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PART 1

GOD,  
SCIENCE,  
AND  
PHILOSOPHY

# HAS SCIENCE DISPROVED GOD?

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*Barry L. Whitney*

The vast majority of human beings have always believed in God. It is a testimony to the depth of this belief that it has persisted despite a new and aggressive challenge, one which has become increasingly prevalent in contemporary society. This challenge presents itself as science, but it is in fact a perversion of modern science more properly called “scientism.”

By “scientism,” I refer to the ideology based on an anti-religious bias which presumes, without proof, that human rationality and the empirical method of science are the sole means for determining what is true about reality. Ironically, there is no scientific proof for this assumption. Scientism fails to consider seriously whether there are other means for discovering truth, ignoring what theologians have argued for centuries and religious believers intuitively know: that besides empirical evidence (and rationality based largely on reflection on the empirical evidence), truth is revealed by God to our inner experience and accepted in faith. Human rationality and empirical verification, in themselves, are not the means for determining God’s existence since, of course, God is not a physical object that can be observed and studied by science, or fully understood by human reason. In focusing solely on such rational empiricism, scientism has overreached the proper limits of science and misunderstood the nature of religious belief.

Despite the fact that scientism has an alarming number of adherents in the scientific and philosophical communities, it has not prevailed. Religious belief has withstood scientism's aggressive challenge not only by a convincing theological defense of belief in God, but by the contemporary revival of spirituality, especially its focus on seeking God's presence inwardly. This revival is a direct reaction to the meaninglessness and despair brought into society by decades of skeptical, anti-religious scientism.

It is important to note that science, unlike scientism, should not be a threat to religious belief. Science, to be sure, advocates a "naturalistic" rather than a "supernaturalistic" focus, and an empirical verification method for determining truths about the physical world and the universe. Yet the proper mandate of science is restricted to the investigation of the natural (physical, empirical) dimension of reality. It is this restriction that scientism has violated, replacing proper science with an illicit ideology that not only seeks to explain all things naturalistically, but assumes — without proof — that the spiritual realm is irrelevant, indeed non-existent. This unproven assumption is based on the mistaken belief that nothing exists unless it can be verified by the empirical scientific method. Such a belief is an invalid reductionism that reduces the explanation for all of reality to physicality. This "physicalism" overextends the method and capabilities of science.

Had all scientists honored the proper mandate of science, there would have been far less antagonism between science and religion, with each focusing on its respective field of study and contributing toward the production of an integrated view of reality that takes into consideration both physical and spiritual aspects.

Scientism's exclusive emphasis on human rationality and empirical verification is not the proper means by which to evaluate religious beliefs. There is, then, no justifiable reason to accept scientism's skeptical dismissal of religious beliefs as myth and superstition. Nor is there any good reason to accept scientism's claim that religious beliefs are irrational, meaningless, and nonsensical. Such claims are themselves nonsense. Yet incredibly, many scientists and philosophers misunderstand this as they continue to engage in a scientism which ignores the fact that proper science is limited to a study of the physical world and that, as such, it has no competence to express negative opinions about the spiritual realm in the guise of scientific conclusions.

## OVERLOOKING IMPORTANT EVIDENCE

We may grant that God's existence cannot be verified as a physical object by the empirical method of science. God is a spiritual reality, not a physical object of scientific study. Yet scientism (and science) have overlooked important evidence for religious beliefs. There is not only an abundance of evidence for God, but much of this evidence is *indirectly* derived from rational reflection on the empirical data. The traditional arguments for God's existence — the so-called “theistic proofs” — are prime examples. There is also more *direct* evidence for God in the inner experience of His revealed presence.

Theology, then, unlike science or scientism, accepts as sources of truth not only physical, scientifically verifiable evidence and the reasoning abilities of human beings, but also the spiritual truths revealed by God. These two sources are referred to, respectively, as “natural” and “revealed” theology (or as “general” and “specific revelation”). Natural theology refers to our natural or rational abilities to affirm God's existence by reason and empirical evidence. Revealed theology focuses on the more specific truths given by God in inner religious experience, and especially those experiences recorded in the Scriptures. While much about God can be known by general revelation, the evidence is inconclusive in itself; some things are revealed only in the certitudes of special revelation, truths which are accepted by believers in faith. From the perspective of faith, moreover, the evidence for God in general revelation is confirmed.

Science (unlike scientism) has understood the limitation of its method and the limits of human rationality. It is not, then, the empirical method of science but the inappropriate and overextended use of this method by scientism which has caused the antagonism between religion and science. Scientism has misunderstood the limits of human reason and sense experience. It is difficult not to infer that the basic motivation of scientism is not so much the seeking of the full truth about reality, but the promotion of an anti-religious bias which ignores and defames the spiritual dimension. The presumptuous claim that human rationality and the empirical method of science are not just *one* means for discovering truth but the *sole* means is an ideological, philosophical opinion which, in presenting itself as science, results in a pseudo (false) science.

Not all scientists have succumbed to this temptation to overextend the proper limits of science. Many have engaged in successful

careers while maintaining belief in God. For example, in two recent books, *In Six Days* (2001) and *On the Seventh Day* (2002), more than 80 scientists were willing to have their testimonies and arguments for religious beliefs published.<sup>1</sup> They did so in response to skeptical ridicule by popular and influential scientists such as Stephen Jay Gould and Ernst Mayr who contend that no respectable scientist would believe in such things as the biblical account of creation by God. Examples of this skeptical, anti-religious scientism are unfortunately far too prevalent.

Philosopher A.J. Ayer, for example, a popular figure in philosophy classrooms, claimed that unless religious belief in God can be verified by the empirical method, we ought to reject such belief as nonsense. Ayer was aware that God's existence can neither be proved nor disproved by the empirical method, but his conclusion was not a respectful agnosticism that admits there is insufficient evidence to decide the question. Rather, he boasted that the empirical method demolishes the truth claims of religious experience on the grounds that God cannot be verified as the referent (source) of such experience. Ayer's view reveals not only the naivety of his scientism, but an anti-religious bias which displays an unconscionable lack of attention to longstanding theological argumentation for the validity of religious experience and beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

Carl Sagan was no less obvious in demonstrating his skeptical, anti-religious bias. His popular *Cosmos* book and TV series established him as a modern prophet of scientism. One of Sagan's infamous statements, "The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be,"<sup>3</sup> has become a cult-like mantra of scientism. This statement, of course, is not a scientific conclusion, but merely Sagan's skeptical opinion. A similar view is assumed, without proof, by too many scientists and philosophers, including popular figures such as Isaac Asimov, Richard Dawkins, W.O. Wilson, Stephen Jay Gould, Peter Atkins, Michael Martin, Paul Kurtz, Kai Nielsen, Anthony Flew, Francis Crick, and Michael Newdow. The *Humanist Manifestos* (1933, 1973, 2000) also advocate a "secular humanistic" ideology that rejects all religious beliefs as lacking the rationality of empirical verification. Again and again, in apparent ignorance (or defiance) of the limits of both the empirical test and human rationality, scientism extols these skills as the all-encompassing criteria for truth. Such a claim is nothing more than an ideological opinion, driven by skeptical bias.

## I WON'T BELIEVE IT UNLESS I CAN SEE IT . . .

Sagan presumes scientism in his infamous challenge that God should demonstrate his existence by displaying physical evidence which can be verified by science — for example, a burning cross in the sky. Such challenges, repeated by countless skeptics, reveal a disconcerting lack of awareness of the absurdity being proposed. They are little more than emotionalism which misrepresents the proper limits of science and the nature of God. God, of course, cannot be coerced or tempted by such challenges; nor is God a physical object for scientific study, nor comprehensible by the finite capacity of human reason.

Consider one further example, the pitiful taunting of American Christians by the first Russian cosmonaut. He sarcastically announced that he had not “seen” God in outer space. His assumption — that since God is a physical object His existence must be verifiable by the scientific method — is sadly misinformed about the nature of God and the proper limits of empirical scientific proof. Further examples abound. It is staggering how prideful the presumption of scientism is in assigning to finite human minds the final authority for adjudicating all truths about reality.<sup>4</sup>

In sum, it is a sad irony that the test which supposedly determines all truths about reality, the verification test, is itself unverifiable. What confidence should reasonable people have in a test which, when applied to itself, condemns itself as meaningless? The empirical test is a naive, circular argument which engages in an illicit “question-begging fallacy” by assuming what needs to be proven. Scientism answers the question “How is truth about reality known?” not on the basis of a conclusion from convincing proof, but by simply assuming that “truth is established only by the empirical test.” Nothing could be further from the truth.

The attitude of scientism, its “I won’t believe anything unless I can see it” dogma, is hardly a reliable guide to truth. As we all know, there is far more to life than meets the eye, more than can be verified by the senses or understood by human rationality. Indeed, it would be impossible to live our lives according to such means, since most of what we believe to be true is not empirically verifiable. We live and act in faith, not on the basis of conclusive, rationally verifiable proof, for most of what we do and believe. There are, in fact, a significant number of important beliefs which we accept intuitively as truths