

The Christian Roots of Science

These notes include a summary of some of the material in ch. 3 of *Evolution, Creation and Science* which can be freely downloaded from barnabas.digital. A PowerPoint file is available to assist in giving the lesson.

For millennia, science progressed very slowly; then suddenly, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it moved forward at great speed. Many historians argue that the Christian worldview played a major role in this change.

What is science?

The study of the natural world so as to understand how it works. The ‘scientific method’ involves making observations, putting forward hypotheses to explain them and then testing these hypotheses, often by conducting experiments. This process can lead to the discovery of scientific laws.

There is a difference between science and technology and it is possible to develop technology without using the scientific method. For example, one might develop better mixes of concrete by trial and error, but never understand why some work better than others. Much of the technology we have today was only made possible through scientific work.

Science advanced rapidly when, together, a significant number of people started to apply the scientific method. This began in the sixteenth century in Western Europe. Although prior to then, a few people thought in a scientific way, this only became ‘mainstream’ a few hundred years ago.

What prompted the scientific revolution?

Many historians have concluded that modern science began when people started to believe certain things about the world. Particularly it was necessary to view it as *orderly* and governed by natural *laws*. This ‘worldview’ grew out of Christian theology which holds that there is only one God who is

- (1) the creator of an orderly world: Genesis 1:2 and 1:14; Job 38:4–6; Isaiah 40:26; Jeremiah 33:25.
- (2) a lawgiver in both the moral and physical realms: Exodus 20:3–17; Proverbs 8:29; Job 28:26
- (3) unchanging: Malachi 3:6; James 1:17
- (4) faithful and dependable: Psalm 119:90–91; 1 Corinthians 1:9; Numbers 23:19; 2 Timothy 2:11–13
- (5) rational: Isaiah 1:18; Matthew 22:37

Hence, lightning does not flash across the sky because the gods are fighting one another, and calm weather is not explained by their being at peace. Rather such things are explained by nature obeying natural laws. Since there is only one God, it would be expected that there would be only one set of laws, and these would apply in all parts of the world. Since God is rational, these laws would be expected to be comprehensible to the human mind, especially as we have been made in His image (Genesis 1:27). Since God is immutable, we can be sure that these laws will remain the same from one day to the next.

Rejection of ancient Greek philosophy

Progress in science also required people to reject certain beliefs handed down by ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. These had dominated the thinking of philosophers for centuries and been a strong impediment to the development of science. Aristotle, for example, taught that objects have souls and move due to powers within them. Hence stones were thought to fall to the ground because they had a desire to reach the centre of the earth. Stars and planets were said to move around the earth in circular orbits because they were divine, and this was their preferred motion. Medieval philosophers built on these principles and used them to explain other natural phenomena. Iron was thought to be attracted to a magnet because their souls were in sympathy; the oceans were drawn

towards the moon because there was a friendship between them, thus causing the tides; ‘suction pumps’ were thought to work because nature had an antipathy towards a vacuum. According to the Bible, however, only people and animals have souls (Hebrew: *nephesh chayyah*; Genesis 1:20, 24; Genesis 2:7). Hence ‘soulish’ explanations were rejected in favour of externally imposed laws.

Another aspect of Greek philosophy that had to fall was the belief in ‘necessity’—that nature necessarily had to be of a certain form and necessarily had to behave in certain ways because ‘reason’ and ‘logic’ dictated this. For example, Plato ‘deduced’ that, being divine, planets *must* move around the earth in perfect circles, as this is most befitting of the gods. (In fact, planets move in elliptical orbits, and around the sun not the earth!) According to Aristotle, heavier objects *must* fall to the ground faster than lighter ones as this is ‘logical’. (In fact, they fall at the same rate!) Such principles were said to be eternal and unchangeable, binding even upon the gods. To these Greek philosophers, making observations to confirm these ‘facts’ was unnecessary, as ‘reason’ and ‘logic’ were sufficient to establish that they were true. Moreover, such ‘reasoning’ was considered a more reliable way of ‘knowing’ than making fallible observations.

According to the Bible, however, the world is not eternal but created, and the Creator, being omnipotent, operated under no constraints and could create as He pleased (Job 42:1–2; Psalm 135:6; Matthew 19:26). Moreover, due to the Fall of man (Genesis ch. 3), the human mind had become fallible, and we no longer had the ability to understand the natural world simply through processes of reason. Consequently, it was concluded that scientific knowledge could only be gained by observation and experiment, a realisation that led to the ‘scientific method’. Being a creation, the natural world was understood to have been designed, and was therefore analogous to a mechanism which could be understood. This was, again, in contrast to the Greek view which held that the world was divine, and analogous to a living organism which had a mind of its own. In Greek thinking the study of nature would be displeasing to the gods as it would amount to interference with them and their realm. In contrast, the Bible teaches that nature is not divine. Moreover, God had given Adam dominion over it (Genesis 1:28) and he therefore had a right to investigate it, and this would bring glory to its creator.

Following this lesson, it is recommended a lesson be given on *Einstein’s Heroes* and then *Galileo, Science and the Church*. Resources for these can be freely downloaded from barnabas.digital.



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