

## Science and Religion: Why Does the Debate Continue?<sup>1</sup>

Several different loci:

1. the association of science with *secularism* or the so-called ‘scientific world view,’
2. the alleged conflict between scientific theories of evolution and essential aspects of Christianity and other theistic religions,
3. the alleged conflict between science and the claim that God *acts specially* in the world
4. the alleged conflict between religious claims and many explanations in evolutionary psychology, the conflict between certain classical Christian doctrines and certain varieties of scientific or historical biblical criticism, the alleged conflict between the *epistemic attitudes* of science and religion.

### I Science and Secularism

**Secular:** of or relating to the worldly or the temporal as distinguished from the spiritual or eternal: not sacred.

**Secularism with respect to x:** the position, with respect to some particular area of life x, that secular approaches are all that is necessary or desirable in that area of life; no reference to the spiritual or supernatural is needed for proper prosecution of the activities or projects in that area.

**Secularism *tout court*:** the idea that a secular approach to *all* of life is satisfactory or required; there is no department or aspect of life where there needs to be, or ought to be, a reference to the supernatural or spiritual.

**Two versions of secularism:**

- *scientific* secularism: ‘objectifying inquiry’ is enough for understanding and practice
- *autonomist* secularism: we human beings construct or, better, *constitute* the truth about the world, and have no need to resort to the spiritual or supernatural.

Scientific secularism: objectifying inquiry: “getting ourselves out of the picture”: individually, but also bracketing some aspects or characteristics of human subjectivity more generally.

Moral judgments

**Teleology:** Francis Bacon:

Although the most general principles in nature ought to be held merely positive, as they are discovered, and cannot with truth be referred to a cause; nevertheless the human understanding being unable to

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<sup>1</sup> This document is a handout that was given to accompany a lecture given by Dr. Alvin Plantinga at Rainier Beach Presbyterian Church (Seattle, WA) in 2007. The lecture can be streamed or downloaded at <http://www.philosophynews.com>

rest still seeks something prior in the order of nature. And then it is that in struggling towards that which is further off it falls back upon that which is more nigh at hand; namely, on final causes: which have relation clearly to the nature of man rather than to the nature of the universe; and from this source have strangely defiled philosophy.

### Personification and Methodological Naturalism

- MN vs ontological naturalism (there is no such person as God or any other supernatural beings)
- Hugo Grotius: we should proceed as if God is not given.
- MN: no reference to the supernatural in scientific theory, data, or relevant background knowledge
- MN as secularism with respect to science
  - *secularism with respect to science vs. scientific secularism*
  - One source of the continuing debate or mistrust between science and religion: confusing *scientific secularism* with *secularism with respect to science*. Science neither requires nor supports the former.

## II Evolution

Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, Phillip Johnson: conflict between Darwinian evolution and classical Christian or even theistic belief

**Evolution:** the *Ancient Earth Thesis*, the *Progress Thesis*, the thesis of *Descent with Modification*, the *Common Ancestry Thesis*, *Darwinism*, the *Naturalistic Origins Thesis*.

The Christian (theistic) doctrine of creation: God has created human beings *in his image* consistent with all of the above but not consistent with the claim that this process of evolution is *unguided*.

**IIA Dawkins: *The Blind Watchmaker*:**

“All appearances to the contrary, the only watchmaker in nature is the blind forces of physics, albeit deployed in a very special way. A true watchmaker has foresight: he designs his cogs and springs, and plans their interconnections, with a future purpose in his mind’s eye. Natural selection, the blind, unconscious automatic process which Darwin discovered, and which we now know is the explanation for the existence and apparently purposeful form of all life, has no purpose in mind. It has no mind and no mind’s eye. It does not plan for the future. It has no vision, no foresight, no sight at all. If it can be said to play the role of watchmaker in nature, it is the *blind* watchmaker.” (5)

The subtitle of the book: “Why the evidence of evolution reveals a universe without design.”

Why does Dawkins think natural selection is blind and unguided? Why does he think that “*the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design*”?

Dawkins does three things:

- he recounts some of the fascinating anatomical details of certain living creatures and their ways,
- he tries to refute arguments for the conclusion that blind, unguided evolution could not have produced certain of the wonders of the living world,
- he makes suggestions as to how these and other organic systems could have developed by unguided evolution.

The form of the main argument:

(1) We know of no irrefutable objections to its being biologically possible that all of life has come to be by way of unguided Darwinian processes;

therefore,

(2) All of life has come to be by way of unguided Darwinian processes.

Dawkins utterly fails to show that “the facts of evolution reveal a universe without design;” still the fact that he and others assert his subtitle loudly and slowly, as it were, can be expected to convince many that the biological theory of evolution is in fact incompatible with the theistic belief that the living world has been designed. Another source of the continuing debate, therefore, is the mistaken claim on the part of such writers as Dawkins that the scientific theory implies that the living world and human beings in particular have not been designed and created by God.

**IIB:** Daniel Dennett: *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*

What is it? The living world with all of its beauty and wonder, all of its marvelous and apparent ingenious design, was not created or designed by God or anything at all like God; instead it was produced by natural selection, a blind, unconscious, mechanical, algorithmic process—a process, he says, which creates “design out of chaos without the aid of Mind.” (50)

“An impersonal, unreflective, robotic, mindless little scrap of molecular machinery is the ultimate basis of all the agency, and hence meaning, and hence consciousness, in the universe.” (203)

“Here, then, is Darwin’s dangerous idea: the algorithmic level *is* the level that best accounts for the speed of the antelope, the wing of the eagle, the shape of the orchid, the diversity of species, and all the other occasions for wonder in the world of nature.” (59)

Why is Darwin’s idea dangerous? Fundamentally, because incompatible with theistic religion.

Baptists in “cultural zoos”?

Why does Dennett think we should *accept* Darwin’s idea? Concede that it is audacious, with it, revolutionary, anti-medieval, quintessentially contemporary, appropriately reverential towards science, and has that nobly stoical hair shirt quality Bertrand Russell said he liked in his beliefs: still, why should we believe it?

He seems to think Darwin's idea is just part of current biology. What does he think is the *evidence* for this idea?

It is *possible* that all the variety of the biosphere be produced by mindless natural selection: "The theory of natural selection shows how every feature of the world *can* be the product of a blind, un-foresightful, non-teleological, ultimately mechanical process of differential reproduction over long periods of time" (315, Dennett's emphasis).

The theory gives us detailed and empirically informed stories about how various features of the living world could have come to be by way of natural selection winnowing genetic mutation.

The important point to see is that Dennett just identifies Darwin's idea—i.e., the idea that the living world has been produced by a process of unguided natural selection—with the deliverances of contemporary biological science.

Does the scientific theory of evolution include, not merely the idea that the living world has been produced by a process in which natural selection is the chief mechanism, but the vastly more ambitious idea that this process has been unsupervised, unplanned, unintended by God or any other intelligent agent? That hardly seems to be an appropriate part of an empirical scientific theory. It looks instead like a metaphysical or theological add-on.

Here we have another important source of the continuing debate between science and religion. Dawkins and Dennett both hold that contemporary evolutionary theory—Darwinism, in particular—is incompatible with the Christian and theistic claim that God has created human beings in his own image. Both claim that Darwinism, the theory that the principal mechanism driving the process of evolution is natural selection winnowing random genetic mutation, implies that the universe—the living universe, anyway—is without design.

This confusion or alleged connection between Darwinism and unguided Darwinism is one of the most important, perhaps the most important, source of continuing conflict and debate between science and religion.

If you confuse Darwinism with unguided Darwinism, a confusion Dennett makes and Dawkins encourages, you will see science and religion as in conflict at this point (See Ruse, *The Evolution-Creation Struggle* 2005).

Manifestations of this confusion: the conflict raging over Intelligent Design; the National Association of Biology Teachers: until 1997 that organization stated as part of its official position that "the diversity of life on earth is the outcome of evolution: an unsupervised, impersonal, unpredictable and natural process.

This confusion between Darwinism and unguided Darwinism is a crucial cause of the continuing debate. Darwinism, the scientific theory, is compatible with theism and theistic religion; unguided Darwinism, a consequence of naturalism, is incompatible with theism, but isn't entailed by the scientific theory. It is instead a metaphysical or theological add-on.