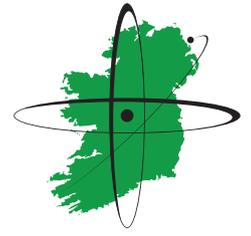


# Religion and Scientific Reason: Dawkins, Locke and Pascal



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**Abstract.** There is a widespread misunderstanding abroad about the relation of Christian religion to science. The first is supposed to be about faith; the second, about reason. The aim in this article is to correct the perception as it affects our reading of Western intellectual history. After noting Richard Dawkins' views on and misinterpretation of religion (at least of Christian religion), two figures are examined who have been influential in Western thought. One is Locke, who gave reason a free hand in religion and scientific investigation, but concluded that its discoveries were very limited. The other is Pascal, who distinguished between faith and reason, but allowed for both. The conclusion is not that we should agree with everything in Locke and Pascal, but that Dawkins completely fails to reckon with major strands of Western thought on science, faith and reason as represented by these two thinkers. It is disappointing that public perceptions on these questions are so poorly informed about the track record of Christian faith.

## Introduction

There is a widespread public perception, reflected in the rhetoric of public leaders, that we should distinguish between faith perspectives and the principles which should undergird public life in secular, liberal democracies. Public policy in a liberal democracy must be steered by secular reason, reason free from the constraints of religious belief. Society should tolerate those who adopt a faith perspective, and social and political leaders may privately adopt it, but this must not intrude on the institutional workings of a secular democracy. Obviously, there is an assumption here about the way in which social and political life ought to function in a democracy, which it is not my remit to examine here. But another set of assumptions is also apparently at work, assumptions about the nature of faith, the nature of reason and the relation of faith to reason. This is the underlying preoccupation in this paper, albeit specifically in relation to science and scientific reason.

Some of us may feel that the work of Richard Dawkins has had more publicity than it really warrants, but his public profile is such that it is right for us to keep attending to him. I do not want to concentrate on the question of Darwinism and religious faith – Alister McGrath's book *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life* does an admirable job of exposing the weaknesses of Dawkins' argument – so I shall be brief here. Dawkins' position is, of course, that a form of Darwinism is scientifically established and, that being so, faith is scientifically disestablished. Faith is explicable in terms of genes and memes, but that is a scientific account of its presence in humans; it certainly does not authorize faith's convictions. God is a delusion.

There is at least a twofold confusion involved here. One is that what we have learned about evolution rules out belief in God. Of course, what we

have *learned* about evolution and what is simply *speculation* are matters of dispute. But when, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructed his disciples to 'look at' the birds of the air – *emblemsate*: 'fix your gaze on' or 'consider' – and said that 'your heavenly Father feeds them' (Matthew 6:26), his words did not meet a derisory peal of laughter from a proto-Dawkinsian first-century disciple who said: 'The fool! I have looked at the birds of the air several times and the way that they are fed is by feeding themselves – fetching worms, supplying them to their young, gathering twigs for their nests etc'. Jesus also observed this and, we may suppose, observed it rather carefully, and what he saw as the natural processes of bird existence, he accepted fully as natural realities, but he saw in those very processes the hand of the Father feeding the birds. In principle, it is possible to see evolution in terms of divine activity; in practice, it depends on getting our science right and on how we interpret the opening chapters of Genesis.

What is the second confusion? It is about the Christian conception of God as Creator. With respect to the point that I have just made about birds, someone could say: 'Well, I suppose that *in principle* you *could* regard what is observable and scientifically testable in religious terms, but why should anyone of sound mind do so? It is not needed and there is no evidence for it'. I shall later remark briefly on the question of whether Dawkins and other natural scientists tend to look for such evidences in the wrong place. But, for the moment, I shall just make a familiar point. At one stage, some maintained (Fred Hoyle was the name that used to come up in this connection) that the universe may have had no origin in time. Now, I am told, astrophysicists agree that this is not the case; the universe had a beginning. Specifically, of course, people talk about the Big Bang, and thanks to the fact that experiments at CERN did not go too badly wrong, we are all still here to discuss these

matters. Unless Genesis is interpreted literally at every point, which many of us believe that the biblical writers never meant us to do, there is no problem *in principle* with affirming a Big Bang; it is the way in which God did things. But then, is it not incredible to say that it was uncaused – or that whatever caused the Big Bang was uncaused? Out of nothing, nothing comes. Atheists, we may say, quoting that prince of authorities, Terry Pratchett, believe that ‘in the beginning was nothing; then it exploded’. True, popular accounts of quantum theory used to talk about bodies popping up out of nothing. It was always up to scientists to figure what was happening here, but whatever was happening was happening within the ‘system of nature’. We are now talking about the beginning of the whole business from absolute nothingness. That most militant of atheist scientists, Peter Atkins, has admitted that ‘acausal inception’ – i.e., the notion of a beginning without a cause – is an intellectual perplexity<sup>1</sup>. A medieval version of one argument for the existence of God ran: (a) ‘Nothing can come into existence without a cause’; (b) ‘The universe came into existence’; ‘Therefore, (c) the universe had a cause’. It went on to identify that cause with God. For some, the more that they hear talk about the Big Bang, the more they wonder how people can resist the conclusion that there was a cause, and not nothingness, behind it.

Now I am not interested in asking how good are arguments for the existence of God which appeal to all this. Dawkins’ confusion resides in his belief that, since evolution produces more complex entities out of more simple entities, God can not have been there at the beginning, because God is, by definition, the most complex of beings. But Christians have never defined God as a complex being – certainly not a being of material complexity. He is a being of a different order. To insist that the only conceivable reality is material reality is to beg the question.

Be all this as it may, my general point is that, on a certain interpretation of the narrative of creation in Scripture – an interpretation that was around in the church many centuries before Darwin or the growth of modern science – *some* scientifically well-grounded form of evolution and scientifically well-grounded version of the Big Bang do not for one moment threaten religious faith *in principle*, from a logical point of view. We must ask, then, why it is that people think that they are a threat. One reason is a faulty perception of the nature of reason, the nature of faith and, therefore, of their relations. As far as Dawkins is concerned, faith is a matter of believing against reason, believing in the absence of reason, believing without evidence. Faith, he says in *The Selfish Gene*, ‘means blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth

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<sup>1</sup> Although he may say so in writing, I can not document this; it was a phrase used in a brief exchange of personal correspondence many years ago.

of evidence’ (p. 198). ‘It is a state of mind that leads people to believe something – it doesn’t matter what – in the total absence of supporting evidence’ (p. 330). Religious believers allegedly maintain that such faith is actually a virtue. There are cognate statements elsewhere, e.g., in *The God Delusion*. When we ask who exactly are supposed to take this position, we have slim pickings indeed in Dawkins’ literature. His target in the main seems to be popular religion, especially that which is labelled ‘fundamentalist’. Now, of course, ‘popular religion’ or ‘fundamentalism’ is contentious for many religious believers. Dawkins would be incensed if I criticized science *as such* because of pop scientists. He indeed admits that there are thinking, ‘non-fundamentalist’ religious believers. But they remain guilty, because they teach their children that faith is a virtue and saddle them with intellectually impossible positions. Well, let us ask a bit about how religion and scientific reason have been related to each other in intellectual history. We shall look at Locke and Pascal, both figures in that most exciting of scientific centuries, the seventeenth century. But we shall begin a little further back than either of them.

### Locke

One of the dominating intellectual problems of the Western Middle Ages was the problem of the relation of reason to revelation. Jews, Christians and Muslims often worked with a common set of problems



in this regard. Developments in the Muslim world could stimulate Christian thought. Muslim philosophers began to puzzle about the relationship between Greek philosophy and the Qur’an. For the two could be at odds with each other. What happens to a Muslim thinker who becomes convinced of certain philosophical positions, such as that the world was not created by God in and with time out of nothing? Well, he can say: ‘From a *philosophical* standpoint this is true; but *theologically*, as believers in the Qur’an, we know otherwise, of course’. That way, you can not be accused of undermining Islam. But the upshot has an uneasy effect on religious belief. Faith and reason begin to pull apart, and pull apart the mind of anyone committed to both, just as doing the splits pulls apart the body of someone who can’t do the splits.

In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas worried about the conception of the relationship between philosophy and theology that was emerging from Muslim engagement with Greek philosophy. And his immense intellect came up with a formulation. Faith and reason are not enemies. It is true that there are things of which faith can be assured and which are not knowable by reason, e.g., the belief

that God is Trinity. But such a belief is *beyond* reason, rather than *contrary* to it. Within the sphere of reason itself, you can demonstrate, at least with high probability, the existence of God. Ordinary religious believers attain belief in God by faith. Philosophers can do so by reason as well. So reason supports faith, but faith goes beyond reason.

However, Aquinas' synthesis of faith and reason was challenged within Christian circles by Christian philosophers who were unhappy with the way that he set things up. The substance of their challenge does not concern us, but what happened as the Middle Ages drew to a close was that faith and reason began to fly apart. It was not that reason *contradicted* faith – Aquinas might be correct there – but it did not lend much support to it either. In one important trajectory of thought, reason was, roughly speaking, moving to a position of religious *neutrality*; it can deal with empirical and scientific matters independently of faith, neither threatening nor sustaining it. With the Protestant Reformation, the cultural scene changed so that the question of the relation of faith to reason became socially significant. Here were different religious groups tearing into each other, each convinced that it was right, basing their convictions on Scripture, Church or faith. And in that very century, the sixteenth century, texts from the ancient Greek world, written by philosophical Sceptics, were being republished in Europe. One school or group of ancient Sceptics took an extreme position: 'Nothing can be known'. Can you get more sceptical than that? 'Yes, said another group – we can. For if you say that nothing can be known, you are making at least one dogmatic claim, you are claiming to know one thing: you are claiming to know that nothing can be known. We', they said, 'are so sceptical that we do not know if anything can be known or not'. (Figure it out if you are stuck for ways to have fun in Belfast on an autumn evening.) Think of the significance of dredging up these texts in post-Reformation Europe. On the one hand, here are religious groups arguing over faith. On the other hand, here are the republished works of cool-headed sceptics asking fundamental questions about whether anyone can know anything. Maybe it would be good for European society, and not just for philosophy, if we said a bit less about faith and leant a bit more on reason. This conviction that irrational religion fuels social strife is one of the main targets of Dawkins (and plenty of others) in their attack on religion – perhaps the main target. To that extent, by the way, the response to scientific atheism is not better Christian reasoning, but more Christian charity. But, of course, the *scientific* appeal to atheism centres on the ill-effects of religion. And that brings us to Locke.

Locke, said Sir Leslie Stephen, Virginia Woolf's father, was 'the intellectual ruler of the eighteenth century', the century of Enlightenment, within whose broad epistemological framework Dawkins

seems to be working. Locke's influence was huge. The philosopher Gilbert Ryle, certainly a man not given to wild hyperbole, remarked that 'it is not much of an exaggeration to say that one cannot pick up a sermon, a novel, a pamphlet or a treatise and be in any doubt, after reading a few lines, whether it was published before or after the publication of Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which was in 1690. The intellectual atmosphere since Locke has had quite a different smell from what it had before Locke' (Peter Schouls: *The Imposition of Method*, 3). Locke (1632-1704) may have written in a style that will send some readers to sleep, but he had an eventful life. He got caught up in the turbulent politics of late seventeenth century England and had to high-tail off to the Netherlands for safety. He worked as a physician and was profoundly interested in the natural sciences. His immense philosophical achievement was contextualized by the problems of science, religion and politics which he, in common with other thinking people, faced. One day, Locke and a few friends, who used to get together to discuss problems in religion and morality, found themselves stuck because they could not sort out a preliminary question which they needed to sort out in order to advance their discussion: What exactly are the limits of human understanding? What are our minds capacitated to know? From this enquiry emerged his great work, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

I am about to track one strand of his argument, but the context of my investigation is Richard Dawkins on religion and scientific reason. Why does he not reckon with Locke? What will he say to *this* outlook on faith and reason? Now many believe that both Locke (who was a seventeenth century Christian) and Dawkins (who is a twenty-first century atheist) share mistaken presuppositions. They appear to believe that there is an entity called 'reason' which is neutral and capable of coming up with objectively assured results. As far as many are concerned, postmodernity has demolished the pretensions of this kind of talk. There is no such thing as objective 'reason' or universal 'reasonableness' and neither Christian *nor* atheist nor anyone else can legitimately appeal to it. I am not at the moment interested in whether the postmodern critique is right or wrong, important as it undoubtedly is. For Dawkins, and those who think like him, do not approach matters in a postmodern way. My question is: what excuse do *they* have for any failure to come to terms with a figure like Locke who, towering influence as he was, was not off and away on some idiosyncratic course in his treatment of the question of faith and reason? (Incidentally, we began with reference to religion in the public square. The public square is not at all postmodern. Politicians talk as though the elimination of poverty, establishment of human rights etc. were utterly *reasonable* matters to which we should all give assent. I am operating within this framework at the moment.)

Locke has long been termed – whether felicitously or not – ‘the father of philosophical empiricism’. I.e., knowledge comes through our senses. Nothing unscientific there. Locke did not think that our knowledge was *confined* to what our senses could disclose, but it is *mediated* by them. Now Locke let reason have a completely free rein. He asked: what can reason, operating on the basis of the senses, actually know? And he concluded that its knowledge was very limited. Locke has been regarded as something of a sceptic, not because he was sceptical by disposition but because when, in practice, he tried to find things out, he kept hitting the limits of reason. This applied to science. Science observes and demonstrates. But it is forced to conceptualise as well. It is forced to say: ‘this is the *essence* of gold’ or ‘this is the *essence* of what it is to be a swan’. And this is where Locke became something of a sceptic about scientific reason.

Until you encounter a black swan, you might be tempted to say that whiteness is part of the essence of a swan. But then, hey presto, you have to revise your view. Whiteness now becomes a *contingent* feature of swanhood, a feature that swans might or might not but probably usually do possess. Yet it is not essential to swanhood, as you find out by observation. Now that is a simple example – the most familiar, I think, in all the philosophical literature on this subject. Imagine the situation with far more complex entities, the kind that were coming to light in ‘corpuscularian’ theories in the seventeenth century – theories that material reality was made up of insensible ‘corpuscles’. Locke believed that, if we humans talk about the *essence* of a material object, we are talking about *nominal* essences. I.e.: ‘This is the essence of *my* concept of a swan. When *I* talk about swans, these are the features that *I* or *we* regard as essential’. But as for what is essential for actually *being* a swan: well – that is a different matter; science is an ongoing business and we might keep finding things out about swans. Science may keep on *observing*, but when it comes to *conceptualizing* – deciding what we regard as essential to being a swan and what is not – that is something that pertains to our *ideas*. I.e., we can state what belongs to our *idea* of a swan; but as for what a swan essentially *is*, that is a different matter. Looking back on it, in those innocent days before I encountered a black swan, and I romantically believed that whiteness was of the *essence* of the swan, what I was actually doing was giving the swan a *nominal* essence. My *idea* of a swan was that of a bird essentially white, among other things. Now I have found a black swan, I shall no longer say that swans are essentially white, but I should be silly to say that I am now in a position to tell you what the essence of a swan really is, for who knows what else may come to light? It is no good now saying: “Swans are essentially either white or black”. Can you be sure that you will never find a purple one?’ They are regularly spotted in California when you take the right stuff.

Such considerations, amongst others, led Locke to a sense of the limits of what can be known about the world by *reason*. Notice that the limits of what can be reasonably known are forced on reason *by reason itself*. Locke does not cry ‘Halt!’ to scientific reason in the name of religion. And he often emphasises the limits of reason discovered by reason itself. But, if you approach the world reasonably, what do you make religion?

Locke turned his attention to this in the final part of the fourth and final book of the *Essay*, with special reference to Christianity, but with principles applicable to all religious claims. What he said was this. In the scientific course of things, you use your reason in an attempt to demonstrate this, that or the other and, at least *in principle*, you can attain certainty, probability, possibility, improbability or a definite ‘no’. That is all very well when you are dealing with propositions which you can discuss on the basis of your reason operating on the basis of your senses. But what does reason do with other sorts of propositions? Take the claim: ‘The dead can be raised’. Left to itself, reason can not show that claim to be true or even probable, but neither can it show that it is untrue or improbable. Frankly, reason doesn’t have a clue. So what can it do? Locke is an empiricist. The empirical world is not made up simply of those things that happen regularly, like the rising of the sun. The world is also made up of historical events, unique by definition. The theological proposition that the dead can be raised is based on reports of events that we find in the New Testament. Now reason says: ‘I can not figure out the truth or falsity of this proposition, when I consider the proposition itself, but I can try to figure out the credibility of the *witnesses*. Obviously, I can only accept what they say if it makes *sense*. If someone said: “God revealed to me that a loud four-sided triangle turned into the year 1066”, reason would perfectly entitled to say: “Stuff and nonsense”. And obviously I can not accept what witnesses say even when it makes perfect *sense*, if it contradicts what I know by reason through my senses. E.g., if we all saw it raining last week, but someone said: “God has revealed to me that it never rained anywhere last week”, we should reject that claim. But where I am in a position to judge, and not to know by my own resources – e.g., judge the proposition whether the dead can be raised or not – I can only judge the quality of *witnesses*. As far as Locke was concerned, as he elaborated in his book *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Christianity passes this test without difficulty. Therefore, it becomes entirely reasonable, says Locke, to believe in the resurrection of Jesus and to be a Christian; in fact, a truly scientific thinker who did *not* believe it would be irrational.

I am not interested in the strengths and weaknesses of Locke’s argument, but what he does is to outline a strategy to show how scientific reason and Christian belief are fully compatible. But we need to remark

on 'scientific reason' here. Speaking generally, my impression is that one difficulty that seems to come up in discussions of science and religion is that scientifically-interested people draw large-scale conclusions (God does or does not, probably does or probably does not, possibly does or possibly does not exist) on the basis of looking at the world as disclosed through natural scientific investigation. But historical events are as fully real as the world in which the events occur. If Christianity is grounded in a claim about an *historical* event, scientists can not dismiss Christianity without looking at historical events. If they say that they are scientists and that is not their subject of study – fine – only let them therefore not draw conclusions outside their field of study. Now, obviously, a scientist might say: 'But we have scientific reason to consider that *no one* can be raised from the dead, so nobody needs to investigate particular cases' or: 'The whole concept of resurrection from the dead makes no logical sense'. But what Locke would have said to Dawkins – and quite rightly, I believe – is that he has not even remotely begun to show *scientifically* that such things are impossible or illogical. Dawkins is coming to *metaphysical* or *philosophical* conclusions, going beyond scientific reasoning. He is making a kind of leap of faith from what is scientifically demonstrable as regards evolution (even if we assume that he has got this right) to a non-religious world-view. And – the point of greatest interest to me here – he makes unsubstantiated allegations about how Christians regard the relation of faith to reason. He has not remotely come to terms with the logic, the philosophy of science or the religious epistemology of a Christian philosopher, Locke, who was such an influence on the eighteenth century, and whose views on faith and reason are, broadly speaking, in the lineage of Aquinas and not highly idiosyncratic.

How Locke came to be the intellectual ruler of a century which could be hostile to Christianity is a story that we can not tell here. And he is open to plenty of philosophical criticism. But, at one point – and here we take our leave of him – he is within the orbit of New Testament thinking. Dawkins describes doubting Thomas' as 'the only admirable member of the twelve apostles' (*The Selfish Gene*, p. 330) because he demanded evidence rather than exhibiting blind faith. This is how Locke would have described the way in which Thomas *ought* to have reasoned, I think. 'This is a strange report – Jesus is risen from the dead. Why should I believe it? Well, I know that these ten people who told me are not congenital liars and unlikely to be collectively muddled. *If* there is a God, as I believe, then it is more rational to believe their report than to disbelieve it just because I have no personal experience of what happened'. Thomas was not in fact being entirely rational: the fact that *he* had *not* seen 'x' counted, for him, against the report that ten people *had* seen 'x'. Within their common framework of belief in God, how was Thomas being rational?

The New Testament does not promote blind faith. Luke opens his Gospel by saying that, with lots of reports flying around, 'I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning', so I am writing to you, Theophilus, 'so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught'. I.e., 'You have been taught certain things, but you naturally want evidence. Here it is'. We in the third millennium can not check Luke's story for itself. All that we can say is that he is certainly not promoting a faith which asks no questions and is unconcerned about its own grounds. Dawkins has reckoned with the New Testament as little as he has with Locke.

Let us move on, rather briefly, to one more figure: Blaise Pascal.

### Pascal

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) was a genius: mathematician, inventor, experimental scientist, not to mention religious thinker. After he had built a calculating machine, he turned his attention to the experiments by Torricelli, a disciple of Galileo, to figure out how we are to interpret what looks like the empty space that appears when you fill a tube with mercury and suspend it upside down under certain conditions. Pascal was insistent that it was the *senses*, not some logical *reason*, that was to resolve such issues. With regard to experimental science, Pascal was occupied with the question of the role of observation in the establishment and confirmation of scientific theory. There is a difference between the *description* of phenomena and the invocation of theoretical causes to *explain* the phenomena. But where do we draw the line? And how can causes be tested? These questions accompanied Pascal's experiments on levels of mercury in the Torricelli tube, to see whether we can draw conclusions about the existence of a vacuum. Pascal was also occupied with the question of how first principles in scientific and philosophical reasoning are ever known. Geometry expresses the most exact form of reasoning and its demonstrations are demonstrations *par excellence*, but if we try to analyse some of the fundamental concepts which enter into it or, more broadly, into experimental sciences – number, space, time, movement – we find ourselves unable to arrive at satisfactory and incontestable definitions, so that we seem to do far better at definition and demonstration when it comes to the *practice* of geometry than when we scrutinize *foundational concepts* like the concept of number or of space.



Now this prepares us, perhaps, for the fact that Pascal is going to distinguish rather more sharply

than we have found Locke distinguishing between religious and scientific reasoning. Actually, Pascal has some things in common with Locke. He believes that, if we give reason free rein, it hits its own limits. 'One must know when it is right to doubt, to affirm, to submit. Anyone who does otherwise does not understand the force of reason' (*Pensées*, 170, numbered according to section as in A. Krailsheimer's edition). Reason, as Augustine said, 'would never submit unless it judged that there are occasions when it ought to submit' (174). 'There is nothing so consistent with reason as this denial of reason' (182). 'Reason's last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it. It is merely feeble if it does not go so far as to realize that' (188). And, like Locke, Pascal can say: 'Faith certainly tells us what the senses do not, but *not the contrary* of what they see; it is *above*, *not against* them' (185).

But he works with a sharper distinction than Locke seems to do – at least in Essay – between religious and scientific knowing. There is much I shall omit here, such as Pascal's remarks on the difference between mathematical and intuitive minds. What is central to Pascal's distinction is that the relation of will to understanding functions differently in religious knowledge than it does in scientific knowledge. The will does not enter into the understanding where scientific reason is concerned. Of course, it can enter at a preliminary stage where *motivation* is concerned: I can decide that I *want* or do not *want* to find out whether there is a vacuum and I can *will* to start experimenting. But once that is settled, it is up to the understanding to operate. Science proceeds on the intellectual basis of truths that Pascal calls 'natural and known to everyone'. But religion works in a different domain. The heart has a different order from the mind. The heart has certain things that are of interest to it, such as the nature of human greatness or smallness, humility, pride and love. Here the will is involved. It has its own first principles, such as the desire to be happy. The will's desire to be happy has no role to play in scientific work. But Christian faith addresses itself to *that* dimension of the human person.

Religious faith, then, involves acts of the will – including desires and active commitments – that indicate that we are operating in a different domain from science. Faith, in fact, is ultimately a gift of God and, in such matters, 'God wishes to move the will rather than the mind' (*Pensées*, 234). Faith is different from proof, says Pascal: 'One is human, the other is a gift of God'. Now statements of this kind have led to Pascal being described as a 'fideist', i.e., someone who advocates belief without evidence or reason. The description is misplaced. Pascal, in his *Pensées*, offers various reasons why Christianity should be considered true. 'The way of God, who disposes all things with gentleness, is to instil religion into our *minds* with *reasoned arguments* and into our *hearts* with *grace*', and he

adds, by the way, that attempting to instil it into hearts and minds with force and threats is to instil not religion but terror (172). It is just that reason can not take you all the way to faith. It can open you up to that domain, but human will and desire and the operation of divine grace then becoming determining factors.

Are scientific and religious reason, therefore, more or less separate domains for Pascal? Not entirely. Scientific work should instil a sense of humility, because of those things that we do not know, and it should breed a hard-nosed scepticism, because of those things that we can not prove. In fostering those attitudes, scientific thinkers should come to realize that humans are a riddle. As far as Pascal is concerned, they are a riddle that can only be explained in terms of humanity created and fallen. More specifically, we humans have this fantastic capacity to think and survey the universe, yet we are existentially lost within it. Pascal writes eloquently of the marvels and immensity of the universe, but of ourselves as forlorn within it – able to understand the workings of nature only in part; able to grasp the meaning of our existence scarcely at all.

And this returns us to Dawkins. The meaning of life is something that Dawkins has to construct, for it is not given in the godless and amoral evolutionary world. For people of sound body and mind, it is doubtless possible to find meaning, exploring the world in all its richness. But what about those who lack these things, or whose spirit is crushed? What then? Now it is perfectly in order to say that religion does not serve the cause of truth by bringing in God as a crutch for folk in this condition. If Dawkins objects that religion should not be used to serve the purposes of wishful thinking, I agree with him. Nevertheless, scientists are not only scientists; in fact, they are not primarily scientists – they are human beings, primarily human beings, subject to the code of human responsibilities before they are responsible to scientific work, rightly committed to science when science is seen as part of our service to wider humanity. The proportionate place of scientific reasoning in the human scheme of things has to be kept in mind. As Pascal mildly but firmly puts it: 'Knowledge of physical science will not console me for ignorance of morality in time of affliction, but knowledge of morality will always console me for ignorance of physical science' (23). Science is not everything – not even the main thing in existence.

We may question which was right, whether Locke or Pascal, on the points where they seem to differ, or whether either was right. I am not here to defend or to attack the religious or scientific epistemology of either of them. But here we have two great seventeenth thinkers, at the dawn of the modern era, who occupied themselves with philosophy, science and religion, and Dawkins does not come

within sniffing distance of investigating their ways of relating religious belief to scientific reason. So not only does he not really deal with either twentieth century secular philosophy of science or philosophical postmodernism. He does not deal either with eve-of-Enlightenment philosophy of scientific or philosophy of religious thought, a huge chunk of the Christian heritage. What is regrettable is not just that he makes pronouncements about religion and scientific reason apparently without having investigated his subject. What is regrettable is that he is part of a wider popular scene that is equally uninformed about how Christians have regarded and often do regard these questions. And that brings us back, in conclusion, to the wider contemporary public scene.

## Conclusion

One of the most influential thinkers on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is the ferociously anti-Christian thinker, Friedrich Nietzsche. In one of his works, written in the 1880s, he makes a statement frequently overlooked, but extremely telling, I think. 'It is our taste that is decisive against Christianity; no longer our reasons' (*The Gay Science*, book 3, sec. 132). He was surely right and perhaps it has always been that way. Ultimately, many people simply do not like Christianity and, when we do not like something, we surely enough find reasons to resist, ridicule or reject it. But, although we should never forget that, two other things have to be taken into account. The first is that, if the *rejection* of Christianity can be based on what people *want*, so can the *acceptance* of it. People can embrace it simply because it they think that it is a means of consolation. So the traffic when it comes to believing what we want is certainly not one way. The second is more to our point here: many quite genuinely believe that scientific reason poses a threat to religion in general or Christianity in particular. Let us conclude with a brief remark about this.

Earlier scientists, e.g., scientists of the seventeenth century, could prosecute their scientific researches with great zest and without any diminution of religious belief. There were two books: the book of Scripture and the book of Nature. God was the ultimate author of both. When a child was born or there was recovery from sickness, it was not only appropriate, but also our duty, to give thanks to God. At the very same time, it was not only appropriate, but also our duty, to investigate the biological processes of procreation and the medical causes of disease and its cure. Long before the seventeenth century, of course, religious beliefs had been held tenaciously in the relative absence of scientific knowledge. But, for many thinkers, growth in scientific information only meant, in principle, growth in our capacity to explain how the world works, not the displacement of belief in God. However, somewhere along the line, many came to believe that scientific explanation was not a

supplementary form of explanation, along with the religious; rather, it rendered religious explanation unnecessary. Indeed, it rendered religious explanation incredible. Aquinas used to argue that, within this world, a causality operates which we can investigate empirically – efficient causation of the kind physicists, chemists, biologists, medical researchers etc. all take for granted as fundamental. But there is an order of causality which is different. Not only does our whole worldly causal system depend on a cause of a different order getting it all going and sustaining it. There are also final causes, what we roughly call *purposes*. You can describe the world both in terms of efficient causes operative within the world and certain designs that God has in the world. One and the same event can be seen from different points of view, and there is no tension involved. What reason can discern and what faith perceives are not in competition. However, one thing that happened with the growth of science was that the description of efficient causes, operating within the world, began to edge out any talk of final causes, or purposes, operating within that same world, and to render them superfluous or even incredible. There we became en route to atheism, where many have arrived today. Aquinas would have considered this an intellectual blunder, as do many religious believers now. Yet when a certain naturalistic or atheistic mind-set sets in, we should at least be sympathetic to the difficulties some people have in seeing anything except immanent, inner, blind causalities in nature.

Scientific reason should be welcomed and embraced unreservedly by Christians. When it was believed that the Bible taught that the sun moved round the earth, science did us a great service in helping us to read our Bibles aright and realize that it was teaching no such thing. For some time now, it is not this that has been contentious, but the question of how to read our Bibles in relation to questions like the age of the earth or biological evolution. Science poses challenges to our self-understanding as *embodied* humans, in light of the biblical teaching about our spiritual relationship with God. But intellectual growth comes through challenge; indeed, on one theory of culture, whole cultures themselves only grow and thrive in response to challenge. A recent book, much publicized in North America, I think – I am not sure about here – argues, from a strictly neuro-scientific perspective, that mind is not identical with brain, that materialist neuro-science is incapable of explaining selfhood, consciousness and freedom, and that, from a logical point of view, the description of religious or mystical experiences in terms of different zones of the brain, merely makes more precise the nature of our convictions, and even strengthens them, about ultimate actual religious reality (M. Beauregard and D. O'Leary: *The Spiritual Brain*). As a non-scientist, let me make the personal confession here that, from an intellectual point of view, far from finding these questions a threat to faith, I find them hugely

stimulating, although my competence in such areas is severely limited. They stimulate rather than threaten because faith is grounded not in wish or imagination but in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and it is more than happy to open this claim out to empirical investigation, as far as we are ever capable of investigating it. Some will emphasise a supplementary ground or what they consider an even deeper ground of faith: the impossibility of believing in the existence of a universe that was not caused by a self-existing being.

Scientific investigation, on its part, must subject itself to two tests. Firstly, it must constantly ask itself at what point it passes over from a strictly *scientific* account to a *metaphysical* or a *philosophical* conclusion, whether it is doing so in favour of or against religious belief. And, secondly, it must constantly ask itself whether it is confusing between the best available explanation that we have here and now and actual unrevisable scientific certainty. On the wider cultural scene, when people oppose faith to reason, they must also be persuaded of two things. One is that Christians have some reason – I do not say logical proof – for faith. The other is that secular reason itself frequently relies on premises which it can not demonstrate and itself

strays quickly off the path of what is rationally demonstrable into hypothesis, even into a species of faith. Irrationality and blind belief or unbelief are indiscriminating predators: they capture rational secularists just as easily as they seize religious believers.

In this lecture, I have operated strictly within certain parameters *ad hoc*. I have not begun to touch on many of the big matters of religion in relation to scientific reason, nor to attempt a rigorous analysis of Dawkins, Locke or Pascal. The relation of religion to scientific reason, in its detail, is something for us to understand progressively, as we press on with both biblical and scientific investigations. But, as a matter of principle, at least where Christianity is concerned, minds troubled by the Richard Dawkinses of this world – needlessly, but it happens – should be considerably encouraged by exposure to the Lockes and Pascals of this world. We may or may not come to believe that both Locke and Pascal got certain important things wrong. But we will surely come to believe even more strongly that Dawkins and his kin get it even more wrong when they say what they say about the relation of religion to scientific reason.

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## For further reading

- Richard Dawkins: *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford University Press, 1976, 2006)  
Richard Dawkins: *The God Delusion* (Bantam Books, 2006)  
Nicholas Hammond (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Pascal* (Cambridge University Press, 2003)  
John Locke: *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Penguin Classics, 1998)  
Alistair McGrath: *Science and Religion: An Introduction* (Blackwell, 1999)  
Alistair McGrath: *The Foundations of a Dialogue on Science and Religion* (Blackwell, 1998)  
Blaise Pascal: *Pensées* (A. Krailsheimer, translator; Penguin Classics, 1966, 1995)  
John Yolton: *John Locke: An Introduction* (Wiley Blackwell, 1985)

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## About the author

Professor Stephen Williams teaches Systematic Theology at Union Theological College, Belfast. He studied Modern History and Theology at Oxford, Cambridge and Yale, and was ordained into the Presbyterian Church in Wales in 1980. He taught Theology in the theological college of the Presbyterian Church in Aberystwyth, Wales, and was then based at a research institute in Oxford, before coming to Northern Ireland. He is interested in the question of faith and reason, and has published on one of the figures featured in this article, namely, John Locke.



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