There are two statements I’ve heard repeatedly in recent months:

‘Science and reason lead you to Atheism’ and

‘Atheism is a different thing to religion’.

Yesterday I read in the paper that the famous Atheist Richard Dawkins has set up the modestly-titled ‘Richard Dawkins Foundation for Science and Reason’. I’m sorely tempted to set up the ‘Duncan Moore foundation for brilliance and humility’. In the eyes of popular culture, these two statements are coming to be seen as self-evidently true. I offer a different perspective.

To believe that ‘science and reason lead you to Atheism’ is to believe, by implication, that faith in Jesus is unscientific and irrational. There are clear reasons why we’ve come to this point. Many, particularly in North America, have insisted on a literal view of the opening chapters of Genesis. This ‘Creationist’ view clearly comes into direct conflict with contemporary scientific thought. Historically the institution of the Roman Catholic church has expressed strong opposition to scientific innovation. This set 16th century Roman Catholicism on a collision course with science. Finally, contemporary culture in the United States has tended to associate faith in Jesus with a Republican political agenda. That in turn has set up controversies over issues such as climate change.

All this helps to explain why the current tensions exist. Each of the examples cited above could be explored in considerable depth. For this article it will suffice to say that faith in Jesus does not require one to believe that the world was created in a literal seven days, to identify with 16th Century Roman Catholicism or to be a Republican. In other words, the most pressing tensions between faith and science are actually tensions between particular cultural interpretations of religion and science, not with faith in Jesus itself.

WORLDVIEW, SCIENCE AND NATURALISM

I suggest it’s both unscientific and irrational to believe that science and reason defaults to Atheism. We’ll start with the statement that “Atheism is a different thing to religion”. Atheism is a general view of ultimate reality which claims that there’s no god. In light of that, meaning and morality become relative rather than absolute concepts which are socially defined. As such, Atheism is a worldview, an overall perspective from which to see and interpret the world. In this sense Atheism is very much the same sort of thing as Theism (the belief in a god or gods). Buddhism would (normally) be a subset of Atheism just as Judaism would be a subset of Theism. Atheism and Theism are general categories of worldview, Buddhism and Judaism are more fully defined worldviews. They all offer a system for understanding reality. Far from Atheism being in a different category from religion, both Atheism and Theism are (very different) worldviews.
To see how science and reason have come to be associated with Atheism in popular culture we must first be careful to define what we mean by science. The Cassell Concise Dictionary defines science as: ‘systematized knowledge about the physical world, developed by observation and experiment.’ From this it should be clear that science has a very clearly defined scope. It’s remit is the physical world, it’s method is observation and experiment. Science only deals with constant, repeatable, physical phenomena and as such, is of very limited use in validating ultimate reality, and particularly the existence or non-existence of God. It operates within a clearly defined and limited scope which excludes spiritual questions.

The stepping stone between Science and Atheism is a worldview called Naturalism. The Cassell Concise Dictionary defines Naturalism as ‘a philosophical or theological system that explains the universe as being produced and governed entirely by physical laws.’ In other words, Naturalism claims that ultimate reality can be described scientifically. This is confusing because at first glance it appears to be the ultimate scientific worldview, but a moment’s reflection shows the fatal flaw in this. Firstly we need to be clear that Naturalism isn’t a scientific theory but a philosophical worldview. Secondly, we need to ask whether the disciple of science can be brought to bear to validate or invalidate Naturalism. Clearly, it cannot. For science to validate Naturalism, it would need to show that nothing existed beyond the scope of science. But science cannot deal with anything beyond its own defined scope. It would be unscientific and unreasonable to seek to validate Naturalism using science.

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<tr>
<th>SCIENCE</th>
<th>NATURALISM</th>
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<td>A discipline for studying the physical world</td>
<td>A philosophy claiming that science explains everything</td>
<td>The belief that there is no god or gods</td>
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The false move in claiming that ‘Science and reason lead you to Atheism’ is to fail to distinguish between science as a discipline for investigating the physical world and Naturalism as a philosophy about ultimate reality. As we move from Science to Naturalism we move from science to philosophy, and beyond the limiting assumptions which make scientific investigation possible.

VALIDATING WORLDVIEWS

If science as a discipline is very limited in its ability to adjudicate between worldviews, we must consider how we can test the validity of different truth claims about ultimate reality. Whichever worldview we embrace will be an act of faith (by faith I mean the decision to trust that the worldview we adopt corresponds to reality as it really is). The question is not whether or not we exercise faith. The question is whether that act of trust will be reasonable or blind. I would propose the following as possible tests to examine the credibility of a worldview:

For any worldview we can consider its ability to make sense of reality as we experience it, and it’s impact on it’s adherents (remembering that our worldview will always be coloured by the culture in which we live and were raised). For a worldview with a clear founder we can examine the credibility of that founder. For a worldview which cites specific texts we can use the disciplines of literature to investigate the meaning, consistency and reliability of those texts. For a worldview claiming a basis in historical events we can use the disciplines of history to see if claimed events will stand up to historical investigation. In this way we can weigh the evidence thoughtfully in order to create a context for reasonable faith in whichever worldview we judge to be most credible.

Whatever our worldview we cannot escape the necessity to exercise faith. The challenge is to place our faith in beliefs that correspond to reality as it really is. This in turn requires careful thought rather than simply following the current trends and dogmas of popular culture.