

# Talking About God With Scientists

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## Our Science and Faith at Work and Church

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### Introduction:

There is no single “formula” for talking about God with our scientific colleagues because each is a unique individual. However, there are several misconceptions about religion in general, and about Christianity in particular, which are fairly common amongst scientists today. These barriers to the gospel are often implicit and only vaguely formed in their thinking, but nevertheless real barriers. Discussing these topics can help your colleagues clarify their own thinking and help them explicitly state their beliefs about science and religion. It then becomes possible to show many points of agreement between a typical scientist’s worldview and a Christian worldview, while strategically delineating points of difference. We can encourage our colleagues to understand how important it is to investigate “the God question,” and perhaps persuade them that ultimately the best method of investigating God is not the scientific method, but one of seeking personal and social experience of God in prayer, fellowship, and scripture.

This talk presents some questions about Christianity which I have found to be fairly common amongst my scientific colleagues, and some thoughts which could be helpful in discussing those questions.

### Question: How can you be a scientist and believe in God? Isn’t science inherently atheistic?

- There are certain philosophical (meta-scientific) beliefs about the world which all scientists share, which make it possible to do science. In order to be a scientist, you have to believe something like the following: *Nature operates according to regular, repeatable, universal patterns; and we can build and understand of those patterns through experimentation and theory-building.* These beliefs about nature are not restricted to atheists; they are compatible with many religions, including Christianity.
  - For example: A modern-day atheist might assert that *nature operates according to regular patterns* simply because this is a fundamental property of matter. A Christian believes that *nature operates according to regular patterns* because God is not capricious, but an orderly God who governs creation in an orderly fashion.
- It’s worth looking at human history and asking, “Where did the belief that *nature operates according to regular patterns* come from?” Many early scientists like Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton, who helped to establish the scientific method of studying the world, held those beliefs about nature precisely because of their Christian theology.
- Christianity provides both a motivation for doing science (we are studying God’s handiwork, and the results of science do benefit other people) and a philosophical framework for understanding why the scientific method works (the God revealed in the Bible governs in an orderly fashion).

### Question: Isn’t “God” an unnecessary hypothesis? Science can explain why things happen without reference to God. By Occam’s Razor, shouldn’t you should discard the “God hypothesis”?

- What is the “fundamental basis of reality”? Philosophers have found it useful to distinguish between things which “contingently” exist (rely on something else for their existence) and things which “necessarily” exist (exist in and of themselves, not contingent on anything else). For example, stars and planets and human beings exist contingently upon matter (electrons, quarks, photons, quantum fields) existing.

- All worldviews (atheist, Christian, and every other worldview) must simply hypothesize something which exists necessarily. The chain of reasoning, “This exists contingent on that, and that exists contingent on that other thing...” always has to stop somewhere, at something which is hypothesized to be self-existing, not contingent on anything else. For atheists, the thing which “necessarily” exists is matter and energy (or quantum fields, or “strings,” or some such thing). For theists, the thing which necessarily exists is God. For theists, matter (quantum fields, strings, etc.) exists contingently upon God.
- Notice that in the atheist worldview, matter must be hypothesized to have certain “godlike” properties such as self-existence and timeless or eternal existence. So another way to phrase this is as follows: *In the atheist worldview, the thing which “necessarily” exists is impersonal and mechanical. In the Christian worldview, the thing which “necessarily” exists is personal.*
- It might be argued that Occam’s razor selects the *impersonal* option as being the simpler one, but we must consider the full range of facts which must be explained. Our worldview should explain not just why matter exists, but also why matter has just the right properties to allow life to exist and to allow persons (human beings) exist. The fact that matter has those properties follows naturally from the theist worldview, but the atheist view must take it as an *ad hoc* addition – matter simply *has* those properties. Our worldview should also explain why humans, throughout the ages, have claimed to encounter a supernatural Person. This follows naturally from the theist view, but takes considerably more work to explain in the atheistic view. In summary, many interesting features of the universe follow naturally from the hypothesis that the fundamental basis of reality is personal, but do not seem to follow naturally from the hypothesis that the fundamental basis for reality is impersonally. All of this does not prove the theist view; however, it does seem seriously to blunt the Occam’s Razor argument.

**Question: Isn’t science about reason and religion about faith. Isn’t faith the opposite of reason?**

- Many people use the word “faith” to mean “believing in some idea despite lack of evidence or despite contradictory evidence.” But that is a mangled definition, a caricature which bears very little resemblance to what Christian theology and scriptures mean by the word “faith.” Christian faith does not primarily consist of believing in God’s *existence* (because of – or in spite of – the evidence). In fact, the Bible explicitly says that believing in the existence of God is, by itself, worth nothing.
- Some everyday analogies to help explain what Christian theology means by “faith”:
  - We have faith in God the way we might have faith in a friend. We trust that God will be good to us. *We trust God’s character and his ability* to do what he has promised. We trust God to do things we could never do, but which he has promised that he will do.
  - It means that as we live our lives, and make all of our daily decisions about how we use our time and money, and how we treat other people, *we act “in good faith.”* If you trust a friend to keep his promises, you can gladly act on the basis of those promises. You act “in good faith.” We make our decisions, all of our life’s choices, with that kind of trust in God.
  - It means *being faithful. Even when the going gets rough*, we stick with what we believe and act on the basis of that belief, even if it seems very costly to do so.
- The opposite of Faith isn’t Reason.
  - The opposite of Reason is Irrationality. It’s possible to have irrational faith. It’s also possible to have rational faith in something or someone else. If your have faith in a friend who has repeatedly shown himself or herself to be trustworthy, then that faith can be very rational indeed.
- The opposite of Faith isn’t Skepticism.
  - The opposite of Skepticism is Gullibility. Proper skepticism is part of rationality. We use some skepticism in scientific work. We don’t fully accept a new scientific claim just because a scientist said so. We don’t fully accept a scientific claim until it has been tested it in various ways. We also use some skepticism in our life of religious faith. If a Christian teacher makes a religious claim which we’ve never heard before, we don’t gullibly believe it just because that person is a

Christian teacher. We put religious claims which are new to us to the test, to see how well they match the things we already have good reason to believe are true.

- The opposite of Faith isn't Doubt.
  - The opposite of doubt is certainty. Times of doubting can come and go. Faith can live and grow, even with occasional periods of doubt.
- The opposite of Faith is *Unbelief*. (That is the best word for it that I can think of.)
  - Unbelief is a deliberate choice. Faith says, "I believe this to be true, and I choose to live my life accordingly." Faith can be based on a little evidence or a lot of evidence. Unbelief says, "I believe that this is **not** true, and I choose to live my life accordingly." Like faith, unbelief can be based on a little evidence or a lot of evidence. The decision to live a life of unbelief can be made *despite* the evidence. Faith or unbelief can be rational or irrational. Both are deliberate choices. Unbelief, like Faith, is a desire and a decision to live one's life in a particular way.

**Question: Isn't scientific knowledge the only reliable knowledge, because it is always double-checked. ?**

- There are many other ways of obtaining knowledge besides the scientific method.
  - Common example: What did George Washington do when he was president? *Historical method*. You examine historical records and artifacts, and try to judge the validity of different historical sources.
  - Common example: Did the defendant commit this crime? *Legal method*, using eye witness and forensic evidence.
  - Common example: Does my friend really like me, or is he/she just using me to bum some free meals? *Personal knowledge*. You base your decision based on your personal experience – facts and events of which you alone are aware.
  - Common example: Is the charitable cause, which is asking for my time and money, a worthwhile cause? *Social knowledge*. You don't have personal experience, so you ask other people who have had personal experience.
  - Example relevant to religion: How does God want me to live my life? If God has revealed himself in word and deed throughout human history, then a record of such revelations (which scripture claims to be) is a good place to answer that question – *Revealed knowledge*. Also, listen to the voice of your conscience and the wisdom of others who are more experienced in these things – *Spiritual knowledge*.
- The temptation in modern times is to think that science is most important method of obtaining knowledge. It isn't. Our everyday experience proves that there are other methods of gaining knowledge which are appropriate in their own spheres. These other kinds of knowledge are not "just opinion." There is real truth to be learned. There are real historical facts about what George Washington did. There are real legal facts about whether the defendant is guilty. The charitable cause can really be or not be worth your time and money. It really is possible to learn, from personal experience, about the character of your friend. There really is or isn't a God who reveals himself and cares about us. These are not just matters of opinion. There is real truth to be learned, and there are good *non*-scientific methods for discovering that truth.
- We trust scientific knowledge. Every time we go to the doctor or take a medicine which the FDA approved, we trust the scientific method to have generated true and useful knowledge. We can, and do, make equally strong commitments based on other types of knowledge, where science cannot help. An historian might risk her career publishing a new theory if she has sufficient historical evidence. You might risk your life based on personal knowledge about your friend's character. You can commit years of your life serving a charitable cause which you have investigated and found worthy. You can commit your whole life to God on the basis of knowledge gained by "religious" methods.

**Question: At their core, aren't all religions essentially the same?**

- It's true that the major religions have a great deal of agreement about moral issues.
- However, each religion has a unique set of answers to questions like: What is the fundamental nature of the Divine? (impersonal, a single person, many persons?) What is the ultimate fate of human beings? How can we be reconciled / in harmony with the Divine? These are extremely important questions, and different religions answer them very differently.
- So while there can be some truths in every religion, it is simply impossible that all religions are essentially the same, when they give such profoundly different answers to these important questions. Logically, *at most one* religion could be correct in its answers to those particular questions.

**Question: What does religion add to your life? Can't you just be a good person without God?**

- Many agnostic scientists believe – with good reason – that they, personally, (and also lots of their colleagues) live reasonably moral lives “without God.” Does believing in God help you be a better person? What does believing in God add to your life?
- This is a question which each individual Christian must be prepared to answer, based on his or her own person life.

**Question: If God exists, why is there so much evil in the world?**

- The “problem of evil” is a barrier to belief in God for many people, scientists and non-scientists alike. When this question is raised, it opens the door to presenting Christianity's unique (and shocking, and scandalous) answer: the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus – that God chooses to overcome evil on earth not by stamping it out with divine power, but, as Jesus, by living as a human being, doing good, suffering all the evil which humanity could throw at him and forgiving it, and trusting God to set things right again in the resurrection – and then inviting his followers to do the same. The “problem of evil” is a difficult question, but whenever it is raised, it can be an invitation to explain the heart of the gospel message.

**Question: I've never experienced God. How could God expect me to believe?**

- When a scientifically-minded person asks the question, “Why should I believe in God? What evidence can you give me?” they are probably expecting you to give scientific arguments, or historical arguments, or philosophical/logical arguments. Those can be useful for starting the conversation, but in most cases they will not convince.
- Most of us came to believe in God primarily through personal experiences, through prayer and scripture reading and inner working of the Holy Spirit, and from observing God at work in the lives of Christians whom we know.
- It is only fair to acknowledge that our non-Christian scientific colleagues, for the most part, have never had these sorts of personal and social experiences which convinced us of the truth of Christianity. They could hardly be blamed, they might say, for not believing in God if they've never had those sorts of personal or social spiritual experiences. We can (and I think we should) plainly agree with our colleagues on this point.
- However, if it is true that God reveals himself to people primarily through these sorts of personal and social experiences, then this should suggest (to a scientist) that the best way to investigate whether or not God is real is, not through science, but to try out these experiences. Do an experiment. Try prayer. Try reading scripture. Try hanging out with Christians when they worship. These are the ways, Christians claim, that they primarily come to know and believe in God. Therefore, a true investigation of the question of whether or not Christianity is true must include trying out these things for oneself, and seeing what one experiences. These are the ways to really get the right sorts of data to make a decision on this important question.