

# Christianity and science: A vital 21<sup>st</sup> century conversation

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## Introductory comments

- Tonight I will talk for about 30 minutes to provoke vigorous discussion.
- I am primarily addressing Christians although I know there may be others in the audience who do not subscribe to Christian faith. I look forward to their comments.

So what is my thesis?

My argument tonight is that in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Christians find themselves in a profoundly important cultural space.

The issue concerns the credibility of Christian truth in a world dominated by science and technology. Let me state the case: leaving aside theological truths of election, and just speaking about the human side of the question, I think that,

**... apart from the sins of the flesh, the lack of an integration between science and faith, in the minds of believers and unbelievers, is the most destructive force working against belief and against confident faith and witness...**

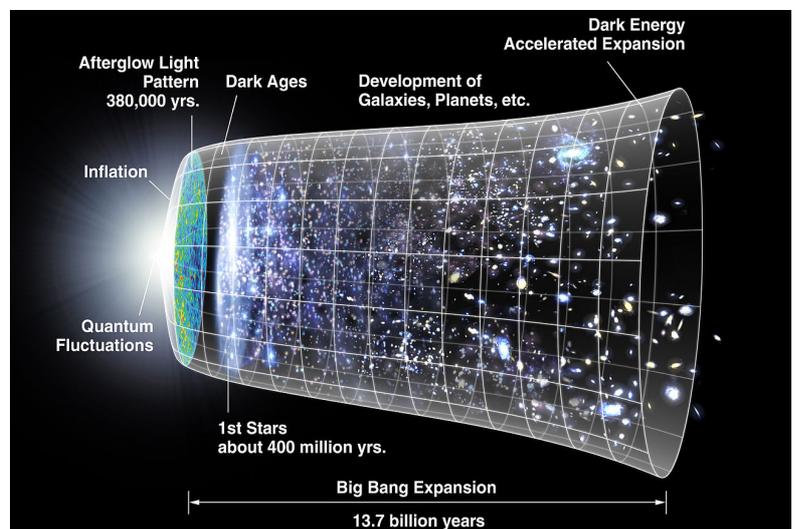
It's good that Christians teach and preach the Bible faithfully (my first love) but while the Bible contains all things necessary for salvation it doesn't give people the tools to deal with the cultural forces that want to relegate Christian faith to fundamentalist, unscientific nonsense. And it doesn't give people the tools to talk with non-believers for whom science is the model of truth and knowledge.

But first let's set the picture...

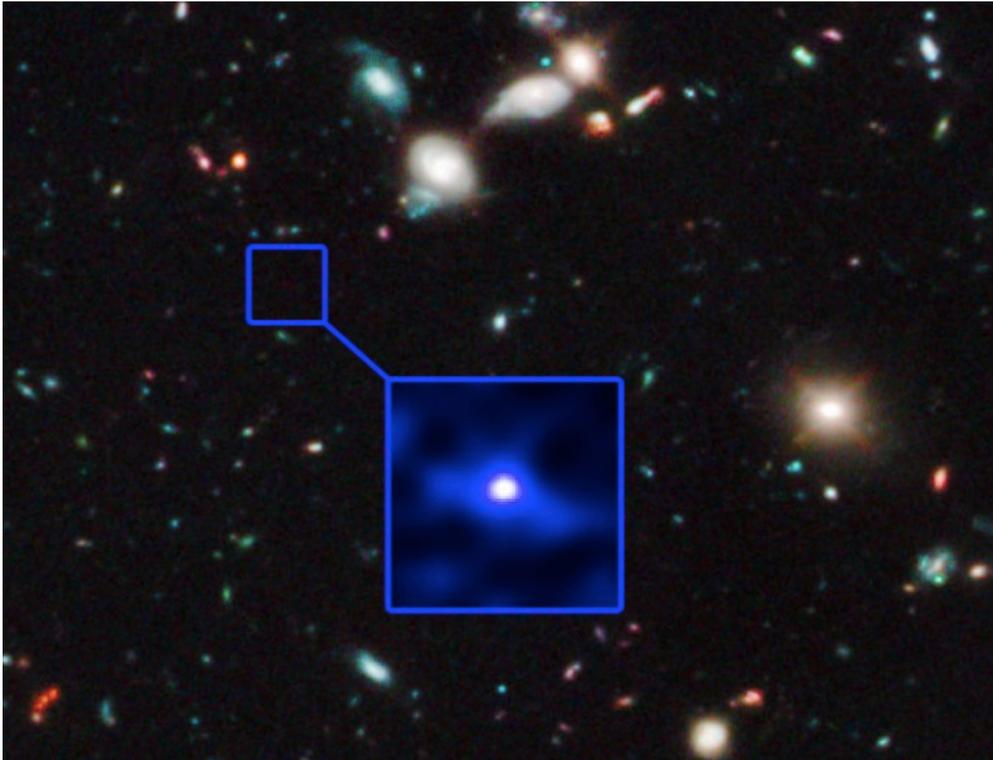
## The amazing universe

We live in an amazing universe: It is incomprehensibly vast and it is incomprehensibly old.

- 100s of billions of stars in our galaxy . . . 100s of billions of galaxies . . .
- 14b years old (modern humans 200k = 1/70,000<sup>th</sup> 1mm in 70m)



Here is UDFj-39546284, possibly the oldest observed galaxy: 480my after the big bang at the end of the ‘dark ages’.



It’s an extraordinary universe. And it is hospitable to the amazing diversity of life we find on this tiny planet we call home.

And the most incomprehensible thing of all, according to Albert Einstein, is that we can comprehend this vast, old, life-allowing universe.

And do you know how scientists go about comprehending our universe? They use the most complex instrument known to exist; the ultra compact human brain:

- with its 100b neurons
- each one connected to a 1000 or so others
- and each one of those billions and billions of neurons firing off electrical signals at up to 200 times per second

In the words of the Psalmist, the heavens—the universe—declares the glory of God and leads us to worship.

**The heavens declare the glory of God;  
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.  
Day after day they pour forth speech;  
night after night they reveal knowledge.  
They have no speech, they use no words;  
no sound is heard from them.  
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,  
their words to the ends of the world.**

Here endeth the reading.

Not only do we live in a vast, old universe; we also live in a moral universe. Every human culture has had its norms about right behaviour, believing some things to be right and some wrong. But more on that in a moment . . .



The rise of natural science in the Western world in the last few hundred years has opened our eyes to understanding the universe in a way that has led to unprecedented power over nature. But modern science has also led to a powerful realignment of cultural norms about what we call knowledge; knowledge isn't what it used to be.



While theology was once known as the queen of the sciences, things have changed. Natural science—physics, chemistry, biology—now holds pride of place as the paradigm of sure knowledge. Neil Tyson, astrophysicist and science populariser, says “**Science is true, whether or not you believe in it,**” but the unspoken subtext is that religion, presumably, is true only in a ‘true for me’ sense.

My belief is that this sort of thinking leaves Christians in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century in an increasingly precarious but critical relationship with secular culture. And if I am right, then it is a message worth repeating and one that Christians ought to take to heart.

I’m talking about the credibility of Christian truth in a world dominated by science and technology; it seems to me that in an increasingly global and secular scientific culture the cutting edge of Christian engagement is the conversation between science and Christian faith. In fact, I would go so far as to say, that humanly speaking, the progress or decline of Christian faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> century depends in large part on its dialogue with science.

For Christians, the current public cultural skirmishes often seem to be about the best expressions of human sexuality or religious education in schools. On such questions, some Christians claim that we must hold on to historical positions, while others say that we must allow the culture to challenge those positions and we should move forward. Other Christians are more concerned with bringing Christian resources to bear on discussion of global

warming and the environment or the—let me say inexcusable—attitude of our government to asylum seekers.

But there is an underlying foundation on which any distinctively Christian public input into such issues depends and which is far more important in the long term; it is the prior question of whether the call of Christ can even be taken seriously in a scientific age.

Obviously this is a matter of importance to Christians; presumably they *do* want their faith to be taken seriously. And it is mostly from the Christian perspective that I am addressing my comments today.

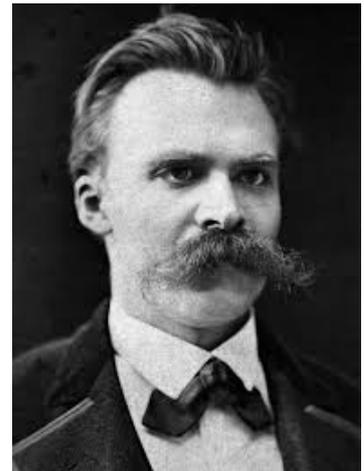
### **A secular perspective: the loss of meaning**

But from a secular perspective, a perspective that doesn't take orthodox Christianity seriously except in a historical sense, I suggest there is also a worry. That worry is an old one, well elaborated by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche over 100 years ago, but one derided by many atheists, which is I suppose to be expected. It is the worry that by doing away with God, we might be doing away with what makes us most human.

**Moral judgment, Nietzsche said, has this in common with religious judgment, that it believes realities which do not exist.**

So let me speak to an imaginary secular audience for a moment.

If we do away with any sort of transcendent reality beyond the energy and matter in motion that science is so good at dealing with; if morality and meaning amount to nothing more than human constructions, ultimately explicable by genetics, evolutionary biology, psychology—and in the end they all boil down to physics don't they? If there is no ultimate sense to be made of this flowering of humanity on earth then the human project would seem to be fatally undermined.



We *do* believe in meaning and morality. Even if we can't articulate it, and despite what we might say in the philosophy tutorial when we debate the existence of the table or other minds or moral norms.

When pressed we do not say 'murder is wrong' simply because our genes condition us to do so or our culture decrees it to be wrong. We say our culture decrees murder to be wrong because it *is* wrong in some sense beyond genetic conditioning or cultural decrees; in

some ultimate or absolute sense it is wrong to needlessly snuff out the life of another human being.

With the advance of science, particularly evolutionary understandings and the new field of brain imaging, we are gaining more insights into possible connections between evolution, genes, brains and morality.

But there is a limit. It's one thing to explain moral behaviour or the moral sense; yes a plausible evolutionary story can be told. We may arrive at the day when scientifically speaking we can explain how Jack and Jill have been culturally and genetically conditioned to believe that going up the hill to torture the innocent is wrong. But the question still remains: are Jack and Jill right? Is it *in fact* wrong to torture the innocent, in any sense beyond the fact that some or even most people have a moral sense of its wrongness? These are philosophical or metaphysical or religious questions and not questions science will ever be able to answer.

This discussion about morality is of course laughed at by many atheists, who agree with Nietzsche, although it is notoriously difficult to be a consistent moral relativist. I suggest that this is a reason for secularists not to be too quick in ridding us of religion. The implications of such a view are well summed up by CS Lewis in his short but dense book called *The Abolition of Man*, which I highly recommend. Lewis makes it clear that ridding ourselves of morality as traditionally understood, leaves cultural norms in the hands of the powerful who will use their power in their own interests, because after all they no longer believe in any ultimate obligation to look after the interests of others.

## **The Christian perspective**

But Christians do not believe that morality boils down to what a culture defines it as, and, as I said, I want to focus more on the Christian perspective today. So why is the science-faith discussion important from a Christian point of view?

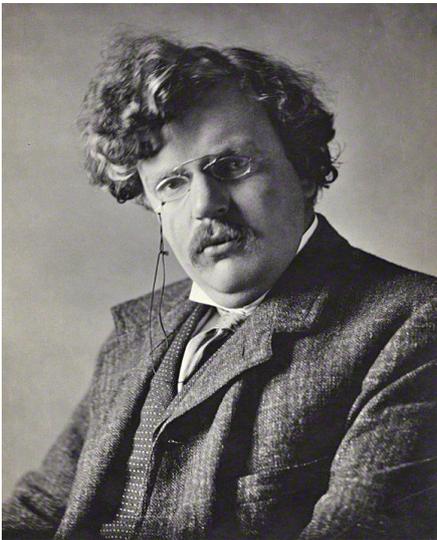
In every generation cultural and intellectual realignment serves to redefine the 'plausibility structure', which determines the limits of what is credible, of what is believable, of what is even possibly true. And the task of Christian apologetics—the defence of the faith—is to enter that cultural fray and to argue the case that the Christian faith is a credible worldview.

No amount of specifically Christian input into discussions about marriage or asylum seekers or the stewardship of creation is relevant if Christianity's claim to truth is written off as hocus-pocus. And if science is the norm of truth, then the credibility of the faith depends

on the way people view its relationship with science; if people are convinced that there is a fundamental conflict between science and faith, there are no prizes for guessing which side most will vote on.

So while Christians might be confident that “the gates of hell will not prevail” against the Church, that is no guarantee of a continuing cultural majority. Nor is it a theological excuse for retreat from the marketplace of ideas.

Yes, the faith will endure. But “loving God with all your mind” and being prepared to “give an account for the hope that is in you,” amount to a biblical call on Christians to engage winsomely but vigorously with the powerful voices that would sideline faith without taking it seriously.



In G. K. Chesterton’s famous quip, **Christianity “has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.”** And despite the fact that philosophers of religion and many serious thinking atheists still take Christianity seriously, public perceptions are overwhelmingly driven by political correctness on the one hand (so faith is left untried). And, on the other hand, perceptions about the credibility of Christianity are conditioned by what the philosophers call *confirmation bias*, which, in short, means that faith is found difficult because it challenges one’s deeply held views rather than confirming them. So once again, faith is left untried.

And for those who would rather leave faith untried, it is overwhelmingly to science that they turn for solace and confident unbelief. So let me put it starkly: in sociological and intellectual terms the science/faith conversation is the cutting edge of Christianity surviving in the Western world; it’s the front of advance or retreat, of credible Christianity.

## **The gifts of science and of faith**

Christians involved in science have no doubts that both science and Christianity are gifts of grace, either of which we disrespect to our peril. But that is not the general view in the street and nor do all Christians share it. So I think Christians need to be on the offensive.

Christians ought to proclaim loudly that **the gifts of science are numerous, breathtaking and worthy of deep gratitude.** As a means of discovering truth about the natural world, science is outstanding, offering extraordinary insight into the mechanisms of

the universe and of life itself. Scientific knowledge offers a power that has led to rapidly increasing health and wealth for all, including the poorest of the global population. And despite continued inequity, as well as the abuse of the power of science to commit appalling atrocities, such blights cannot be blamed on the scientific enterprise. Why? Because, as I have already suggested,

**No amount of science can provide answers to questions of meaning or morality. Science cannot tell us when its products are well spent and when not.**

**Science cannot tell us if the means of ending life painlessly should be used; science cannot tell us whether the next generation of military weapons is for good or ill; science cannot tell us whether we ought to spend billions on space exploration or on sustainable agriculture.**

**Science simply cannot answer these questions.**

Why? Because these are questions outside the ambit of science.

The gifts of Christianity too, even at a purely secular level, are also manifest. Human rights entrenched worldwide, convictions about charity, compassion, justice, the social welfare net, equality—all have roots and motivations deep within the Christian faith. But the Christian worldview—so foundational to a Western culture of human dignity and corresponding rights—is being dismantled piece by piece. While vestiges remain, such as the equality of all human beings or “doing unto others,” they are now adrift from their roots, which lie in the conviction that humans are made in the image of God.

## **Culture and credibility**

With globalisation and the spread of techno-scientific thinking and practices, most obviously exemplified in the world wide web of instant interconnectedness, a secular scientific worldview is advancing to all corners of the earth. This view, most aggressively championed by the so-called new atheists, challenges all non-scientific thinking in its advance.

This is not to say that people are no longer ‘spiritual’; but, in the words of Os Guinness, Christianity is often seen as privately engaging but publically irrelevant. Or, in Bishop Lesslie Newbigin’s terms, Christianity is not seen as public truth.

## **Science is not *scientism***

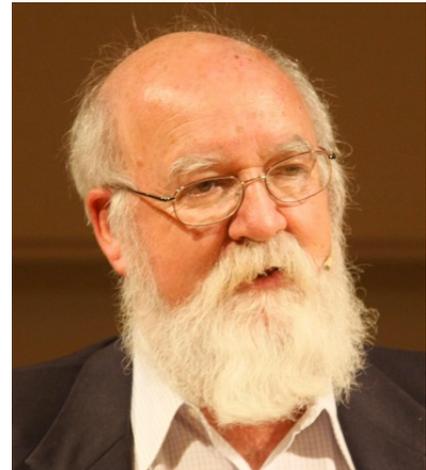
Today the right to be heard depends partly on getting along with mainstream science. And, in a sense, that is as it should be. But ‘mainstream science’ is not the same as *scientism*,

the ideology that says that science has (or will have) all the answers. Scientism, which goes well beyond healthy science, is becoming the cultural default position.

Here it is exemplified by Daniel Dennett, philosopher and one of the media personalities of popular atheism: **“when it come to facts, science is the only game in town.”**

Or Jerry Coyne a biologist and another popular atheist: **“The view that all sciences are in principle reducible to the laws of physics must be true unless you’re religious.”**

So the comprehensive Christian worldview, which has for centuries included science as an essential element, is increasingly dominated in the public mind by a view that science—seen as the epitome of sure knowledge—offers the only access to truth.



Daniel Dennett

### Three options for Christians

In the face of this changing balance of cultural forces, and views about what is credible and what should be relegated to in-credibility, I suggest that **there are three options open to Christians.**

The first option is accommodationist in the extreme.

It is to **allow secular cultural norms to dictate the nature and boundaries of truth.** This path would accept that science and faith are worlds apart and that faith makes no universal truth claims. This is to capitulate; it involves denying that Christian faith is true in any serious sense. It involves tacitly accepting the New Atheist line that faith in Jesus Christ is akin to believing in the tooth fairy or Father Christmas. It also involves ignoring the biblical record including the words of Paul that if Christ was not raised bodily from the dead then the Christian’s faith is in vain.

The second option is to beat the **retreat to the Christian ghetto**, boldly asserting a naïve biblical literalism and seeing the scientific enterprise through conspiracy-theory lenses or more likely simply **ignoring much of science while enjoying its fruits.** This is a way backward that not only casts aspersions at the integrity of scientists but also at the third person of the Trinity; it uses a hermeneutic of suspicion to doubt the integrity of millions of Christian scientists and thinkers, while not applying that same suspicion to its own conclusions.

But there is another option: a way that has been the orthodox manner of engagement since the beginning of the Christian era. Following the example of the Galilean teacher, Paul the apostle debated with the public world of his time on the Areopagus in Athens—also known as Mars’ Hill. And for two thousand years since, thoughtful Christians have proclaimed that the God of the Bible is revealed both within that book and also through the achievements of the arts and sciences.

This third way is to follow the path trodden by the great Christian scientists and thinkers of history and to thoroughly **affirm that all truth is God’s truth. To affirm the two books of God—the book of his Word and the book of his works.** In every generation it needs to be proclaimed again from pulpits and peer reviewed articles: there is no conflict between science and faithful Christian belief!

### **The conflict thesis is bunkum**

The past crowd of witnesses who saw no conflict includes hundreds of the great names of Western history. (Mind you I don’t vouch for the theology of them all!)



To name only a few who were prominent scientists: Roger and Francis Bacon (linked across three centuries by their names and by laying foundations for the scientific method), William of Ockham (remember Ockham’s razor?), Jean Buridan (presaging inertia), Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Descartes, Pascal (have you heard of his triangle?), Boyle (of gas law fame), Linnaeus (natural taxonomy), Bernoulli (his law keeps planes in the air),

Lavoisier (we owe chemistry to him), Faraday (who invented the electric motor), Maxwell (electromagnetic fields), William Bragg, Max Planck, Werner Heisenberg (creator of quantum mechanics)—the last three also being Nobel laureates.

And, in case you are prone to the prejudice that thinks of past thinkers as semi-incompetent and ignorant in the light of present knowledge, there is no question that numerous outstanding living scientists and other respected thought leaders are also Christians:

John Houghton (top left), who was co-chair of the scientific assessment of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change; Francis Collins (bottom right) who led the human genome project and is now head of the US government National Institutes of Health. And here in Australia people like Graeme Clark (bottom left) of bionic ear fame.



Or, if you are keen to include economics as a science, Glenn Stevens (top right) the head of the Reserve Bank. And we might also mention Ian Harper, also an economist, and currently chairing the 'Harper Review' the government's top level review into competition law and policy in Australia. Stevens plays guitar in his Baptist church I believe, and Harper regular leads worship and prayers at St Jude's church in Melbourne. Many of these people are household names, and they are examples of thousands of people for whom Christian faith and serious engagement with so-called 'secular' thinking poses no conflict.

Of course the point is not that that any list of Christians who are also people of public stature proves that Christianity is true; what it proves is that it is possible for publicly respected leaders who are rigorous thinkers to be committed to the truth of Jesus Christ.

At this point there is a temptation to make a comment about whether certain politicians, also known to be Christians, fall into the serious Christian thinking category, or whether

they have simply succumbed to the accommodationist option. But I will resist the temptation to comment!

Philosophers of religion too are aware that Christian faith makes serious truth claims, and while they may personally be atheists they often recognise that there is no necessary conflict between science and faith. Atheist philosopher, Jim Stone, says that believers are often excellent philosophers and respected by their atheist colleagues. But he is frustrated with fundamentalist atheism, which has no conception of its own blinkered approach.

He says, **“the people I don't like are the New Atheists, because they don't seem to realize that the [Christian philosophers] with whom I must contend even exist.”**

Other prominent thinkers too are frustrated by fundamentalist atheism. The un-reasonable and vitriolic attitude of books like Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, prompted atheist philosopher of science, **Michael Ruse, to say, “*The God Delusion* makes me embarrassed to be an atheist.”<sup>1</sup>**



Michael Ruse

### Into the fray

The time for simplistic belief and unbelief is over. Fundamentalists of both faith and non-faith must give up their ground to views that keep science in its rightful place as servant of a broader worldview—historically, Christianity in its fullness—which offers the framework out of which arose both modern science and a global commitment to equality, and human rights, and cries for justice for the poor and marginalised.

The need is for Christian thinkers, and especially those who are involved in science and technology, to take up the gauntlet laid down by radical secularists and to speak up and to speak loudly about their own experience of integrating their faith with the best that science has to offer. Christian scientists must come out of the shadows. Their science is important but the future of a culture deeply rooted in human dignity and meaningful existence depends also on knowing there is more to truth than what science can offer.

And, as Christian thinkers speak up, others will not have to live with that uneasy secret feeling that faith is actually the antithesis of serious thinking and good science.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted on the cover of *The Dawkins Delusion* by Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, SPCK, 2007.

The urgent need, for the sake of the church and for the sake of the world which it loves, is for a public and honest conversation about the limits of science and the importance of faith. And, yes, too, that conversation needs to be couched in humility, which recognises the limits of religious belief as well as the existential problems that remain, despite robust belief in the God who will make all things new.

In short, the need is to proclaim in every pulpit and public space, in every classroom and lecture theatre, that the conflict is over—in fact it never was a credible view—and that, humanly speaking, the survival of humane civilisation depends on a healthy relationship between science and faith.

And on that provocative note I will end.