



# The Christian Foundation for Science



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# **THE CHRISTIAN FOUNDATION FOR SCIENCE**

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## Two Myths:

Western culture is plagued by two myths. The first is that Christianity is in conflict with Science. The second is that progress of human culture is inevitable.

The myth that Christianity is in conflict with Science has a very specific origin. It began as a lecture to a New York audience by the first president of Cornell University. It was Friday evening, December 17, 1869 when Andrew Dickinson White (1832-1918) began his lecture titled: "The Warfare of Science."

His opening remarks are telling: "The great sacred struggle for the liberty of Science...has been going on for centuries...In all modern history, interference with Science in the supposed interest of religion...has resulted in the direst evils both to Religion and Science."<sup>1</sup>

White expanded his lecture into a book. For the majority of the intervening 128 years it has remained in print. Noted historians of science, Ronald Numbers and David Lindberg, readily admit its enormous influence in propagating this myth. Quote: "No work...has done more than White's to instill in the public mind a sense of the adversarial relationship between science and religion"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Mark A. Kalthoff, "God and Creation: An Historical Look At Encounters Between Christianity and Science," in ed. Michael Bauman, *Man and Creation, Perspectives on Science and Theology*, (Hillsdale, Michigan: Hillsdale College Press, 1993), p.10.

<sup>2</sup>ibid. p.25.n17 citing David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers, "Beyond War and Peace: A Reappraisal of the Encounter between Christianity and Science," *Church History*, 55 (September 1986): 340.

The second myth is that human culture progresses inevitably. That is, that this good we call the scientific enterprise grows as inevitable as an acorn grows into an oak. This myth shows little appreciation for the many false starts, dead ends, and sheer serendipity so evident in the history of science. Moreover, it trips over the obvious. Acorns grow into oaks, only if they are planted in fertile soil.

My purpose in this booklet is simply to show that modern science came from the cradle of Christianity because the biblical views about God, man and nature replaced pagan views, views that prohibited the development of what we call the scientific mind.

My hope is that after reading this little booklet, you will see more clearly how the Lord Jesus Christ is the lord also of science, and by knowing this you will be better able to honor him—submitting all of your labors, studies, and pursuits to his Word and for his glory.

## 1. Whence Science?

Let's begin by asking the question: Whence science? Ours has not been the only great civilization, not the only civilization that has contributed scientific ideas.<sup>3</sup> However, the annals of history display an indisputable pattern. In all the great cultures (Sumerian, Babylonian, Chinese, Hindu, Greek, Arab), the shoots of science sprang up with great promise; yet, no sooner did they appear than they withered. Why?

And why didn't Western Europe succumb to the same fate? Why instead do we find modern science birthed in medieval

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<sup>3</sup>For example, the Sumerians gave us sexagesimal time, Phoenicians the alphabet, Arabs our numerals, Greeks the various theories of Euclid and Pythagoras, Aristotle's biological observations are well know.

Europe and flowering in Reformation Europe?<sup>4</sup>

These are the questions asked by historians of science. Their answer reveals that the Christian faith, far from being hostile to modern science, was actually its impetus.<sup>5</sup> Christian revelation is not the weed that strangles the vine of science. It is its fertile soil.

Thus, even a scientist and evolutionist like Loren Eiseley, reluctantly admits: “In one of those strange permutations of which history yields occasional rare examples, it is the Christian world which finally gave birth in a clear, articulate fashion to the experimental method of science itself.”<sup>6</sup>

What Eiseley calls strange we call obvious and ordinary. As beautiful roses do not grow except under great and watchful care and concern, so modern science grew up during the time when Europe was being saturated with a renewed and vital Christian faith. That period gave us not only the great confessions like—the Westminster Confession—but the fathers of modern science: Isaac Newton (Dynamics, 1642-1727), Johann Kepler (Astronomy, 1571-1630), Robert Boyle (Chemistry, 1627-1691), and John Ray (Biology, 1627-1705). They were committed Christians who made clear their convictions that it was their faith which commended to them and compelled them in their science.

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<sup>4</sup>I take Pierre Duhem’s dating. In his *Etudes sur Leonard de Vinci* he wrote: “if we must assign a date for the birth of modern science, we would, without doubt, choose the year 1277.”

<sup>5</sup>See footnoted works in this document.

<sup>6</sup>Nancy R. Percy, Charles B. Thaxton, *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy*, (Wheaton: Crossway books, 1994) p.18 citing Loren Eiseley, “Francis Bacon,” in *The Horizon book of Makers of Modern Thought*, intro. Bruce Mazlish (New York: American Heritage Publishing, 1972) pp. 95-96, emphasis in original.

What, then, is it about the Christian faith that proved so fertile for the rise of modern science? No one discounts the many other factors that have contributed to the flowering and flourishing of science. Growth in travel, trade, technological advances (printing press, telescope and microscope), the founding of scientific institutions like the *Royal Society of London* and the *Academie des Sciences* of Paris, all contributed to the growth, sustenance and success of science.

These though were but the avenues, not the source. They made for the trafficking of ideas to foster this infant enterprise, but they were not its womb.

What, then, is it about the Christian view of God, man and nature that so well became the nursery for modern science to grow? Let me give you just FIVE transforming truths.

## 2. Five Transforming Truths

### A. Nature is real, not illusion.

The biblical truth that nature is real and not illusion gave great impetus to the birthing of science. Paganism has always looked at nature as the appearance of the Real, and not the Real itself. This “Real” goes by various names: the One, the Absolute, the Infinite. What we perceive in nature—individuality, definition, and distinct structures—are illusions, what the Hindus call *maya*.

Now do not misconstrue what I mean. The pagan knows as well as you or me when he has stubbed his toe on a rock. He intends to say something more significant than that when he denies of nature reality, when he calls nature illusion.

Let me illustrate: The pagan views everything in nature, including himself, as consisting of essentially the same thing. He sees himself as a man of ice, living in a room of ice, surrounded by other people and things carved from ice. For all their individual differences, everything at bottom is the same thing—ice.

As you can see, such a view gives little incentive to study nature as modern science studies it. Rather, the kind of study it promotes is mysticism, the contemplation of the oneness of all things. And the ethics it promotes is conformity to nature, going with the flow.

On the contrary, Biblical revelation teaches that God created not only all things, but all sorts of different things. He created the heavens and distinguished them from the earth. He created light and separated it from darkness. He separated the waters above from the waters below. He separated the dry land from the seas. He created the vegetation, animals, and man and distinguished them all.

Man is distinct from the animals, animals from plants, and plants from rocks, and their individual natures are not simply the sum of their parts. The whole is greater than the parts. Consequently, this view promotes the practice of studying each individual thing for its own sake. And the ethic it promotes is not conformity to nature, but the cultivation of it.

### **B. Nature is good, not evil.**

If nature is real and not illusion, Biblical revelation also asserts that nature is a worthy object of study. Genesis One affirms that nature is good and not evil. Seven times it is announced: **“And God saw that it was good.”** (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). If this too seems obvious, it is only because you are unaware of the opposing view that has dominated man’s history.

The ancient world conceived of nature or matter as something evil. Nature tends to chaos, disorder. It was even thought that touching something material could spoil the soul. So manual labor was relegated to the lower classes, the slaves. The philosopher, instead sought a life of leisure in order to contemplate “higher things.” There was no incentive to engage nature in the empirical, hands-on approach so peculiar to modern

science.

### **C. Nature is a garden, not a god.**

A third impetus Christianity gave to modern science was its view of nature as beneath God and man. Nature, says Scripture, is a garden, not a god. The Lord instructed Adam to “Fill the earth and subdue it.” Adam was to worship God and work the garden, not worship the garden and work to make a god.

How different this view from Paganism. For Paganism nature is a god or part of god or an emanation of god. Matter, the stuff of nature, is pre-existing. It is eternal. Already present alongside the gods. Hence, nature’s processes and properties were thought to be spiritual and intelligent. Each thing, you might say, had a mind of its own. To pagan man, nature is filled with all manner of spirits, sprites, demons, gods and goddesses. Nature is enchanted. The Sun is divine.

Consequently, nature was thought capricious, not orderly, irrational and unknowable to man’s mind. It was to be worshiped rather than studied, conformed to, rather than manipulated, by man.

Recognition of this belief, so fatal to modern science, was articulated long ago in the 17th century by the father of modern chemistry, and committed Christian, Robert Boyle. He writes: “The veneration...for...nature, has been a discouraging impediment to the empire of man over the inferior creatures of God: for many have not only looked upon it as an impossible thing to compass, but as something *impious to attempt...*”<sup>7</sup>

To put it in the vernacular: if your cow is a god you won’t eat it. You’ll worship it. You won’t study Devil’s Tower, you’ll bow down to it. You won’t study the sun, you’ll pray to it.

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<sup>7</sup>cited in Percy and Thaxton, p. 251, n.20

Someone may rebut that we need not fear that our scientists will soon be worshiping the sun. But that rebuttal misses the point. Ideas have legs and if the majority of a culture throws off the biblical view, you will find even the scientists throwing off their science in order to grovel before creation.

If modern scientists do not bow now, it is only because they borrow Biblical truth without acknowledging their debt. The late Carl Sagan, never worshiped the sun, did he? Listen to what he says: “If we must worship a power greater than ourselves, does it not make sense to revere the Sun and the stars? Hidden within every astronomical investigation, sometimes so deeply buried that the researcher himself is unaware of its presence, is a kernel of awe.”<sup>8</sup> I hope you see that there are not too many steps between that faith and the end of modern science.

#### **D. God’s creation is covenantal—contingent yet unified, orderly, lawful and rational.**

The fourth truth overlaps the third and is really a complex of truths. God’s creation is covenantal. Two implications about nature can be drawn from this. First, that creation is contingent, dependent upon God’s free act of creation. Second that creation is unified, orderly, lawful and rational, even as God himself is.

The concept of covenant carries both. As covenantal, God was free to create. Unlike a craftsman who must submit to matter (like a carpenter to the wood or a potter to the clay), God was not a craftsman, but the creator. The laws of nature then could be otherwise. The properties of things could be otherwise. Everything is contingent. No one can figure out before hand what those laws are. They are not immanent in matter, as imposed upon

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<sup>8</sup>T.M. Moore, “Beyond Creation vs. Evolution: Taking the Full Measure of the Materialist Challenge ([www. Wavefront. Com/~contra\\_Mantithesis/v1n6/ant\\_v1n6\\_creation.html](http://www.Wavefront.Com/~contra_Mantithesis/v1n6/ant_v1n6_creation.html)) citing Sagan, *Cosmos*, pp.24; *Comet*, New York: Random House, 1985), p.21 Broca’s Brain, p. 286.

matter by God. But because God is a covenantal God, we should expect laws of nature—that is regularity, predictability, unity, coherence.

Everything therefore is lawful, orderly, and rational because God is. Yet, because everything is contingent, the properties of nature are discoverable only after man searches them out.

E.L. Mascall shows the significance for the union of these two ideas when he says: “A world which is created by the Christian God will be both contingent and orderly. It will embody regularities and patterns, since its Maker is rational, but the particular regularities and patterns which it will embody cannot be predicted *a priori*, since he is free; they can be discovered only by examination.”<sup>9</sup>

Do ideas have legs? Joseph Needham thinks so. In his massive work *Science and Civilization in China*, he attributes the failure of science in China as due to its theological belief that the world was eternal, not contingent; and that whatever order it had, it was beyond the reach of man’s reason. Without belief in a rational lawgiver and Creator of the world, Needham says: “the Chinese could not bring themselves to believe that man was able to trace out at least some of the laws of the physical universe.”<sup>10</sup>

### **E. History is real. Man has a motive for science**

Finally, biblical revelation asserts not only the reality of nature but of history. History is real and man has a motive to pursue science and a hope to change the world.

The failure of science to arise in the great cultures of the

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<sup>9</sup>cited by Daniel O’Connor, “Introduction: Two Philosophies of Nature,” in eds. Daniel O’Connor and Francis Oakley, *Creation: The Impact of an Idea*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969) p.20.

<sup>10</sup>Stanley Jaki, *The Road of Science and the Ways to God*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p.14.

world has not been due to any absence of intelligence, or technological skill, not conditions of peace, prosperity, and social stability so necessary for the pursuit of scientific knowledge. They all had these. The failure was due to their theology—a view of God, nature and man, that always rendered their pursuits stillborn.

We've examined some of those myths and how they were fatal to any scientific enterprise. Yet, another myth held by these great civilizations held them back. It is the issue of man's destiny. It is the myth of the eternal return.

The myth of the eternal return is the belief that everything is destined to the same end. Life doesn't progress either downward or upward, but rather like the seasons simply turns in its cycles.

Whatever a man may plant, build, or make today in the spring of his life is destined to wither and die in the inevitable winter of life. Man and his labors are like annuals—the vegetation you plant once a year, and must plant again and again. In this view, there is no real growth or advance or progress. There is no historical hope that children can build upon the works of their parents. All you do is conform to nature, not change it. You just learn to get by, to spend your days eating and drinking for tomorrow you die. Winter inevitably comes.

D.K. Rangnekar, in his book titled *Poverty and Capital Development in India*, writes: "The young Indian...must be able and willing to tear himself away from family ties, flout customs and traditions, put economic welfare before cow worship,...concentrate on material gains rather than dwell on Kismet (destiny)."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>ibid. P. 15

#### 4. Conclusion:

I hope I have proved my thesis. Christianity is not in conflict with science. Rather, it was its cradle. Specific transforming truths about God, man and nature replaced pagan views, and once those new, biblical views took hold, the scientific mind was born.

**The application follows:** Let us praise the Lord as the Lord of science and better honor him by submitting all of our labors, studies, and pursuits to his Word and for his glory.

The psalmist says: **“Great are the works of the Lord; they are pondered by all who delight in them.”**<sup>12</sup> Is that how you and your family apply yourselves to your jobs, your studies, your lives? Do you believe that every field of human activity and thought has still much more to be developed, improved, and made to conform better to God’s ways? Do you believe that you are called to change the world by obedience to God’s word?

Listen to the words of Isaac Newton, a man who answered yes in his own generation. Not satisfied with what he was handed down, and determined to bring all of his thoughts under God, he became a different kind of workman.

Here we do not find a person who divorced his worship from his work. Rather, in everything he did, Newton did in gratitude to the glory of God.

In one of his notebooks we find not only calculations, equations, lots of sweat and tears, but prayer and praise. Newton says:

“I give you thanks, Creator and God, that you have given

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<sup>12</sup>Ps. 111:2

me this joy in thy creation, and I rejoice in the works of your hands. See I have now completed the work to which I was called. In it I have used all the talents you have lent to my spirit.”<sup>13</sup>

May your own attitude toward your labors and your studies, be like his, singing God’s glory. Amen.

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<sup>13</sup>cited in Percy and Thaxton, p. 23



