

Is Belief in God made Obsolete by Science?

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That anyone could take this title question seriously betrays the abysmal ignorance of the nature of religious belief that is so common nowadays. Science, understood as hypotheses about the nature of the cosmos, couldn't possibly make obsolete *any* answer to another question, the question as to the identity of the self-existent reality on which all else depends. Whether or not the answer given to this very different question is Brahman-Atman, Dharmakaya, the Tao, Mana, Zurvan, or God, the study of the cosmos could not possibly affect it. The only way a theory about the cosmos could impact these ideas of divinity is if that theory included or presupposed a belief in some part of the cosmos (or the whole of it) as the self-existent reality on which all else depends instead of those divinities. In that case the theory would be including or presupposing a competing divinity belief, and to that extent would be importing a *religious* belief into science. For surely no study of the cosmos could *show* that part (or all) of it is self-existent; any such belief would have to be brought to science, not derived from it.

These opening comments are based on my 50 years of investigating religions, which has shown overwhelmingly that the common core of every one of them is a belief in something as divine, where "divine" means (minimally) the non-dependent self-existent reality on which all else depends for existence.¹ When I first discovered it, I thought this definition was original. Then, as I read further, I found to my amazement that far from being original it has been held by

¹ There are other terms that could be used besides "divine" such as "sacred", "holy," "numinous", etc. But the core idea of them all remains the same. It should also be noted that in many religions there are gods that are not self-existent. But since these are all personifications of some more basic divinity that *is* self-existent, they are not exceptions to this definition. The gods of ancient Greece, e.g., were all thought to have been brought into existence by Chaos (Hesiod) or Okeanos (Homer) which have no origin.

more philosophers and scholars of religion than any other! I was amazed because this definition is now so widely ignored. So it was startling to learn that it had been held by virtually every Pre-Socratic thinker, Plato, Aristotle, virtually every medieval thinker, John Calvin, and Friedrich Schleiermacher - to name but a few prior to the 20th century. In the 20th century alone it was also recognized by: Wm James, Norman Kemp Smith, Paul Tillich, Hans Kung, C.S. Lewis, Herman Dooyeweerd, Paul Chenau, A.C. Bouquet, Mercea Eliade, Joachim Wach, Robert Neville, and Will Herberg – once again, to name but a few!²

Among other things, this definition makes clear why belief in God and atheism - though contrary - are not exhaustive options. Atheism relates to religious belief as vegetarianism does to eating: if I know you're a vegetarian I know what you don't eat but not what you like to eat. Likewise, if I know you're an atheist I know what you don't believe is divine, but not what you do believe to be divine. The Naturalist who believes that part or all of the cosmos is self-existent has a divinity belief every bit as much as any Hindu, Buddhist, Jew, Christian, or Muslim. Such a person simply has a *different* divinity belief, rather than no religious belief at all. Moreover, the fact that what Naturalism regards as divine is also (part of) what the sciences study does nothing to make Naturalism itself *scientific* rather than religious; to claim it does is a howling non sequitur on a par with claiming that the study of farming must itself be healthy because it studies the production of food. Besides, Naturalist religion has been around for a long time. In the ancient world it was called paganism, and the main difference between its modern and its ancient forms seems to be that the ancient ones admitted they were religions while their contemporary counterparts claim to

² *Varieties of Religious Experience* (NY: Longmans Green & Co, 1929), 31-34; *The Credibility of Divine Existence* (NY: St Martins Press, 1967), 396; *The Dynamics of Faith* (NY: Harper & Bros, 1957), 12; *Christianity and the World Religions* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1986), xvi; *Miracles* (NY: MacMillan, 1948), 15-22; *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (Phila: 1953), I, 57; *The Reformation* (Gloucester: Allan Sutton, 1989), 18; *Comparative Religion* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973), 37; *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (NY: Sheed & Ward, 1958), 23-25; *The Comparative Study of Religions* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1961), 30; *The Tao and the Daimon* (Albany: State University of NY Press, 1982), 117; "The Fundamental Outlook of Hebraic Religion" in *The Ways of Religion*, ed. R. Eastman (NY: Canfield, 1975), 283.

oppose all religion. That they oppose all other ideas of divinity in the name of their own seems to go unnoticed.

This definition of religious belief, though marginalized in present day religious studies, is exactly what is needed in contemporary discussions of the relation between science and religion. For while there are differences among philosophers and scientists about the nature of the scientific enterprise, there is also a large area of agreement about it. By contrast, there is not the slightest agreement among participants in the science/ religion dialogue concerning the nature of religious belief. To make matters worse, the most commonly held ideas about it are patently false. For example, divinity beliefs are not all accompanied by worship, do not all have an ethic associated with them, and do not all result in a cultic organization. Nevertheless, despite the lack of any clear idea of what makes a belief religious, thinkers by the dozens plow ahead with their pronouncements about how religion relates to science.

In addition to the prevalent grievous misunderstanding of the *nature* of divinity beliefs, there presently persists an equally grievous misunderstanding of the *ground* on which they are believed. One of the cheapest shots in the entire science/religion discussion is the one that goes: science is matter of observation and reason while religion is blind faith. I call it cheap because it is made in the face of *centuries* of explanations to the contrary. To cite only Christian thinkers (and only a few of them) it is contradicted by Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Pascal. How anyone could ignore all of them and still claim to have correctly described the Christian idea of the grounds for belief in God, I do not know. But it is done with appalling regularity by people who hold prestigious positions in major universities, some of whom have notable accomplishments in one or another science. All I can say about that is to note how often success in one area tempts those flushed with such success to proclaim (with great confidence) the most ludicrous mistakes in another area of which they know next to nothing.

So let's get this much clear right away: *there is not, and never has been, a religion on earth whose scriptures ever asked anyone to believe it on blind faith.* Neither have the scriptures of any religion attempted to prove its doctrines as though they were theories. *Rather, the ground that every religion has pointed to as the way to know the truth of its teachings is the direct experience of their self-evident certainty.*

For that reason it is doubly absurd first to misdescribe divinity beliefs as based on blind faith, and then dismiss them as epistemically substandard unless they are proven. That makes no more sense than it would to demand of mathematics that it prove its axioms or declare them blind faith in the absence of such proof. Moreover, these twin mistakes are usually conjoined to a third, namely, the egregiously false claim that if a belief has no proof then the only alternative *is* that of blind faith. Many participants in the science/religion dialog have asserted this position without noticing that it would not only make the axioms of math and logic blind faith, but also all beliefs derived from normal sense perception! None of these are provable, but they are not therefore blind faith! Nor do they need proof; nothing that is believed because it is experienced as self-evident needs proof. And please notice that it will not do to reply to this last point by saying that when it comes to logic, math, and normal sense perception everyone agrees as to what is self-evidently true, whereas the disagreements over what is divine render its alleged self-evidency spurious. That isn't even close to being correct. There are as intractable, head-butting, long-standing disagreements about axioms of math and logic as there are about divinity beliefs. What this shows is not that self-evidency is not a proper ground for belief, but that although it is often the ground (and the only ground) for a belief, it is not infallible.

I mentioned above just a few of the Christian thinkers who denied that belief in God is a matter of blind trust, and who held that one or another form of direct experience is the ground of belief in God. I also then suggested that, while

such experience may take many forms, they all stressed the form of it in which scriptural teaching is seen to be self-evidently true. There is room here to quote only two of them to demonstrate that point. The first is a Protestant theologian, the second a Catholic scientist. First, John Calvin:

As to the question, How shall we be persuaded that [Scripture] came from God?... it is just the same as if we were asked, How shall we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter? Scripture bears on the face of it as clear evidence of its truth, as white and black do of their color, sweet and bitter of their taste.³

They who strive to build up a firm faith in Scripture through disputation are doing things backwards... Even if anyone clears God's sacred Word from man's evil speaking, he will not at once imprint upon their hearts that certainty which piety requires... unbelieving men... both wish and demand rational proof that Moses and the prophets spoke divinely. But I reply that the testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason.⁴

Scripture, carrying its own evidence along with it, deigns not to submit to proofs and arguments, but owes the full conviction with which we ought to receive it to the testimony of the Spirit of God.⁵

Just to be sure there's no misunderstanding here: when Calvin speaks of the testimony of God's Spirit he is referring to the experience of enlightenment referred to repeatedly in the New Testament. He is not speaking of hearing voices

³ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.7.2

⁴ *Ibid.* 1.7.4

⁵ *Ibid.* 1.7.5

or seeing visions, but of the opening of ones heart and mind to the light (truth) of the gospel.⁶ And although he doesn't use the expression "self-evident" in the quotes above, but he may as well have done since what he says conveys the same idea. So, too, does the following passage from Pascal's famous work, *Pensees*:

We know truth not only by the reason but also by the heart, and it is this last way that we know first principles; and reason which has no part in it, tries in vain to impugn them... [For example] we know that we do not dream... however impossible it is for us to prove it by reason... the knowledge of first principles, such as space, time, motion, and number is as sure as any of those we get from reasoning. And reason must trust these intuitions of the heart, and must base every argument upon them... it is as useless and absurd for reason to demand from the heart proofs of her first principles before admitting them, as it would be for the heart to demand from reason an intuition of all demonstrated propositions before accepting them... Therefore those to whom God has imparted religion by intuition are very fortunate, and justly convinced.⁷

It should be obvious that Pascal also appeals here to the idea of self-evidency without using the term.

But even more remarkably, direct experience of their self-evidency is also said to be the ground of the divinity beliefs of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism! The idea goes by many names in different scriptures and writers, but their connotation is the same: Turiya, Moksha, Satori, Zen, conversion, enlightenment, opening of the heart, intuition, etc. The upshot is that although these are very different ideas of exactly what has the status of divinity, they are all taken to be grounded on *experience*. In this respect, these specific ideas are –

⁶ E.g., Cmp. Rom. 1: 21, 25; 2 Cor. 4: 4-6; Eph. 1: 18, 5: 8-13.

⁷ Trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1966), 58.

again – analogous to the contrary intuitions about the axioms of math and logic, number theory, set theory, and other long-standing controversies in the sciences. But none is recommended on blind faith.⁸

This is not to say that you can't find a writer in any of these traditions who has ever said such a thing. I was careful to phrase this point by saying that none of the scriptures of these or any other tradition ever say this, and that in fact they present a different account of the basis for their divinity belief – an account that is inconsistent with blind trust. So I've not denied that you can find, say, fundamentalists who will all too gladly agree with the Naturalists' accusation that belief in God rests on blind faith. Nevertheless, that doesn't make it excusable for participants in the science/religion discussion to accept that as fact, and still less does it excuse generalizing that same mistake to *all* religions! Attacking non-Naturalist religions by attacking Jewish, Christian, or Muslim fundamentalism is analogous to attacking science by attacking alchemists.

In fact, the role of faith in the Theistic traditions is just the same as it is in everyday life. Just as we trust a friend to fulfill a promise, we are admonished to trust in God to keep his. Likewise, just as we don't have faith that our friend *exists*, so too no Bible writer ever asks that we trust that God is real. In each case, we would already have to believe in the reality of the person we trust in order to place trust in that person. In this same way, Bible writers speak of trusting *in* God not *that* God is real. The trust and faith are not that God is there, but that he will keep his promises. So they always speak to their readers as though the readers *know* God is real, and the only question is whether those readers will both think and act in obedient reliance on God's faithfulness.

One last thing. The most prevalent form of contemporary Naturalism today is materialism: the belief that some exclusively physical realities are self-existent (divine). The two versions of this claim are: 1) there are only purely

⁸ This position is developed at greater length in my little book, *Knowing with the Heart: Religious Experience and Belief in God* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2007).

physical things governed by physical laws, and 2) the purely physical things and laws are what produce all that is non-physical. Many of those who hold to such a materialist view of reality try to justify it by claiming that it is necessary to science. For example, in a review of two books by theists who are distinguished scientists, George Johnson dismissed their point that they saw no conflict between their science and their Christianity this way: “But theism and materialism don’t stand on equal footings. The assumption of materialism is fundamental to science.” (*Scientific American*, Oct. 2006, p. 95). That claim should (at least) look mighty suspicious even to those who wish it were true in view of the fact that every major figure in the rise of modern science was both a theist and not a materialist. But that aside, what the claim asserts is literally nonsense. The reason is that no one can so much as frame the idea of anything as purely physical. If we take “physical” to refer to that which is subject to physical law, then our inability to provide any idea of “purely physical” can be confirmed by the simple thought experiment of trying to conceive of anything as purely physical.

Take as a first example, the concept of a stone. Now strip from your concept every quantitative property since these are not physical (numbers are not subject to physical laws). That will mean there is no “how much” to the stone so that it cannot be counted or measured. Now likewise strip away every spatial property so that it has no size or shape or location (spatial shapes are also not subject to physical laws). Next think away any content to the concept that is in any way biotic so that the stone is in not, e.g., dangerous to life. Then divest it of any sensory property so that it is *in principle* unable to be perceived (this will mean, among other things, that no observations could possibly confirm any theory about it). Next subtract from your concept the stone’s logical property of being able to be distinguished from other things, and finally take from it the linguistic potentiality of being referred to in language.

Now tell me what you have left.

Have you any idea whatever? Granted, some of the properties I've just mentioned are true of the stone only passively; it doesn't actively possess sensory, logical, or linguistic properties. But unless it had the passive potential to be perceived, to be distinguished, and to be referred to, none of those actions could be performed on it. And every one of those potentialities requires that it be subject to other-than-physical laws: laws of perception, laws of logic, and linguistic laws. Moreover, this result doesn't only accrue to concrete *objects*, but even applies to abstract *properties* that clearly are physical. So let's do the experiment again, this time using as our test case the abstract property of (physical) weight. What is weight which has no amount, is nowhere, is unable to be perceived, cannot be distinguished from any other property, and cannot be referred to in language?

This experiment destroys materialism as a theory and confirms that it is a divinity belief which is as unprovable as any found in the major world religions. It's unprovable because there is no recovery from the point that materialists cannot so much as frame the idea of what they claim to be true, and what cannot be conceived of cannot be proven. The real ground of this belief, then, is the experience of having it appear self-evident to its advocates, not that it is necessary to science. But, as the experiment shows, this is a divinity with special difficulties. For materialism proclaims as the self-existent basis of all reality something of which it literally has no idea! Thus it is in the same epistemological boat as the assertion there are square circles. We can say the words "square circle" but we (literally) have no idea what we're talking about when we do. Likewise, we can say the words "purely physical" but we can't supply any idea whatever to go with them. The expression is literally meaningless.

For this reason, neither version of materialism is what scientists actually employ in their work. Even scientists who are also avid materialists are forced to treat the concrete objects and the abstract properties and laws they work with as inextricably connected with quantitative, spatial, sensory, logical, and many other kinds of properties. No one ever works with the mythical class of the purely

physical. It is literally inconceivable and thus has zero explanatory power.⁹ What this shows is that when materialists do science, they shift back and forth between two meanings of “physical”. They first claim that the purely physical is the ultimate (divine) reality, and then work with theories which they *never* deal with anything as exclusively physical. Moreover, this is not just a slip-up on their part; as we’ve just seen, it’s because they can’t so much as frame the idea of anything as exclusively physical.

But what, then, does that tell us about their belief that the purely physical is divine? If no one can form any idea of the physical as independent of all else, how can it be the cause of all else? The fact is that materialism contrasts to the divinity beliefs of the major world traditions in a curious way. Whereas they all take something other than the cosmos to be the divine reality on which all else depends, materialism identifies the divine as the purely physical component of the cosmos. But that puts it in the position of holding that there are purely physical realities on which all else depends despite the fact that it can offer no idea whatever of what it is talking about.

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⁹ This argument and a non-reductionist theory of reality are both developed in my book, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).