

Evolution, Science, Religion: Part 1

One of the great pushes today to undermine even a basic belief in God, much less faith or religion, is to claim that religion is superseded by “science” – religion, Sacred Scripture, and all that is just superstition that “science” has disproven. One area where this seems to be especially advocated is evolution. It’s difficult to follow the “reasoning” but somehow or other the belief seems to be that evolution disproves the creation accounts given in Scripture and thus disproves the existence of a Creator and thus of God. Sadly people today, especially young people, are frequently exposed to these sorts of claims and it is often “scientists” who try to make them. And since “science” has been enshrined with an unquestionable aura of sanctity in our times, many people find themselves saying – well there must be something to it, it’s scientifically proven after all; and we certainly don’t want to look stupid or be an outsider by going against “science.” It seems necessary, then, or at least prudent, to take up this question, in particular: has evolution disproven the creation accounts given in Scripture and thus the existence of God?

First some background will be helpful, starting with the definition of science. For centuries the word science meant something like: an organized, logical, methodical system of thought or reasoning, leading to a conclusion which has a degree of certitude. So in other words, science means taking some sort of raw material (or observations), reasoning (or thinking) about them, using logic, and reaching a conclusion. A classical definition of science, for example, was: certain knowledge through causes; *certain* knowledge here means there was a certitude about it; it wasn’t just a guess or an expression of what I want to believe, but real logic and reasoning went into the conclusion, given the information at hand. Theology, then, is considered a science, using Revelation (Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition) as its raw (or starting) material. St Thomas Aquinas was a prime example of this exercise of reasoning; Aquinas did not just state off-the-cuff opinions (well, I think this or believe that or I feel this way); he used rigorous reasoning to reach conclusions, taking Revelation as his source material. Historically, philosophy has also been considered a science, using the observable world as its raw material. Aristotle (one of the ancient Greek philosophers who lived about 3 or 4 hundred years before Christ), for example, was able to reason out that there was only one God, based simply on what he observed in the material world.

Today the word “science” for most people has come to refer to only the physical sciences – biology, chemistry, physics, and so on. This is unfortunate, however, since true theology and philosophy are real sciences – rigorous systems of thought using valid raw material. Nonetheless, in what follows if I use the word “science” alone, it will mean the physical sciences, the meaning that is popular today. I also want to mention from the outset that there is certainly nothing wrong with the physical sciences or in pursuing true knowledge of the material world. In fact, there can be no real conflict between Revelation and the truths of the material world since both come from God. There is a tendency, however, to think of the physical sciences as infallible, which they are not. When I was in college, I was giving a presentation to a group of professors and I said something about the “Central Dogma of Molecular Biology;” one of the professors said: well, that might not be quite as central or as dogmatic as was once thought. “Dogmas” of the physical science are not true dogmas; they can and do change over time. The only infallible, absolutely certain, knowledge that man has are the definitive teachings of the Church. This is the only area that our Lord guaranteed would be without error; He only guaranteed correctness for the most important thing – that knowledge which is needed to reach Heaven, needed to fulfill the very purpose of this life.

The question at hand is whether “science” has disproven “religion,” and in particular if evolution has disproven creation and thus that there is no God. To answer this question, the next point to consider is the scope of the physical sciences – what can and do they deal with? By their very definition, they deal only with the material world. In His essence, God, however, is pure Spirit. Thus, the physical sciences, per se, can make no, *no*, conclusion even about the existence of God. Any scientist who puts on his science hat and proclaims, with an austere aura of authority, that there is no God is irresponsible and misrepresents himself; he betrays his own discipline, and takes advantage of his own position to mislead others into his own personal opinion or bias or preference or ignorance or acrimony or fear or arrogance or whatever it is. Now some say: ok, science per se

cannot make the conclusion that God doesn't exist but it can't say tooth fairies don't exist either and I also don't believe in them. That's clever. I'm afraid that to compare the two shows little, if any, serious thought in a number of ways, but we will consider only one here. Anyone who says that has, for *one* thing, never reckoned with the person of Jesus. That Jesus existed is confirmed even by secular (non-religious) historical sources. How, then, does one account for all of the things that He did that were well beyond human power – His command over nature, the healings He performed, His power over life and death, His capacity to read the interior of a person? These things, incidentally, were not only attested to *even* by His enemies, but we might say *especially* by His enemies; they were not made up by our Lord's friends. Indeed, Jesus was crucified largely on account of the signs He performed – the Jewish leaders of the day were afraid everyone would believe in Him *because* of the supernatural power He demonstrated. Belief in God, in Jesus, in His Church *is* an act of faith; but it is a *reasonable* act, not an unreasonable one.

Continuing on the topic of limits, the physical sciences per se cannot make any sort of philosophical conclusions or judgments. Science cannot even use the words “good” or “bad.” Consider a simple example. Suppose a chemist said: if I mixed these chemicals together in this quantity, there would be a huge explosion and everybody in the room would likely be killed; so far he's acting in the realm of science. But if he says: that would be bad, he's stepped outside the realm of the physical sciences – it *would* be bad but that's a judgment *outside* the realm of *science*. The chemist can only describe or predict the nature of material things; as soon as he says “that would be bad,” he's making a moral statement or stating a desire or judgment. It's not wrong to do that, to make that moral judgement, to say that would be bad...it's just that that it's not science, it falls outside the scope of science. The scope of the physical sciences is purely this: testable hypotheses about the material world. A person might look at the world and begin to reason about the nature of man, how the world came into existence, or more generally about truth/reality (notice the word reason, not just speculate, but reason); this is something good but it does not belong to the realm of the physical sciences, it's philosophy. The realm of physical science is testable hypotheses about material things and that's it. The physical sciences are something good; in fact, studying God's creation can lead me towards God. The physical sciences are not something evil but it is imperative to know what they can and cannot say, otherwise science itself is corrupted.

What has been presented here are some general, background considerations of “science” itself. We will have to take up particular considerations of evolution and creation next week. To finish today, there is something important about Sacred Scripture that we need to always bear in mind. The purpose of Scripture is to teach us what we need to know about and from God in order to reach our ultimate beatitude. Scripture does contain historical events but it's not intended to be history book; it does say things about the natural world but it's not intended to be a science book. To hold it up as such and then ridicule it on those bases is simply ignorance of the Word of God and its purpose.