

Does science make belief in God obsolete?



No, but it should.

Until about 1832, when it first seems to have become established as a noun and a concept, the term “scientist” had no really independent meaning. “Science” meant “knowledge” in much the same way as “physic”

Christopher Hitchens meant medicine, and those who conducted experiments or organized field expeditions or managed laboratories were known as “natural philosophers.” To these gentlemen (for they were mainly gentlemen) the belief in a divine presence or inspiration was often merely assumed to be a part of the natural order, in rather the same way as it was assumed—or actually insisted upon—that a teacher at Cambridge University swear an oath to be an ordained Christian minister. For Sir Isaac Newton—an enthusiastic alchemist, a despiser of the doctrine of the Trinity, and a fanatical anti-Papist—the main clues to the cosmos were to be found in Scripture. Joseph Priestley, discoverer of oxygen, was a devout Unitarian as well as a believer in the phlogiston theory. Alfred Russel Wallace, to whom we owe much of what we know about evolution and natural selection, delighted in nothing more than a session of ectoplasmic or spiritual communion with the departed.

And thus it could be argued—though if I were a believer in god I would not myself attempt to argue it—that a commitment to science by no means contradicts a belief in the supernatural. The best known statement of this opinion in our own time comes from the late Stephen Jay Gould, who tactfully proposed that the worlds of science and religion commanded “non-overlapping magisteria.” How true is this on a second look, or even on a first glance? Would we have adopted monotheism in the first place if we had known:

That our species is at most 200,000 years old, and very nearly joined the 98.9 percent of all other species on our planet by becoming extinct, in

Africa, 60,000 years ago, when our numbers seemingly fell below 2,000 before we embarked on our true “exodus” from the savannah?

That the universe, originally discovered by Edwin Hubble to be expanding away from itself in a flash of red light, is now known to be expanding away from itself even more rapidly, so that soon even the evidence of the original “big bang” will be unobservable?

That the Andromeda galaxy is on a direct collision course with our own, the ominous but beautiful premonition of which can already be seen with a naked eye in the night sky?

These are very recent examples, post-Darwinian and post-Einsteinian, and they make pathetic nonsense of any idea that our presence on this planet, let alone in this of so many billion galaxies, is part of a plan. Which design, or designer, made so sure that absolutely nothing (see above) will come out of our fragile current “something”? What plan, or planner, determined that millions of humans would die without even a grave marker, for our first 200,000 years of struggling and desperate existence, and that there would only then at last be a “revelation” to save us, about 3,000 years ago, but disclosed only to gaping peasants in remote and violent and illiterate areas of the Middle East?

To say that there is little “scientific” evidence for the last proposition is to invite a laugh. There is no evidence for it, period. And if by some strenuous and improbable revelation there was to be any evidence, it would only argue that the creator or designer of all things was either (a) very laborious, roundabout, tinkering, and incompetent and/or (b) extremely capricious and callous, and even cruel. It will not do to say, in reply to this, that the lord moves in mysterious ways. Those who dare to claim to be his understudies and votaries and interpreters must either accept the cruelty and the chaos or disown it: they cannot pick and choose between the warmly benign and the frigidly indifferent. Nor can the religious claim to be in

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possession of secret sources of information that are denied to the rest of us. That claim was, once, the prerogative of the Pope and the witch doctor, but now it's gone. This is as much as to say that reason and logic reject god, which (without being conclusive) would be a fairly close approach to a scientific rebuttal. It would also be quite near to saying something that lies just outside the scope of this essay, which is that morality shudders at the idea of god, as well.

Religion, remember, is theism not deism. Faith cannot rest itself on the argument that there might or might not be a prime mover. Faith must believe in answered prayers, divinely ordained morality, heavenly warrant for circumcision, the occurrence of miracles or what you will. Physics and chemistry and biology and paleontology and archeology have, at a minimum, given us explanations for what used to be mysterious, and furnished us with hypotheses that are at least as good as, or very much better than, the ones offered by any believers in other and inexplicable dimensions.

Does this mean that the inexplicable or superstitious has become "obsolete"? I myself would wish to say no, if only because I believe that the human capacity

for wonder neither will nor should be destroyed or superseded. But the original problem with religion is that it is our first, and our worst, attempt at explanation. It is how we came up with answers before we had any evidence. It belongs to the terrified childhood of our species, before we knew about germs or could account for earthquakes. It belongs to our childhood, too, in the less charming sense of demanding a tyrannical authority: a protective parent who demands compulsory love even as he exacts a tithe of fear. This unalterable and eternal despot is the origin of totalitarianism, and represents the first cringing human attempt to refer all difficult questions to the smoking and forbidding altar of a Big Brother. This of course is why one desires that science and humanism would make faith obsolete, even as one sadly realizes that as long as we remain insecure primates we shall remain very fearful of breaking the chain.

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