



Salvation Through Science?

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THROUGH
SCIENCE?

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Can Science Replace Religion?

There is a new and exuberant optimism in the air. With increasing enthusiasm scientists are beginning to preach once more the message of salvation through science. Dr. Pierre Auger, the French physicist, recently referred to the Christian viewpoint of God and the universe as a period of "adolescence" through which mankind had to go.¹ But that period is now over, Auger contends. Man has advanced far enough in his science that he can now put aside all supernaturalism and depend on science to point the way to the salvation of all men. From science man can tell what is good for himself and what is evil. He needs no God for this. He needs no spiritually derived system of morals. With his enlightened knowledge he can plot a course to utopia. He can make a heaven on earth. He need not worry about a heaven in the world beyond, because there is no such realm. The physical world, the world of matter and energy of the scientist—this is the only reality. So the argument runs. Auger has been joined by many of his colleagues in the various sciences in preaching this gospel of salvation through science alone.

This is not the first time that such claims have been made. The skepticism of rationalism was promulgated centuries ago by men such as Hobbes, Hume, and Voltaire. The theory was that man by his reason could work out all the

religion that man needed to solve all his problems. Before World War I there were the evolutionary optimists who held that progress was part of the evolutionary scheme and bound to come. But two world wars, with their exhibition of the inhumanity of man, did much to bankrupt these philosophies of naive optimism.

Now the claims are being made again. Scientific positivists or humanists are claiming that science has now advanced so far that they are sure of two things. First, there is nothing beyond the physical universe. Second, no God is needed to establish a religion. All that is necessary is to listen to the voice of science. Christianity and Christianity's God are vestigial organs of man's development. They might as well be amputated! Salvation is through science.

Nothing succeeds like success. Because atomic physicists, chemists and their colleagues in other fields have made startling breakthroughs to new knowledge of the universe, many people are inclined to listen when the scientist speaks. Many are inclined to say, "Yes, it is unscientific and medieval to believe in a God who is above and beyond matter."

What Is the Scientific Method?

What do you think of the claims of the new scientific humanism? Has science disproved the existence of God? Are Christianity and the Bible obsolete? To answer these questions let us begin by taking a look at the scientific method.

Scientists have a hard time defining the scientific method. In various fields of science it assumes different forms. But basically the scientific method is no mysterious or very complicated process. The scientist who attacks a particular problem first collects all the information that may conceivably contribute to the solution of the problem. This is called the collection of data. He reviews the work of earlier investigators. He makes observations, often with the use of specially designed instruments. He may set up certain experiments aimed at collecting data. Then he places the information he has in some sort of logical order. He then attempts to set up a logical explanation for the phenomenon or event he is attempting to explain. This first tentative explanation is called a hypothesis. This hypothesis contributes to the solution of the problem by proposing a mechanism or way in which matter and energy interact in producing the phenomenon being studied.

After the scientist has formulated his hypothesis he considers the consequences of his scheme or concept. To what does it lead? From his scheme he can usually make certain predictions as to what will happen if he performs certain experiments or goes out into the field and makes certain observations. So he follows the lead of his hypothesis. He submits it to the test of checking its predictive value. If this procedure is successful the scientist places more confidence in his hypothesis. He may call it a theory. If further predictions and checking are fruitful the explanation or concept will be dignified by calling it a law.

Note that the basic features of the scientific method are an observation of material things and the formulation of

certain principles which offer logical explanations of how these real things interact. The explanations assist the scientist in predicting how these real things will interact in other given situations and in controlling these real things. Experimentation is used throughout as an essential feature of the process. This, in brief, is the scientific method.

Percepts, the observations that have been made, are used to formulate certain generalizations or concepts. The percepts are correct, unless the scientist is deceived by his senses or the instruments he uses. The concepts are merely human formulations which are accepted until experiments or further observations force the scientist to modify or reject them.

Limitations of the Scientific Method

Many top-flight scientists are not in agreement with the claims which their colleagues among the scientific humanists are making for the scientific method in the field of religion. Those who work in the field of science are very much aware of the fact that the scientific method has certain very restrictive limitations. When the scientific humanists forget this fact they go beyond the realm of science. In fact they become philosophers, and often not very good ones at that. The Christian will profit by learning to ask, "Is this man now talking in the field of his specialty, or is he merely speculating in an area where the fact that he is a scientist has no relevance?"

The following specific points are of value in demonstrating the limitations of science, particularly when scientists seek to intrude into the area of religion.

Science Is Limited to a Study of the Physical Universe

1. By the very nature of things science is limited to the observation and study of objects and events in the material realm. Matter and energy in their interaction with each other constitute the area in which science properly operates. Science can neither prove nor disprove the existence of a God who is a spirit. The realm of the immaterial cannot be entered by science.

The person who says it is unscientific to believe in God is making an unscientific statement. He is assuming that whatever he cannot perceive and measure does not exist. He is assuming that his senses and the instruments he has devised are capable of detecting everything that exists.

The folly of this statement is to be seen from the history of science itself. Today radio astronomy is a new and rapidly growing field of science. A few years ago the origin of radio waves in outer space was completely unknown to science, for man had not yet developed the sensitive receiving apparatus to detect these waves. Would it have been scientific in those days to have said that there could be no radio waves coming from outer space because no one could detect their existence? In precisely the same way it is folly to say that God cannot exist because we are not able to devise an experiment to test our theories concerning him. God is above and beyond the measuring sticks of men.

Dr. E. W. Sinnott, chairman of the Division of Sciences and Dean of the Yale Graduate School, recently made this

point when he wrote: "We should remember that many of the differences between these two attitudes (the theologian and the scientific humanist) are concerned with matters about which no certain conclusion can be drawn. In looking out upon the panorama of the universe, animate and inanimate, the religionist has a strong conviction that it makes sense only on the assumption that there is an all-wise, all powerful spiritual intelligence that created it and keeps it in order. For the scientific humanist such an assumption is not necessary, and he regards the universe from a purely logical point of view, as an impersonal mechanism, self-running, self-regulating, and needing no spiritual agency to account for it. Neither conclusion can be proven, and which we will accept will depend more on inner predilection than on argument."²

Science Is Limited by Assumptions

2. An allied point is the fact that the scientist himself bases his work on many assumptions which he is not in a position to prove. An assumption is a proposition which seems reasonable and which is taken for granted. Usually this is so because in the nature of things it cannot be rigidly proved. In the book, *General Education, Explorations in Evaluation*, Dr. William C. Van Deventer lists the basic assumptions of the scientist.³ He states fourteen different propositions on which modern science are based. For ordinary scientific work these assumptions are beyond question. But when the scientific humanist essays to walk out on the limb of philosophy, then he needs to be reminded

that his own field of science does not rest entirely on rigid proof. It is grounded on certain assumptions, things which he casually takes for granted.

Causality

For example, among the assumptions listed by Dr. Van Deventer is the assumption of "causality." The scientist believes that every phenomenon or happening results from a discoverable cause. Thus he believes that germs and viruses cause men to become ill. Surely this assumption has been tremendously productive. But it does not rule out God as an initial and first Cause who created and maintains the laws of nature. Nor does it "prove" that God cannot work directly in nature as did Christ in the performance of miracles. The scientist cannot prove that miracles cannot happen. He can only say he prefers to think that they do not. But that is a far different thing from having offered proof for his contention!

Uniformity

Likewise the scientist works with the assumption of "uniformity" in nature. He holds that the forces now operating in nature are those that have always operated. This again is a most useful assumption. But it remains an assumption. When we extrapolate back to the time when God created the world, when time and space came into existence, the principle of uniformity may not be correct. No scientist may insist that it must have held through all past time. To the Christian it is equally logical to hold that

when God created the world, when He established the very laws by which it now operates, He may have operated in a very different way from His present method of working through the laws of nature that hold today. When we say this we are not being unscientific; we are merely indicating our preference for a different assumption.

Materiality

Another assumption of the scientist is the principle of "materiality." The scientist prefers to believe that the phenomena he observes may be elucidated only by material and mechanical explanations. As far as the Christian is concerned, the Bible gives us no cause for "whistling up a miracle" at every corner. But, at the same time, we must insist that if God desires to act directly, or did so in the past, He may. To believe the Biblical accounts of miracles is not unscientific. We cannot today perform experiments and offer proof for them. But, again, the scientist is powerless to disprove them. He can only say he likes his assumption better than ours!

Scientific Truth Is Relative

3. Furthermore, it is essential that scientists remain properly humble concerning accomplishments in their own field. In the early part of 1957 experiments were announced by Columbia University which gave good reason for doubting the validity of the principle of parity, for many years one of the cornerstones of modern nuclear theory. Throughout the history of science such events have served to remind

us that science yields only relative truth. It is constantly being refined and corrected. Today while the scientific humanists exult over the accomplishments of modern science, physics faces the fact that as yet it has no comprehensive theory of the atom and certainly not of the ultimate nature of the universe. Compared to what we do not know, the things we know shrink to relative insignificance!

Science Cannot Establish Ethics

4. Scientists themselves, and in large numbers, are not enthusiastic about the idea of science taking over the running of civilization. Many point out that science is related to the intellect of man almost completely. The determination of what is good and for whom it is good lies outside the realm of science. Even Dr. M. Vischer, one of the proponents of scientific humanism, admits this.⁴ The appreciation of beauty, of spiritual values, etc. lies outside the realm of science.

In a recent symposium, devoted to the study of the fact that psychology has progressed far enough to promise the easy control of whole nations through various conditioning processes, Dr. Carl Rogers, of the University of Chicago, warned that "To hope that the power which is being made available by the behavioral sciences will be exercised by the scientists or by a benevolent group seems to be a hope little supported by either recent or distant history."⁵ The same attitude is taken by Dr. Sinnott in the article referred to previously in which he states, "If reason alone is neces-

sary, if a scientific command of knowledge is enough, then man ought surely by his own exertions to reach something very like the millennium. But the cold fact is that today his headway toward this goal is far less rapid than his material progress. Glimpses into the depths of human depravity that the two world wars have given us make human perfectibility seem more doubtful than it appeared a few decades ago. . . . The days of the evolutionary optimists are gone.”²

Science Is Not Atheistic

5. Finally, it is a mistake to believe that all or even a majority of scientists subscribe to the thesis that their research gives them no cause to think of a God. In all fields of science men have looked at the magnificent order and infinite complexity of the universe and confessed with the Psalmist, “The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth His handiwork.” They have considered the statistical chances of the universe and all it contains having evolved by pure chance and have concluded that the odds are impossibly high against the idea. They have counted it more reasonable to believe that behind all things there is a Supreme Intelligence, an Almighty God. Many are the scientists who agree with the holy writer that it is the fool who hath said in his heart, “There is no God.” (Ps.14:1).

Scientists have freely confessed their religious beliefs. America’s foremost rocket expert, Dr. Wernher von Braun, once stated, “Any real scientist ends up a religious man. The more he learns about natural science, the more he

sees that the words that sound deep are really poorly contrived disguises for ignorance. Energy? Matter? We use them, but we don’t really know what they are.”⁶ The English astronomer, Dr. W. M. Smart, concluded his book, *The Origin of the Earth*, with the confession, “When we study the universe and appreciate its grandeur and orderliness, it seems to me that we are led to the recognition of a Creative Power and Cosmic Purpose than transcends all that our limited minds can comprehend . . . to one astronomer, at least, the heavens are telling the glory of God and the wonder of His works.”⁷

By Faith Alone!

In Romans 1:20 the Apostle Paul tells us that “The invisible things of Him (God) from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.” He thus makes clear that man can conclude from nature that there is a God. In Acts 14:17 Paul and Barnabas told the people of Lystra that God “left not Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave us rain from heavens, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.” Here again the point is made that the bounties and wonders of nature point to a Creator. It is the sinful nature of man that leads him to conclude that the blessings we have in nature evolved by chance out of dead material, without the help of God. It is natural for man to believe in a God; unnatural to deny His existence.

But beyond this point Christianity is surely a religion of faith. It is neither designed for nor susceptible to analysis by the methods of science. The necessity of faith is stressed again and again by the holy writers. The author of the book of Hebrews tells us in the eleventh chapter that "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." It is "through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God." And it is through faith that we embrace and hold tight the precious message of salvation by grace alone through Christ Jesus. We cannot, in the ordinary sense of the word, prove that Jesus was the Son of God, that He rose from the dead. True, He showed Himself to many witnesses. The Resurrection story is better established than many facts in history we never challenge. It is also true that the Bible time and again has been vindicated as accurate and reliable in its contents. But we cannot put Christ and the Gospel in a test tube and apply the rules of chemistry, physics, and mathematics. We cannot because the entire matter is known in a way that is vastly superior; it is known by faith!

We believe the precious truth of the Christian religion because the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace, the sacraments and the Word, has convinced us of the truth of the Gospel. (II Tim. 3:16; John 20:31; I Cor. 2:4-5.)

Christian faith is strong and firm beyond comprehension. Time and again Christians have chosen to die rather than to be unfaithful to their God and Savior. Thereby they have given the strongest possible testimony to the depth of their convictions. Countless millions have shown

their faith by living lives of loving service to God and their fellow man. A tremendous amount of the world's progress in social affairs has been due to the acceptance of the leadership of Christians and Christian ethics.

Christians have the final answer in their hearts. For God dwells in them with all His peace and joy. (John 14:16-17.) They can speak with the positive conviction of Paul, who out of the prison in which he lay wrote, "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day." (II Tim. 1:12.)

Thus the Christian sees in science an exploration of the nature that God created and maintains. In the Bible He sees a revelation of a truth that is above and beyond the scope of science, the eternal truth of God's grace and love, a truth that opens the way to life eternal. He hears with joy the invitation of His Savior, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matt. 11:28.) This is the greatest and most sure truth of all. It comes from Him who said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." (John 14:6.)

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