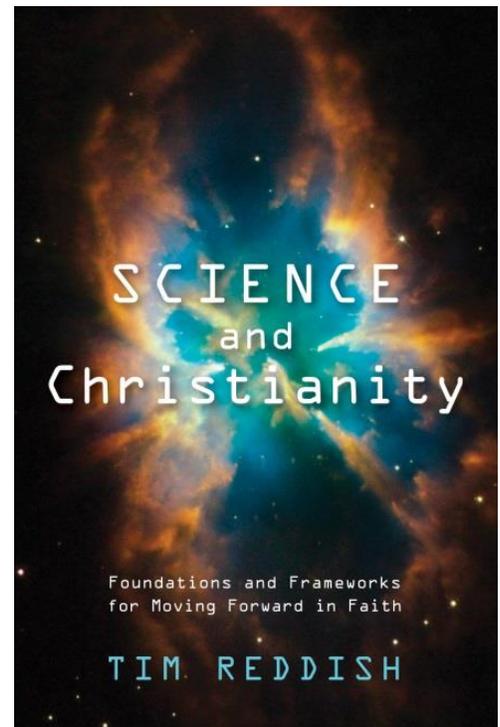


# Science and Christianity

## Foundations and Frameworks for Moving Forward in Faith

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### About the Author:

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## Introduction

“What, *another* book on ‘Science and Christianity’?” That was my first reaction when friends encouraged me to undertake such a project. So much has been written on this topic on both sides of the Atlantic that I was not sure what new contributions I could meaningfully add. Particularly as the excellent material by giants in the area of science-faith dialogue, such as John Polkinghorne, Ian Barbour, Alister McGrath, and Keith Ward, have had seemingly little effect in the life of the North American church. On reflection, I realized that there is a major disconnect between discussions in scholarly circles on this theme, which have been ongoing for many decades now, and the regular life of church congregations—particularly within some branches of the evangelical church.

To compound the problem, the established churches in the West have been in serious, steady, numerical decline over the last 50 years. It is particularly evident in the young adult age range. In *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church . . . and Rethinking Faith*, David Kinnaman details, in six chapters, the major reasons that emerging adults (18–29 years old) are losing interest in our congregations. One chapter is simply titled “Antiscience.”<sup>1</sup> This generation sees the church as standing against the findings of science. Yet over 50 percent of young people aspire to science-related careers like biology, chemistry, engineering, and technology, along with the medical and health-related professions. In light of that, how many pastors or youth workers had addressed issues of faith and science in the course of the year? 1 percent.<sup>2</sup> This reflects a serious discontinuity between our culture and faith. Or worse, if it indicates the church is in a state of denial.

The real issue is not about reversing declining church numbers, but in the way we *think*. In his acclaimed study, Mark Noll writes: “. . . evangelical thinking about science is still but a shadow of what God, nature, and the Christian faith deserve.”<sup>3</sup> Noll recently revisited his prophetic plea concerning the health of the evangelical mind; the section on science concludes:

Satisfactory resolution to problems stemming from responsible biblical interpretation brought together with responsible interpretation of nature will not come easily. Such resolution requires *more sophistication in scientific knowledge, more sophistication in biblical hermeneutics*, and more humility of spirit than most of us possess. But it is not wishful thinking to believe that such resolution is possible. It is rather an expected hope that goes directly from confidence in what has been revealed in Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup>

There is *still* a need for many Christians to courageously engage in the findings of modern science, which can only begin if we are prepared to acknowledge our ignorance and fear in order to travel on a journey of discovery. There is also a desperate need for Christians to be to be more self-

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<sup>1</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 139–48.

<sup>2</sup> Cootsona, “When Science Comes to Church,” 1.

<sup>3</sup> Noll, *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 233.

<sup>4</sup> Noll, *Jesus Christ and the life of the Mind*, 124 emphasis mine. He adds “If, therefore, completely responsible thinkers, properly equipped scientifically and hermeneutically, conclude that the full picture of human evolution now standard in many scientific disciplines fits with the trustworthy interpretation of Scripture, that conclusion can be regarded as fully compatible with historic Christian orthodoxy as defined by the normative creeds.”

critical in the way we view Scripture—its inspiration and interpretation.<sup>5</sup> As we participate in this ongoing science and Christianity expedition, are we prepared to trust the Holy Spirit to guide us into all the truth on this faith adventure (John 16:13)? Are we prepared to *risk* being *changed* by the process? Or have we already firmly made up our minds? That is the challenge every person faces—those with faith and those who claim none.

In light of the on-going crisis identified by Noll (and others) what is the church to do? One response is for church leaders and enquiring minds to be better informed on science and faith. It is only from a framework of critical engagement with both science and the bible that contemporary issues and the needs of the church and society can be addressed. This is already underway with initiatives by various groups, such as The BioLogos Foundation, The American Scientific Affiliation—and their international partners, the Faraday Institute of Science and Religion, and many others.<sup>6</sup> Yet much more evidently needs to be done. Consequently, my goal here is to communicate to ministers and seminary students. Better informed church leaders can then engage their congregations and so foster transformational faith. It is also for jaded, thoughtful Christians who wrestle to maintain their faith in a church climate that is intellectually unsatisfying and stifling. The book is also for the agnostic and the simply curious who are sympathetic to Christianity but deeply suspicious of institutional religion.

This book brings material from various sources together and presents them in—hopefully—an accessible and engaging way, especially for those who do not have a science background. Even so, I freely admit the book is not a light read since its contents are, of necessity, interdisciplinary; there are elements of history, philosophy, physics, theology, and biblical studies. The material aims to bring to light our presuppositions and so provide a framework and a set of adaptable tools to address the concerns of congregants and skeptics. What is important, in my view, is a willingness to engage the material, and to have our Christian worldview challenged without equating that to undermining our core faith.

This is *not* another book that attempts to defend God from perceived threats—as if God needs *me* to defend him! Neither is it another response to the New Atheists. Nor is it a book that tries to show that the findings of modern science are in concord with Scripture. Rather, it is an attempt to learn wisdom from history—both ancient and modern—and to see how we can move beyond the old battlegrounds of modernity in what is now a postmodern world. The aim of this book therefore is to enhance faith. But in order to do that we have to first look at *foundations*; only then are we in a position to consider *issues*.

Too often conversations on science and faith skate over much deeper assumptions (or perceptions) on the nature and interpretation of Scripture, and of science. Instead, the rhetoric

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<sup>5</sup> This topic is explored in Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So* and Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example: BioLogos (<http://biologos.org/>); The American Scientific Affiliation and their international partners (<http://network.asa3.org/>); Test of Faith Project (<http://www.testoffaith.com/>—from the Faraday Institute of Science and Religion); The Vatican Observatory (<http://www.vaticanobservatory.va/>); The Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences (<http://www.ctns.org/>).

quickly goes towards issues, like evolution, global warming, or genetic engineering, without establishing a framework of mutual understanding in order for the dialogue to take place and be respectfully heard. The difference is not simply about the issues that are perceived to be at stake, but about the whole process on how such matters are to be addressed. For example, what is the role of Scripture, reason, experience, and tradition in formulating our theological perspective? The balance of those four elements will differ depending upon your Christian tradition. It is naive to proclaim *sola scriptura* as if reason, experience, and tradition had no role to play at all. The Bible needs to be interpreted and that requires the use of reason. That process does not occur in isolation; rather our intellectual faculties have been shaped by our educational and religious traditions. Moreover our context in reading the Bible is very different from that of, say, the Middle Ages, and therefore our cultural experience also shapes the lenses through which we read Scripture. Add to that the whole topic of hermeneutics, which is the theory or principles of biblical interpretation, and we begin to see that Luther's *sola scriptura* is not as simple as it might seem at first glance. Indeed, if we look back at church history, we will see that Luther's conflict with Zwingli at Marburg (1529) over the nature of the Eucharist (Holy Communion) was—in part—because *sola scriptura* was not a sufficient enough criterion to resolve differences of interpretation.<sup>7</sup>

The first chapter revisits the battle over biblical interpretation at the time of Galileo. This is timely, since 2016 marks the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the church's condemnation of heliocentrism, and there are still important lessons we must remember and relearn today. The key issue in 1616 was not so much about Galileo, but on *who* interprets Scripture and on *what* basis or principles. Chapter 2 squarely faces the issue of the inspiration and interpretation of Scripture. *Who* says the bible is inspired? What are the *principles* for interpreting Scripture in our postmodern context? And what is the *purpose* of Scripture anyway? Chapter 3 critically explores the nature of science, exposing the inherited stereotypes that we often perceive to be true, which have created and fueled the historical tension between science and religion. Having established foundations—or at least communicated my own assumptions—we are then in a position to consider ways of *relating* science and theology. Following Ian Barbour, four approaches will be outlined and discussed in chapter 4. Are science and Christianity essentially in *conflict*, or are they compartmentalized and hence *independent* from one another? What can we learn if they respectfully *dialogue* with each other? What can we discover about God by studying nature itself? Can science and Christianity eventually be harmonized or *integrated*, resulting in enlightened, ethically-responsible science and new understandings and formulations of Christian doctrine? I come to this subject as a physicist, so my questions are from that perspective. Those from other scientific disciplines, such as biology, genetics, geology, psychology, etc. have their own subject-specific concerns and challenges. Chapter 5 explores what I regard as a key issue, that of chance and order. Quantum mechanics, which describes atoms, molecules, and their constituents, radically challenges our common-sense view of a cause-and-effect world. This has resulted in a statistical description of nature at the microscopic level, shattering the previous mechanistic, clockwork view of the cosmos. What, as Christians, are we to make of the element of

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 181–7.

chance (indeterminacy) that seems to be at the heart of nature? Does even talking about the role of chance in nature fill us with fear because it challenges our desire for “control,” if not by us, at least by an all-powerful God? Or does it fill us with excitement over a world that is pregnant with new possibilities? This raises questions as to the nature of God. What do we mean when we say God is omnipotent? This and other divine attributes will be explored briefly in chapter 6, with particular focus on God’s relationship with *time*. In addition to our views on scripture, what we assume about the nature of God shapes the conversation between science and faith. Chapter 7 shifts gears from the God who is the *Creator* and *Sustainer* of the cosmos to the *personal, loving* God whom Christians worship. I explore the plausibility of the miraculous and the notion of petitionary prayer. Finally, in chapter 8, I return to examining the biblical creation narratives in the light of this journey of discovery. In addition to briefly exploring the classic texts of early Genesis, other Old Testament creation texts are examined which present a complementary view of God’s ongoing creative activity and emphasize God as Sustainer.

With a flexible framework and suitable tools that church leaders apply self-critically, we are in a position to address a wide range of important, topical science-faith (and other) issues that go well beyond the scope of this book. If I make some headway in that direction, this project will have been a success. If some of the traditional myths (and even fears) associated with thinking about the bible, or science, or both, have been dispelled (and fears eased), this book will have been a success. If Christians, jaded by the institutional church’s viewpoints in this arena, find grounds for hope, then this book will have been a success. If your faith in God as Creator and Sustainer is enhanced, and if you are newly inspired to pray, this book will have been a success.

As you journey onwards, reflect on the words of Lesslie Newbigin:

Both faith and doubt are necessary elements in this adventure [of knowing]. One does not learn anything except by believing in something, and—conversely—if one doubts everything one learns nothing. On the other hand, believing everything uncritically is a road to disaster. The faculty of doubt is essential. But . . . doubt always rests on faith and not vice versa.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 24–25.