

Launch of Science and Christianity: Understanding the Conflict Myth by Chris Mulherin

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Launch by Most Rev. Assoc. Prof. Shane Mackinlay

For the last fifteen years, whenever one has a conversation about science and religion, four figures hovering in the background are those of the so-called ‘new atheists’: Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris. However, having begun their interventions in 2006, they are no longer ‘new’ in a strict sense, and in Chris’ admirable book, they don’t make an appearance until nearly halfway through, which I’m sure would be much to their chagrin. Nonetheless, they have a long shadow, and this book is clearly written in it.

Chris presents a wonderfully lucid and measured defence of Christian faith against the sort of attacks that the new atheists mounted on it. One of the book’s great strengths is that it offers a critique not only of their views on faith, but also a critique of their views on science. It’s often been said that the new atheists are not sufficiently familiar with what they are arguing against. Indeed, it’s often difficult for believers to recognise their faith in the account given of it by Dawkins and his associates. We might well say: “I understand completely why you wouldn’t believe in a God like that; neither do I!” Piers Plowman, reviewing Dawkins’ latest book, recently described him as “a brilliant interpreter of science, butterfly net and sword of truth in hand, on the hunt for mythical beasts created by his own prejudice” (*The Tablet*, 21 September 2019, p. 19).

A parallel criticism can certainly not be levelled at Chris’ book. It’s very clear that he is deeply familiar not only with Christian faith, but also with science and its history, and with philosophy. Moreover, as well as knowing each of these areas, he is passionate about them and an advocate for them. He does this without giving in to the temptation of an evangelical fervour, and more by celebrating how each, in complementary ways, enrich our lives and our understanding. His insights into each of Science and Christianity enhances the value that he sees in the other. Thus, science gives us more reasons to wonder and give thanks for the ways “the heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Psalm 19), and also for the capacity of human reason to understand that handiwork. On the other hand, Christianity gives a moral and existential framework for science, which otherwise would show a universe that has, as Dawkins admits: “precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference.”

Chris’ particular interest is debunking what he calls the “conflict myth”, which is the view that Science and Christianity are set in an intrinsic conflict with one another, summed up in comments such as: “I believe in science, so I couldn’t be a Christian.” His essential argument is to distinguish questions about meaning, which lead to the formation of a worldview, from questions about mechanisms, which lead to us understanding and predicting what happens in the world. Failing to distinguish between these two different kinds of question leads to what he calls ‘scientism’, which asserts that the only legitimate worldview is that presumed by science.



Chris analyses the basis of scientism as a careless and irresponsible approach to naturalism. All science engages in ‘methodological naturalism’, which describes the foundations of the scientific method: namely, scientific questions can be addressed by investigating the “properties of measurable material phenomena” without reference to any possible spiritual dimension. This presumes that the world as it is naturally given is ordered, that experiment and observation are a valid and reliable basis for theories, and that human reason has the capacity to assess observation and arrive at understanding and predictions about the world. Chris argues that naturalism becomes a problem when this methodological naturalism slides across into Naturalism as a worldview or, if you like, ‘ontological naturalism’ (though I hasten to add that Chris avoids technical philosophical language like that). Naturalism as a worldview asserts that scientific experiment and confirmation are the only basis for truth and validity in *every* question, not just in scientific questions. However, Naturalism is inherently self-contradictory, as this very assertion cannot be proven by scientific experiment or observation. It is a worldview that has been merely asserted, and cannot be proved scientifically. Chris describes this worldview as ‘scientism’. While there is clearly intrinsic conflict between *scientism* and Christianity, Chris argues convincingly that there is no intrinsic conflict between *science* itself and Christianity, as science relies only on *methodological* naturalism and not on the worldview of *ontological* Naturalism.

With commendable even-handedness, Chris also describes the religious parallel to Naturalism, in the equally fundamentalist approach of those who absolutize a literalist reading of the bible. This leads to a worldview evident in the various forms of creationism, which insist that the bible is the only basis for truth and validity in every question, not just in religious or moral questions. In this context, Chris quotes Galileo’s pithy observation that “The bible teaches how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go.”

This is a relatively short text, but it is informed by a thorough knowledge of science, philosophy and religion. Chris carries this knowledge lightly and avoids labouring his points, but he gives very careful and clear attention to nuances such as:

- The different meanings of science through history and between different branches of science;
- The limitations of scientific enquiry, both in practice and in principle;
- The ‘truth’ status of scientific hypotheses, which are always subject to the problem of induction, because we can never be certain that the next observation might not prove them wrong, as happened when black swans were inconveniently discovered in Australia in 1697, thus disproving the hypothesis held universally until then that all swans were white;
- The epistemological and ontological presuppositions that provide a foundation for the scientific method;
- And even the different literary genres that are to be found in the bible.

It is clear that Chris is a fine teacher and communicator: he writes clearly, directly and with great accessibility. He also includes exemplary sign-posting at every point, and helpful questions for discussion at the end of each chapter. The text is complemented by stunning photos, and a consistently attractive and layout, of which the publisher should be proud. It also has seventeen enlightening articles that could stand alone on aspects of science such as quantum mechanics and DNA, and on historical figures with insights into the relation between science and religion, ranging from Augustine and Galileo to Darwin and Polkinghorne.

I failed to locate a single typo, which reflects the care with which the book has been produced. It is very much a book for the twenty-first century, with the images, stand-alone articles and discussion questions indulging all the demands for stimulus of a generation accustomed to a limited attention span. Yet, despite so many moving parts, Chris maintains an absolutely clear purpose and a direct line of argument that runs from the beginning of the book to its end.

I am very pleased to launch Chris Mulherin’s *Science and Christianity*, and I warmly commend it to you.

Response by Chris Mulherin

Thank you so much for joining in this celebration. I do hope you enjoy yourselves, mingle and partake of the spread.

Publishing a book, even a slim one such as tonight's specimen, comes at the end of a journey. It's a journey which starts long before the writing begins and it involves many people. So it's appropriate to tell some of that story and also to thank those people who have contributed indirectly to this book along the way.

Firstly, thank you Shane—Bishop Shane—for launching the book in such splendid fashion. Of course I never expected that Australia's newest Catholic bishop would be launching my book; it is an honour.

So, how does an evangelical Anglican finish up launching his book at Catholic Theological College? And by a Catholic bishop no less? An odd thing indeed, you might say. Well, the story of this book is wedded to the story of my doctoral thesis. Mind you, the academics here will say that this certainly doesn't look like a thesis-to-book offering. However you'd be surprised at the hidden intertextual references here to Polanyi, Heidegger and Gadamer.

About 12 years ago, soon after returning from our adventures in Argentina, I started a master's degree under the able supervision of Brian Edgar at what was then Bible College of Victoria. My interest was in the relationship between scientific knowledge and other sorts of truth claims such as the claims of the Christian faith. I have always been interested in the science–faith relationship and convinced that there was no conflict.

Soon it was apparent that I wanted to upgrade to a doctorate, and the upgrade essay was sent to Shane, who was the head of philosophy here at CTC. Then two things happened: first, Shane did a meticulous job assessing my upgrade essay. And secondly, it dawned on me that doing my doctorate through what was the Melbourne College of Divinity meant that I could apply for an Australian postgraduate research scholarship. To cut a long story short, with Brian's blessing, I asked Shane about supervising me; I moved to the MCD; Shane arranged a little teaching work; Shane became master of CTC, and I now have a two-day a week job here teaching philosophy.

I should say one last thing about Shane's supervision ... Many of you know that very early in my doctorate we lost our oldest son Ben to cancer. This book is dedicated to the memory of Ben.

Shane's pastoral care, and also his patience with a grieving and very unproductive doctoral candidate, was an essential part of me surviving that first year or two after Ben's death.

So, in short, CTC has been very hospitable to this low Anglican. And I'm sure I am the only person in history to have taught concurrently at both CTC and Ridley College.

Well, that is a long thank you to now Bishop Shane and also to CTC, under the able leadership of a new Master, Fr Kevin Lenehan. Thank you to you both and to all the CTC people here tonight who have received this theological foreigner so warmly, and borne with my ups and downs and eccentricities. Let me say thank you too to Martin and Sarah and Jill and other CTC people who have done the organising for this event; I am very grateful.

And I should mention Cal Ledsham who is teaching in another part of the building tonight and who wanted his apologies minuted. Cal is now head of philosophy. He's a medieval scholar who prefers his texts and his church services in Latin. But despite such quirks, he has also been a great encouragement to me.

Thank you also to all the other people who have encouraged me along the way, and most especially Lindy who probably doesn't want to be mentioned tonight. Thank you darling and thank you to our boys and their wives and of course to our grandsons who had very little to do with this book but they have come to cheer us along.

My thanks too to Garratt Publishing for inviting me to write the book—David, Rose, and Karen, are here with us tonight and will happily sell you a copy.

Finally, thank you to the supporters of ISCAST—Christians in Science and Technology. Through their support in recent years I have been paid to manage the organisation as we promote a healthy dialogue between science and Christian faith in Australia. If you are interested in such things, please do subscribe to ISCAST news. There are sign-up sheets on the tables. Or even better, become a financial member or a donor.

Enough thank yous. I haven't mentioned all the people I would like to but I must move on.

Why did I write this book? If it's not clear already, let me briefly tell you. No, it was not a get-rich-quick scheme. I wrote it because I am still a missionary at heart and I want to change the world for the glory of God. Well, that sounds a little highbrow, but the sentiment is clear.

As we're wont to say in ISCAST circles, in an increasingly global and secular scientific culture, the science–faith conversation is at the cutting edge of Christian engagement. You all know well that the so-called conflict thesis is alive and thriving. The oft-repeated phrase in schools and universities is “I believe in science so I couldn't be religious.” And in churches, many Christians fear that a strong affirmation of science would be detrimental to their faith.

So, I wrote this book to help that conversation. To use the word in its technical sense; it is an apologetic work. It is designed to be useful in the street and in the marketplace. Let me give you an example.

Yesterday I got back from the Gold Coast where I spent four days at The Southport School. I spoke to 1000 secondary boys in chapel services and in Life and Faith classes. As he drove me to the airport, Father Jonathan the chaplain said, “We should spend more time on these issues in our curriculum. You don't know any material we could use do you?” I told him I knew just the thing.

So, I wrote this book to serve the church and to offer some tools to challenge those who are antagonistic to the Christian faith; people who have weaponised science in their crusade. That's why it is written in the style it is, designed to be accessible, with lots of bite-size bits and questions for discussion.

At this point I am going to ask Philippa Lohmeyer-Collins if she would lead us in a prayer. A prayer that this book will serve that purpose.

Philippa is the chaplain at Mentone Girls Grammar and she has done some fascinating classes helping even primary students come to grips with science and faith. Thanks Philippa.

Prayer by Rev. Philippa Lohmeyer-Collins

Dear God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

You spoke and this world came into being.

You spoke and the waters parted and land formed.

Your word is a light to our path.

You, God, value words. You have given us speech to enjoy and share.

We give thanks for Chris Mulherin and the time and thought and prayer which has gone into the writing of this book.

We give thanks for his learning and insight into how we think about this world, its laws and activities in the natural world and the intersection with you.

We pray that this book would be read widely and thoroughly.

We pray that the issues written about would be discussed, debated and considered respectfully .

We pray that all those who read it would glimpse a God who is bigger than their imagination.

We pray for those young people reading this book and struggling to find meaning would be challenged to think again about you, God, who loves this world you created full of scientific laws and peculiarities.

We pray this book helps people to think clearly and fairly about the big issues of science and recognise deeply that you God are the chief scientist.

We pray that this book furthers conversation about you and this world with young people and old.

And we give thanks that you God, made us in your image, created with minds that can think, dwell and contemplate big and little issues.

How wonderful you are!

Amen.

Thank you Philippa.

I am not going to tell you any more of what you will find in this book; you will have to buy it to find out. However, before I finish I want to recognise that we have in our midst one of the world's foremost authorities on the relationship between science and religion. I was very pleased when Peter Harrison said he would like to be here tonight.

Peter runs the University of Queensland's Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities. Prior to that he was at Oxford University where he was the Idreos Professor of Science and Religion and also the Director of the Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion. He has delivered the Gifford Lectures and he's the author of various books including *The Territories of Science and Religion*. He is also a Distinguished Fellow of ISCAST.

So, Peter, we can't let this opportunity go by without hearing from you. Thank you for agreeing to respond to a couple of questions.

Firstly, I know it's unfair to ask you to put much of your life's work in a 3-minute answer to a question, but the historical story of conflict is not quite as conflictual as we might have been led to believe, is it?

Secondly, I wonder if you might comment on the current state of the science and religion conversation? Where are we up to?

Unfortunately Peter's comments were not recorded.

