

Introduction

The Pervading Intricacy of the World's Detail: Science and Religion Across Diverse Perspectives

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Scientific inquiry has come to play a central role in contemporary society in shaping what Charles Taylor describes as our shared *cosmic imaginary*: our basic way of making sense of and relating to the world around us.¹ In other words, regardless of our religious orientation, it is nearly impossible to construct or imagine a worldview unaffected by scientific knowledge. The cultural ascendancy of modern science is even more remarkable given that the set of practices and results we refer to as “science” is a relatively recent development. Following its roots in the natural philosophies of the seventeenth century, only by the nineteenth century had science emerged into the categorical label as understood today.²

Moreover, modern science emerged out of a context characterized by predominantly Christian creeds and practices. It is therefore no surprise that science throughout its history would have had significant interaction with religious belief.³ Indeed, it would be curious if science and religious belief had somehow managed to remain apart. As noted by Carl Sagan, “because science is inseparable from the rest of the human endeavor, it cannot be discussed without making contact, sometimes glancing, sometimes head-on, with a number of social, political, religious and philosophical issues.”⁴ Over the past several decades, growing awareness and recognition of the social and cultural aspects of scientific inquiry have opened up new opportunities for exploring the relationship between science and social, political, religious, and philosophical issues.⁵

Given these developments, how should we characterize the relationship between science and religion? In his influential *Religion in an Age of Science*

(based upon his 1989–1991 Gifford Lectures), Ian Barbour surveyed the landscape of science and religion and described four general categories of interaction: conflict, independence, dialogue, and integration.⁶ While this descriptive typology has been of great value, numerous examples (and counter-examples) of each can be found throughout history and into the present. Thus, in recent decades there has been growing recognition that the relationship between science and religion is best described as one of *complexity*, wherein the manner of interaction depends upon a host of factors particular to each situation. Any description of “science-religion” interaction must likewise be attentive to historical context.

Nevertheless, like a moth to flame, a narrative of perpetual struggle between science and religion (or even a *perception* of such a struggle) has continued to attract the most attention, in part due to the lasting influence of polemical works such as *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1875) by John W. Draper, and *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896) by Andrew D. White. According to this so-called conflict narrative, the relationship between science and religion is best demonstrated by events such as the Galileo affair (1610–1633), reactions to Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1860), and the Scopes Monkey Trial (1925), to the cultural clashes of the twentieth century and the claims of New Atheism in the twenty-first century.⁷ Moreover, caricatured descriptions of these battles are frequently offered as examples of—depending upon one’s predisposition—either scientific reason vs. superstitious religion, or naturalistic atheism vs. orthodox biblical faith.

Historians of science and religion point to a much richer and complex relationship. As noted by historian Ronald Numbers, “the greatest myth in the history of science and religion is that they have been in a state of constant conflict.”⁸ What is often characterized as conflict between “science” and “religion” usually involves additional scientific, philosophical, theological, social, and political factors that complicate the narrative.⁹ And yet, science and religion are both making significant claims about the world. Even if the perpetual conflict narrative is largely mythical, conflict between the claims of modern science and religious belief may indeed occur. Such tensions may create pressure for reinterpretation of scientific data or even rejection of scientific conclusions or paradigms. In other instances, it may result in reinterpretation of scripturally derived religious claims about the physical world (for example, how passages like Ecclesiastes 1:5 might be read and understood before and after the Copernican revolution). Another reaction to apparent conflict is the adoption of a more literalist hermeneutic in which the Bible is read to make claims in a scientific manner. Notably, this approach “also springs from the scientific context itself,”¹⁰ given the cultural influence and prestige of scientific knowledge as a perceived source of authority.

A proposed alternative strategy to sidestep potential conflict is to *embrace* the category distinction between science and religion. In this approach, science and religion are taken to represent fundamentally different activities that are interested in fundamentally different questions about the world and can thus operate within their respective domains of authority. This category could be variously described as independence (in Barbour's typology) or indifference, or perhaps (more positively) as "consilience of equal regard."¹¹ Stephen Jay Gould presented a well-articulated description of this approach in which science and religion are "non-overlapping magisteria" (or NOMA).¹²

In practice, this sort of science-religion "decoupling" (generally via some variation of methodological naturalism: the working assumption that all causes are natural and can be studied empirically) has proven to be a remarkably productive way for people from diverse religious backgrounds to collaborate in the work of science. Even for the theist, it has allowed for deep insights into creational structure while avoiding simple reliance on "god-of-the-gaps" arguments for events that take place in the natural world.

Yet this approach also has significant shortcomings, not least of which is the assumption that a clear boundary can be drawn between magisteria of "science" and "religion." In fact, we do encounter significant areas of interaction, especially around questions of origins, scientific ethics, the mind and consciousness, or what it means to be human. Moreover, a model of independence assumes that humans can readily adopt some form of compartmentalized Kantian "objective neutrality" in their approach to science. It ignores the reality that scientific practice and scientific knowledge are *contextual* and *situated*: shaped by our broader social and historical context,¹³ by any operative disciplinary or scientific paradigms,¹⁴ and by our particular faith traditions and experience.¹⁵ As in the conflict narrative, a model of independence also treats science and religion as monolithic entities, with a tendency to neglect the many-layered ways in which we encounter and understand the world. Moreover, it is also susceptible to what Mary Midgley has described as "the myth of omniscience": a type of scientism that makes the claim that legitimate knowledge can only be attained through particular scientific means.¹⁶

Even in more harmonious models of interaction between science and religion (such as dialogue or integration, using Barbour's typology) such challenges remain, along with the central difficulty of the individual encountering a vast, many-layered world. For example, over the past several decades, an exponential "multiplicity" of methodological development and specialization within the sciences has taken place, creating new challenges—but also new opportunities—for constructive engagement.¹⁷ Recognizing the degree of disciplinary specialization (or even fragmentation) means that we can no longer

point to a single mode of interaction between science and religion: *which* science? (or *which* religion?) This trend of specialization, along with the sheer volume of scientific output, has made it increasingly difficult for any single individual to possess a fully comprehensive understanding when exploring specific questions at the interface between science and religion. Indeed, disciplinarity has proceeded to such an extent that it is not unusual to hear descriptions of “different languages” among sub-disciplines of the physical sciences, not to mention “other cultures” such as theology or the humanities.

The growing divide in disciplinary work can create scenarios where specialists continue to pursue scientific inquiry into “overlapping” areas relevant for science-religion dialogue but remain largely hidden from non-practitioners. This may include significant, ongoing developments built upon contemporary scientific paradigms that may still be considered contested by religious believers (such as in evolutionary theory, cosmology, or geology) but where scientific developments in the twentieth century have served to strengthen each existing paradigm. Taken together, these scenarios create gaps in dialogue or integration. The gap between specialized study and lay understanding also makes it harder to communicate in key areas of science and policy, such as around climate change,¹⁸ where, as Jürgen Moltmann notes, theology and religion might better serve as “companions in tribulation” in light of the present ecological crises. “In a global situation where it is a case of ‘one world or none,’” Moltmann writes, “science and theology cannot afford to divide up the one, single reality. On the contrary, theology and the sciences will arrive together at the ecological awareness of the world.”¹⁹ Notably, the growing lay-specialist gap also highlights the changing nature of scientific knowledge and practice over time. How then does science, which is tentative, yet durable, provide meaningful truth? How do shifts in scientific knowledge shape interactions with religious belief over time? And what might collaborative science-religion engagement look like in an era of increasing disciplinary specialization—specialization that is in part a reflection of the complexity of a multi-layered creation?

A posture of honesty and intellectual humility provides recognition that disciplinary inquiry is (by definition) self-limiting; other methods of inquiry are necessary to provide a comprehensive picture of the world. Likewise, we are incapable of this task as individuals. Given our own finite and limited perspective, *we can't do this work alone*. Even in our human identity, Hermann Bavinck comments that “the ‘image of God’ can only be unfolded in the depth and riches of a humanity of billions.”²⁰ Put another way, explorations of our world call for multiple perspectives provided through community. Diversity is needed not to relativize truth, but to begin to capture the complexity of a vast, multi-layered world. Throughout the following pages we thus hope to

embrace the tension of maintaining disciplinary integrity while recognizing disciplinary limitation. Our aim is to heed the words of Mary Midgley as we explore “one world, but a big one.”²¹ In this simple phrase we see an expression of both *ontological unity* and *epistemological pluralism*. By “one world,” we recognize ontological unity: a single objective reality that exists outside of us, but one that we can still comprehend. By “a big world,” we recognize the necessity of epistemological pluralism: a vast, complex and diverse cosmos that invites diverse interactions as we explore it. Thus, we seek to create a space of new cognitive possibilities²² as we consider the physical creation alongside biblical narratives to generate new insights about our world.

A multi-layered world invites a wide range of disciplinary perspectives, by necessity, to mine its expansive and varied territories, a theme introduced and examined in the first chapter of this volume. In “Bridging the Disciplines: Reflections on Interdisciplinarity and the Unity of Knowledge,” Alister E. McGrath explores how to integrate findings from various intellectual disciplines into a cohesive whole. McGrath first considers the challenges of such a task, including intellectual isolationism and intellectual colonialism, both of which reject interdisciplinary dialogue. The chapter then highlights how disciplines can simultaneously maintain their individuality and integrate wisdom from other fields. Mary Midgley’s theory of “multiple maps” is analyzed within this context before applying such an integrative approach to the field of science and religion. John Hedley Brooke examines the origins of modern science in his essay “The Beginnings of Science in the Western World,” specifically how Islam and Christianity created environments where science could thrive, while also leading to a closed-off sense of tribal gatekeeping. Brooke challenges the idea that Christian theology “gave birth” to Western modern science, while still highlighting how Christianity positively impacted empirical research in seventeenth-century Europe. This chapter acknowledges Galileo, Newton, and other seventeenth-century philosophers who cultivated vital space for science to thrive. Finally, Brooke addresses how Christianity has been used to gain social acceptance of experimental scientific engagements. As one very minor expression of multiplicity in perspectives, we note that while American spelling is generally adopted throughout this volume, we have retained English spelling in the chapters from our British contributors.

In “On Leibniz’s Objection against Substantivalism,” Omar Fakhri interrogates Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz’s arguments against Sir Isaac Newton’s theory of substantivalism, which claims that space is a concrete substance. On the other hand, relationism claims that space only exists *between* things. This chapter mines not only how Leibniz uses God to refute substantivalism, but also how the debate itself between substantivalism and relationism highlights a healthy relationship between science and religion, as noted by Fakhri. Channon Visscher discusses in “Science as Storytelling: Making the Moon”

how the role of the Moon in science and religion correlates with various theories of the Moon's origin. While the Moon was mostly used throughout history to mark signs and seasons, the space age of the mid-twentieth century revealed an abundance of new information, and an emerging emphasis on the giant impact theory of the Moon's origin. This theory, along with others constructed about the past, sheds light on the ways we create scientific origin stories and our understanding of the role of divine action in creation.

Through his essay, "Heaven and Earth in Earnest: Annie Dillard's Natural Theology," Barrett Fisher II focuses on Annie Dillard's book of natural theology, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Inspired by both science and mysticism, Dillard investigates nature as revealed by the divine. In doing so, she refuses to solve the tension between science and religion. Rather, she both searches for God through nature (*via positive*) and also waits for God to appear (*via negative*). In the end, Dillard surveys the meaning of life, while accepting that there may not be an easy answer to such deep mysteries. Exploring another strain of the relationship between science and religion, Marcus Simmons asserts in "Finite Ear, Infinite God: The Living Art and Science Heard in God's Creation" that music can be a conduit for emotional and scientific expression. Together, the sciences and the arts can take what would otherwise remain discordant and create mutually beneficial relationships. The composition of music reflects an artistic, immeasurable creator. The soundscape, therefore, can impact one's journey through both physical space and the imaginative spaces built by humans. Finally, this essay concludes by highlighting how the soundscape can sharpen decreasing brain function.

Through the chapter, "Art, *Imago*, and Human Dignity," Wayne L. Roosa seeks to understand how art can both defend and rejoice in human dignity. Roosa looks at the physicality of making art with human hands, substantiated by tangible materials, as a process that asserts human worth. This concrete approach finds value not only in art's visual appeal, but in its physical formulation. Roosa focuses on visual art throughout the centuries, from prehistoric caves to handprints in bricks left by enslaved workers. Ultimately, this essay celebrates human dignity through art-making across time and space.

In "The Science of Propriety in Florence Nightingale's Bible," Bernon Lee connects Florence Nightingale's view of divine excellence to Victorian and Eurocentric notions of the prime human form. Through inspecting her Biblical commentary and other writings, Lee reveals an attitude of repugnance toward Indian and Egyptian bodies, aligned with the surrounding Anglo-European imperial convictions. In conclusion, Nightingale's views of Scripture are heavily informed by colonial conversation towards India and other non-European countries. Through the chapter "Inference to the Best Explanation: Potential Gateways to the Relationship Between Science and Religion and Multidisciplinary Interpretations of Biblical Stories," Claudia

May introduces a rationale behind formulating a second segment of *Science and Religion: Perspectives Across Disciplines*. The editors of this anthology maintain that when the sciences, humanities, and social sciences converse with the Advent and Easter stories they contribute subtleties that provoke discussion on the plasticity of biblical scriptures when viewed through the lens of diverse disciplines. Building on this premise, May probes how the concept, Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE), can be aligned with the examination of scripture through the frameworks of the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Through the lens of IBE, this chapter provides a gateway to theologian Michael Holmes' textual analyses of biblical authors' nuanced and at times divergent renditions of these stories. Holmes views the Nativity and Easter stories through the lenses of exegesis and hermeneutics in his chapter, "Advent and Easter in the Gospel Narratives." Holmes observes how both narratives are interpreted in diverse ways throughout disciplines, including the different readings within this anthology. The protagonists of these stories are reviewed through the layered and sometimes clashing interpretations of the immaculate conception and the birth of Jesus, resulting in a three-dimensional portrayal of their lives. In conclusion, Holmes supports a varied and multidisciplinary approach to these stories.

In "The Face of Christmas," Sherryse L. Corrow argues that the story of Advent is replete with sensory details, such as Jesus being the *light* of the world or *hearing* the coming of the Lord. What might it have been like to experience Jesus Christ in the flesh, to look at his face? What is particularly connective about seeing someone's face in general? In this chapter, Corrow dissects such questions through the lens of cognitive and visual neuroscience. Cara M. Wall-Scheffler evaluates the idea of New Creation as an "ecosystem" in her essay, "Eternal Evolution in the New Creation: A Proposal." She asks, how might this diverse ecosystem continue to evolve? She goes on to explore this issue via the following questions: "Is it reasonable for Christians to expect human evolution to continue in New Creation and, if so, how might this happen? More to the point, can the epistemologies of science and religion work together in understanding this prospect?"

During the Christmas season, "Emmanuel" is sung as an invitation for God's presence, "God with us." With this perspective in mind, Julie Hogan assesses in the chapter, "Paradoxical Presence: God with Us in Time and Space," an ancient theory of the universe centered on "celestial spheres," where heaven was divided from Earth by luminous spheres comprising the Sun, Moon, and planets. This theory viewed God coming to Earth as a movement through the spheres within the universe. Hogan looks at the various paradoxes associated with an infinite God descending into humanity's limited conceptions of time and space as they pertain to the Advent season.

Presenting possible contributions the physics field can make to the study of science and religion, Nathan Lindquist first acknowledges that the nanoscale allows scientists to construct a variety of staggering and seemingly impossible materials, often referred to as the second industrial revolution. In “Do We Need a Nano-Theology? Christian Engagement at the Cutting-Edge,” Lindquist begins with a broad overview of nanotechnology before considering how Christians can create a theology of technology. Lindquist looks at the fresh ideas and viewpoints Christians can lend to nanotechnology, while also engaging how this rapidly developing field can illuminate the Easter story.

In her chapter, “Psychological Views of the Resurrection: The Integral Role of Paradox,” Angela M. Sabates highlights how the logic-defying nature of Christ’s resurrection can help expand neurological understanding. Humans’ cognitive desire for rewards, categories and patterns helps interpret the social and physical construction of the world. Such preferences also help separate friends from threats, while emphasizing the natural relationality of humankind. By exploring various neurological responses to Christ’s resurrection, Sabates declares that the brain’s preference for neat categories also has the capacity to hold deeper contradictions and complexities. Similarly, in “Easter as Divine Summons: A Theological Reflection,” Victor I. Ezigbo unravels the theological issues that arise with the Christian belief in Jesus’ physical resurrection. These theological issues are intentionally separated from philosophical and scientific issues, such as whether it is biologically feasible for someone dead to become fully alive again. Theology does not seek to answer such questions, so Ezigbo spends time probing the meanings behind both Jesus’ body before death and his resurrected body. Ultimately, Ezigbo seeks to uncover if Jesus’ resurrected body should be viewed as opposed to or connected with his body before death. Finally, Juan Hernández Jr. scrutinizes the various complexities that arise from the gospel narratives in his essay, “Faith, Fundamentalism, and the Guild: The Challenge of Our Discrepant Gospels.” Rather than reduce the gospels to a matter of stock theological answers and easy platitudes, this essay affirms the attributes of multifaceted and ever shifting understandings of biblical interpretation. The tendency of the gospels to accommodate and indeed encourage multiple readings finds a comparable associate in multidisciplinary articulations of science and religion.

What new imaginative pathways might be uncovered by multidisciplinary dialogue? How can these re-imaginings shape and enrich our understanding of both science and religious belief? Here we invite conversation through diverse disciplinary perspectives on science and religion in our attempt to reflect the beautiful complexity of the world. In the words of Annie Dillard,

This is the truth of the pervading intricacy of the world's detail: the creation is not a study, a roughed-in sketch; it is supremely, meticulously created, created abundantly, extravagantly, and in fine.²³

Throughout this work, we hope to convey not a set of propositions, but a posture of wonder and curious humility about the world, rooted in deep faith, with the freedom and opportunity to explore new images of an abundant, extravagant, and good creation.

NOTES

1. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 323.

2. Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

3. John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

4. Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980).

5. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Bruno Latour, *Science in Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); Philip Hefner, *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

6. Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997).

7. Mohammad Hassan Khalil, “‘Imagine a World with No Religion’: A Word on Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett,” in *Jihad, Radicalism, and the New Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 154–63.

8. Ronald L. Numbers, ed., *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths about Science and Religion* (Harvard University Press, 2010).

9. See Peter Harrison, “A Historian’s Perspective on Science-Engaged Theology,” *Modern Theology* 37, no. 2 (April 2021): 467–82; Peter Harrison, and Paul Tyson, eds., *New Directions in Theology and Science: Beyond Dialogue* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022).

10. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 330.

11. Alister E. McGrath, “A Consilience of Equal Regard: Stephen Jay Gould on the Relation of Science and Religion,” *Zygon* 56, no. 3 (September 2021): 547–65.

12. Stephen J. Gould, “Nonoverlapping Magisteria,” *Natural History* 106, no. 2 (March 1997): 16–22.

13. e.g., by our cosmic social imaginary; cf. Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

14. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

15. For example, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, “A Reformed Understanding of Scholarship,” in *Reformed Public Theology: A Global Vision for Life in the World*, ed. Matthew Kaemingk (Baker Academic, 2021); Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Duet or*

duel?: Theology and Science in a Postmodern World (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, 1998); Hermann, Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1960); Harrison, “A Historian’s Perspective.”

16. Mary Midgley, *Science and Poetry* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

17. See Harrison and Tyson, *New Directions in Theology and Science*.

18. Michael S. Northcott, “Religion and the Science of Climate Destabilization: The Case for (Re)Entanglement,” in *New Directions in Theology and Science*, ed. Peter Harrison and Paul Taylor (New York: Routledge, 2022).

19. Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 34.

20. Hermann Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 2: God and Creation*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004), 577.

21. Midgley, *Science and Poetry*, 170.

22. Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 1998).

23. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1974).

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