society in which they lived.” (pp. 269-270)

But what of the accuracy of all this? Doesn't this beg the question? Why was it necessary to accommodate one's beliefs to such ideas? Brooke admits that “it was a *presupposition* of the scholars that Christ be stripped of superhuman qualities; and yet these peculiar qualities...were apparently essential to the New Testament witness. The science of history had created a watershed. One set of presuppositions took one toward a human, but historically illusive Christ. The other—more traditional—allowed the retention of the Christ of faith, but at the cost of severing one's ties with...our modern world.” (p. 270) In other words, one must accept the teachings of “the science of history” rather than the witness of the historical records themselves.

Change your presuppositions and accommodate yourself to the modern world. Drop your supernaturalism and learn to look at life as a naturalist. That's not enough, of course, for you'll also have to learn how to ignore evidence and arguments that contradict your new presuppositions. But “once naturalists learned to look at the world through Darwin's spectacles”, the “difficulties (which still loom large in creationist literature) began to appear inconsequential.” (p. 285)

Darwin, we are told, “destroyed any last pretensions to historicity in the Genesis creation story.” (p. 271) But the historicity or lack thereof remains absolute and does not change with one's perception of his historicity. The evidence continues to be affected by the presuppositions of the observer. The supernaturalist has no problem in believing in creation by God, but the naturalist rules that out by his presuppositions and so views the evidence in a completely different way.

Let the text speak for itself. The people who had been with Jesus for three years obviously really believed they had seen the risen Lord and communed with him several times during a period of forty days. Strauss admitted the point; the disciples really believed what they testified. The resurrection of Jesus was “a delusion, not a fabrication.” (p. 268) The argument is based on the presupposition of naturalism, not on the historical evidence as presented by those who were actually there. Resurrections from the dead simply don't happen in a naturalistic framework. A supernaturalist demands evidence for a particular event, but does not automatically rule it out *prima facie*.

As the popularity of Darwinism grew, many clergymen sought to accommodate

themselves to the new “science”. The Christian socialist Charles Kingsley rejected the concept of “a God who created as if by magic” in favor of “a God so wise that He could make all things make themselves.” (pp. 293-94)

A crucial issue is whether Biblical teachings on Creation and evolutionary “natural selection” were “fundamentally incompatible” or mutually exclusive and contradictory. Princeton theologian Charles Hodge saw nothing *intrinsically* objectionable to “the idea of theistic evolution, in which the development of new species was under divine control.” (p. 303) Darwin claimed that his theory did not deny an original creator, but “he could not see how a process in which natural selection worked on random variations could be said to be anything other than *effectively* atheistic, since the doctrine of an active providence working to specific designs” was abandoned. (p. 304)

Regardless of theoretical compatibility, three practical questions remained: 1) Does scripture in fact teach or leave room for theistic evolution within Divine creation or would that strain a Biblical hermeneutic? 2) Did the new “scientific world-view” (p. 304) reject a personal God as a causal factor in the existence of the universe and its form? 3) If so, how did the new world view attempt to explain how personality could have come from non-personality?

What developed in the nineteenth century dialogues and debates was a naturalistic world view that became a rival secular religion. Its basic assumption was a belief in “progress” through scientific manipulation. Its intolerant dogmatism was protested as early as 1889 by the French Catholic physician Pierre Jousset who wrote that “Anti-Christian science...imposes its theories as dogmas, its hypotheses as incontestable truths; the dreams of imagination become articles of faith—science is infallible!” (p. 306) The scientific movement was the “Second Reformation”. “There had been an Old and a New Testament; now there was a third, the testament of science, which transcended both.”

Naturalists not infrequently spoke of their “scientific awakening in terms that might be used of a religious conversion. One could experience a sense of ecstasy at the disclosures of nature's secrets and make sense of the sublime in contemplating *its* works.” (p. 31) First came the shift from an open system to a closed system and then from a personal universe to an impersonal one. Instead of praising God's mighty works one is awed by nature's secrets and nature's works. The worship persists but the object has changed. In 1853 a British scientist, Lyon Playfair, declared that “science is a religion and its philosophers are the priests of nature.” (p. 31)

Some even sought to create “a church scientific”. Echoing Mars Hill, Herbert Spencer believed there was an “Unknowable Power” behind evolution that “stands towards our general conception of things, in substantially the same relation as does the Creative Power asserted by theology.” (p. 305) And since the “Unknowable Power” was presumable non-personal, then one did not have to answer to “it” or fear judgment from “it”.

There were attempts to synthesize Darwinism and Biblical beliefs, “enriching” Christianity in the process, of course, and making it more “realistic.” “It was possible to ditch obsolete notions of biblical inspiration but at the same time to retain a privileged role for the Bible as a historical record of spiritual ascent—toward a more refined understanding of God.” (pp. 311-12) But it is hardly “privileged” to be demoted from being the God-breathing word to becoming the tool of autonomous man to “redefine” his knowledge of God.

“Why posit an unknown power behind the evolutionary process when the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would do just as well?” Henry Drummond wondered. The answer to the seemingly rhetorical question is: human accountability to God. And that raises the issue of sin, judgement, and redemption, which has no place in an evolutionary framework. “Whatever is, is right” in a naturalistic framework. And yet all was not right. Darwin, Brooke suggests, “had made the problem worse. If man had risen, not fallen, what would be left of the scheme of redemption? How could Christ be the second Adam if there had never been a first? Who is responsible for the sinfulness of man, mankind or their Creator?” (p. 313) And if God is Father, then his relationship to the world is not one of mechanic to machine.

Darwin was complemented by Sigmund Freud who disparaged religious beliefs for their alleged irrationality. Freud, “perhaps more than anyone, provided an analysis of religion that allowed twentieth-century thinkers to rationalize their unbelief.” (p. 323) In the process Freud unleashed a sexual revolution that has been devastating to western culture. Freud's idea of guilt, too, reflected his naturalistic attack on supernaturalism. Guilt was not a result of moral disobedience to a holy God, but merely a “psychological projection” of one's subconscious feelings. Sin was re-defined as sickness and Freud's fantasizing became realities in an increasingly decadent society.

Other movements, such as logical positivism, joined in the pervasiveness of the scientific attitude which permeated popular culture. It has taken western society a long time to realize that inventiveness and technological success are not the same as “science”, nor is everything done in the name of “science” authoritative. “It is no longer possible to regard scientific theories as independent deductive systems, each proposition of which acquires its meaning by infusion from the verifiable facts with which it ostensibly connects. Theoretical constructs appearing in different branches of science have been shown to be interdependent, and also underdetermined by the data they purport to explain.” (p. 332)

Brooke attributes a less scientific view of science to the development of subatomic physics because theory and deductive logic are used along with empirical data. The imperfect fit between theoretical model and physical reality is recognized in that field. The new physics understands that “indeterminacies” are inherent in any physical description and “no one model can give an exhaustive account of subatomic phenomena.” (p. 331)

Inescapably ethics is part of scientific analysis. As soon as one asks why science should be pursued at all, questions of value immediately arise. Do we pursue science as part of the Cultural Mandate given by God at the original creation? It is part of the restoration of man's dominion over nature, as Francis Bacon believed? It is merely a humanistic ideal of sharing knowledge for the public good? Is it a means of manipulation by the dominant culture to suppress dissent?

The Enlightenment assumed that the practice of science would encourage human culture; but the rise of modern science has also raised serious ethical questions. “Contrary to the triumphalist images of the nineteenth century, science has generated its own penumbra of ignorance, surrounding e.g., what may be considered a safe level of exposure to nuclear radiation. It has generated ethical problems that it is powerless to solve. A public alerted to experiments on human embryos and to the prospects for genetic engineering can no longer share the illusion that scientific and ethical imperatives belong to two quite different spheres. How research is oriented and how it is applied have become matters of unprecedented public concern.” (p. 338)

What is the relationship between science and secularization in the modern world? Is modern science responsible for his secularization or symptomatic of it? “Profound changes in our understanding of science itself“, Brooke believes, “have created space for renewed dialogue between scientist and theologians. As long as theologians are willing to reformulate their doctrines in terms of models rather than absolutes, there really are new opportunities for truce.” (p. 331) Give up your most basic presuppositions, belief in an absolute God who has revealed absolute truth in the pages of Holy Scripture and we just might welcome you to some secondary role in the world of autonomous science. The insistence that we give up our absolutes is stated in absolute terms. It is a *sine qua non* that there are no absolutes—except this one.

Despite many valuable insights, this book is flawed by its rejection of Biblical absolutes as authoritative. Brooke attempts to be open-minded towards various forms of “religion” except for “Biblical literalists” and “Creationists”. Intriguingly enough, the reason these people shouldn't be included in the debate is that they ignore “unassailable scientific facts”. Brooke warns against such misuse of “science” (which he aptly calls “scientism”). Creationism, according to Brooke, is “fanatically extremes” of religion. (p. 343) “Attacks on the theory of evolution” by a “growing body of creationists...constitutes a threat not merely to the orientation of research but to the cognitive content of academic science.” “So-called scientific creationism” has been “increasingly militant in their efforts to censor textbooks” by asking “equal time” for creationist arguments. Such a distortion is more to be expected from a virulent “scientistic” person than from a scholar seeking to foster an intelligent dialogue between scientists and religionists.

We have indeed come a long way from the seventeenth century when the pioneers of modern science also believed strongly in the authority of scripture. The shift has been from supernaturalism to naturalism. Insofar as science deals with empirical observation and use of the particulars of nature/creation, most of their discoveries and research are

welcomed by those who take the Bible seriously. What was true in the seventeenth century is still true today: science should be the study of God's in creation. The hostility created between science and Biblical belief has been caused by a philosophical shift to secular scientism. Synthesis of opposites simply is not possible philosophically or scientifically in the real world. Either the sovereign God is directly involved now in His creation or He is not. The issue is one of truth, not accommodation.