

# Is Science Replacing God?

Rev. Dr Mark Worthing

First published in *The Lutheran* June 2018 at <https://www.thelutheran.com.au/is-science-replacing-god/>

Winner of the 2019 ARPA (Australasian Religious Press Association) silver award for best article.

There is an increasing remoteness between the biblical world and our own modern world. When my grandfather was born in 1899 there were no automobiles, airplanes, telephones, radios, cinema, televisions or computers. No world wars had been fought, no tanks, poison gas or nuclear weapons had been developed. And no one had heard of global warming. By the time of his death in 1993 he had sold his father's plough horses for tractors, hooked up the farm to electricity, put the carriages in the barn loft to be replaced by a succession of automobiles, had repaired bi-planes in the first world war, purchased the first radio, telephone and later television in the district, and on a warm summer day in July 1969, sat down with his grandson in his farmhouse to watch a black and white feed of Neil Armstrong stepping onto the moon. I can still hear his words: 'Sit still and watch this, Mark. You'll want to tell your grandchildren someday that you saw this.'

In a relatively short space of time we have emerged from a largely rural and agrarian society with simple technologies into an age of computers, virtual reality video games, international jet flight and modern medical care – all made possible by a myriad of scientific and technological advances.

And the science that has changed our world has itself undergone significant change. Up until the beginning of the twentieth century science held firmly to the concept of a static and eternal universe – without beginning or end. Within this context, talk about creation and

end of time seemed quite nonsensical. Einstein's theory of relativity, developed between 1905 and 1915, and Edwin Hubble's discovery of the expansion of the universe in 1929 through the observation of the red-shift in the light of distant galaxies, turned scientific ideas about the universe on their head. And this was on top of the continuing debate about Darwin's theory of evolution and the new ways this opened up for looking at life on our planet, including human beings. The discovery of the double helix structure of DNA and the mapping of the human genome also opened up entire new worlds of understanding into what makes us who we are.

For many, science has replaced religion as the 'go to' source for answers to life's big questions. This has inevitably led to tension between science and faith. Some scientists believe that faith, particularly Christian faith, has opposed science and represents a superstitious reliance on archaic beliefs which do not stand up to scrutiny. Some Christians believe science is at heart anti-faith and leaves no room for God. Modern persons are not well served by either of these views. The reality is that many key early scientists were people of strong personal faith, such as Johannes Kepler, Isaac Newton, Michael Faraday and Lord Kelvin. Also, many contemporary scientists are devout Christians. Graeme Clark, who invented the bionic ear, is one of Australia's most famous scientists. But he is also a person of very strong Christian faith who credits prayer as much as his ground-breaking research for his success.

So are science and faith adversaries or friends? Dialogue between science and faith has become easier with more identifiable contact points since the rise of Big Bang cosmology. But it would be wrong to assume that there are still not a number of difficult and perplexing problems. In wrestling with these problems both science and faith can benefit. Science is challenged not to reduce all things to the level of the physical, and to be open to the idea of purpose. If science fails to recognise the metaphysical and theological

implications of its findings and to find room for purpose in the universe, then it runs the risk of impersonal reductionism. And people of faith, particularly Christians, are challenged to take seriously our own confession of God as creator.

As Christians we have learned that if we really believe what we confess, namely that God is creator of heaven and earth, then we must listen carefully to those who study the physical universe that God has created and will redeem. As the Psalmist confessed; ‘Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them’ (Psalm 111:2). If we fail to speak about such things as creation, the end of the world, and even human beings in light of what science can tell us about the physical world around us, then we run the risk of becoming irrelevant.

This task of the Christian church within this context is to help people within our faith communities and beyond, both those who are scientifically informed and those who are less informed, to come to terms with the ongoing dialogue between the natural sciences and Christian faith. Science and technology form one of the dominant background settings in most Australians’ lives (right after sport!). It is an area that we cannot ignore in our sermons, our youth groups, our Bible studies, even our Sunday schools. If people walk into our churches and feel that they have stepped back into the intellectual context and worldview of a previous century, we reinforce an unfortunate and erroneous perception that Christianity is quaint, useful for Christmas and Easter celebrations, mostly harmless, but otherwise irrelevant for our daily lives in the modern world.

Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth. The God who took on human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ has affirmed and dignified the physical world. God not only created the physical world, but became a part of it so that he might redeem it. ‘For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible .... And through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or in heaven’

(Colossians 1:16,19). As Christians we want to understand the physical world in which we live because God created it, because God dignified it by becoming a part of it in Jesus Christ, and because God redeems it.

We need congregations today in which the Gospel is effectively proclaimed within the context of the modern scientific and technological world. We need congregations in which Christians can live integrated lives and in which there is recognition and support both of their faith and their knowledge, of their worship and their work, of their lives on Sunday and their lives the rest of the week. Such congregations will have made peace with the modern scientific world, and will have done so with integrity.

This does not mean we must accept uncritically everything that science or some individual scientist says. It does not mean adopting a physical reductionist view of reality. And it does not mean going quiet about what we believe about God and salvation, so as not to offend modern persons. It does, however, mean that we cannot assume that science is the enemy of faith and something to be suspicious of. After all, we have no reason to fear the knowledge of the world that God created? It means we should not engage scientists in conversation as adversaries, but rather as allies. It means that even though we may find some of the results and theories coming out modern science challenging, we should not dismiss them out of hand simply because they do not fit with our existing worldview. It could be that our existing worldview is not based on what scripture actually says. And finally, it means that we should not assume that those working in the sciences, many of whom are in our churches every Sunday, are not people of strong faith.

If Christianity is not only to survive, but also to thrive in the twenty-first century and beyond, we need to positively and constructively engage the modern world, including the natural sciences. If our confession of faith in the God who is ‘maker of heaven and earth’ means anything to us, we must not be afraid of what the sciences tell us about the world

around us – even when this knowledge forces us to ask difficult questions or to re-think the way we articulate our faith. These issues must be taken up faithfully, with intellectual integrity and pastoral sensitivity, within our Christian communities. Only then will effective progress be made toward realising a healthy and vibrant expression of Christian faith within the context of our modern, scientifically-influenced and technology-dominated world.

When we listen to those who study the natural world and seek to understand what they have discovered about it, we honour the God who created this world, who became a part of this world through the Incarnation, and who redeemed this world through the cross.

Mark Worthing is pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church, North Adelaide. He is a founding member of the International Society of Science and Religion (ISSR) and a Fellow of Christians in Science and Faith (ISCAST). He is author of *God, Creation and Contemporary Physics* (Fortress Press, 1996); *Graeme Clark. The Man Who Invented the Bionic Ear* (Allen&Unwin, 2015); *Martin Luther. A Wild Boar in the Lord's Vineyard* (Morning Star, 2017) and co-author of *God and Science in Classroom and Pulpit* (Morning Star, 2018). He has been invited to present this year's Tony Morgan Lecture at the University of New South Wales on the topic: 'Unlikely Allies: Monotheism and the Rise of Natural Science.'