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*Isn't Atheism Based on Scientific Fact
Whereas Christianity is Based on "Faith"?*

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I once led a dialogue at the University of California–Berkeley with two skeptical students about the existence of God. As the discussion progressed, one of them conveyed my challenge in rather stark terms: “You’re the one maintaining extraordinary supernatural claims. We believe in science. As far as I’m concerned, the entire burden of proof is on your shoulders.”

Murmurs of ascent from the audience. It was clear many agreed with him. Indeed, plenty of educated people hold this same view and are only too happy to consign Christians to a kind of permanent hot seat. The word science itself carries an oracular power in our cultural moment. Think of the effect of a phrase like “science says.” In many ways, this makes sense. At a time when the world feels increasingly chaotic, the hard sciences seem to offer a level of order, stability, and authority that’s all too rare. Indeed, they seem to offer a promise of control.

Consequently, those of a skeptical bent will often argue that their atheism is firmly rooted in scientific fact, whereas Christianity is based on nothing more than the gossamer-thin threads of religious faith. Here faith is understood as a blind and largely irrational commitment made in the absence of evidence. We retreat to faith when we’ve run out of rational options.

Before I share my response to this student’s challenge, let’s subject the phrase *we believe in science* to a bit of analysis. Baked into such a statement is the assumption that the hard sciences offer a comprehensive explanation of reality—the coveted “theory of everything.” Although it’s true that my Christianity obliges me to embrace a supernatural vision of reality (a so-called “extraordinary claim”), is the notion that science explains everything without remainder any less ambitious? Taking it a step further, isn’t this itself a statement of faith?

The missiologist Lesslie Newbigin argues that doubt always rests on a set of prior assumptions. It’s impossible to call anything into question without standing on certain assumptions of your own. For example, if someone says that science makes God an “unnecessary hypothesis,” they’re assuming that material explanations are sufficient to explain all of reality. My question for those who align themselves with various iterations of skepticism is, therefore, What’s supporting your doubts about the existence of God? It’s a revealing question because in my experience skeptics are frequently reluctant to open up about their own intellectual commitments. They are, however, more than happy to see their Christian interlocutors remain on the defensive.

Back to that dialogue at Berkeley. This was my answer to the student: Because I believe in a supremely rational, relational, and loving God who out of the abundance of His grace and generosity brought the entire created order into existence, it makes sense that the universe is understandable to us. On the atheist view, however, things are considerably more problematic. Both students in this dialogue were firmly committed materialists—a view that traces its lineage all the way back to ancient Greek philosophers such as Democritus who reduced everything to minuscule atoms. Consequently, both of them thought the world was nothing more than the sum of its parts.



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Recall Newbiggin's insight about our doubts resting on (often hidden) assumptions. In this case, both students were assuming that the human faculty of reason is trustworthy and reliable and that our universe is legible. But if everything including our brains is a result of random, unguided forces, do such assumptions make sense? Is the claim that everything somehow came from nothing really any less extravagant than the belief in a personal creator God? If we call these basic assumptions about human understanding and the rational universe into question, the scientific enterprise comes to a grinding halt. After all, an unknowable universe isn't susceptible to scientific inquiry.

To address the supposed opposition between faith and science, two things are needed: (1) a clear understanding of the distinction between science and scientism and (2) a holistic definition of faith. On that first point, the supposed conflict between science and faith involves a basic category mistake, because the statement "science explains everything" is not itself scientific. How would you verify it scientifically? In truth, it's a philosophical statement giving voice to a worldview known as *scientism*, which involves a dogmatic commitment to materialism. Speaking of the hard sciences themselves, they are necessarily limited to, well, scientific work. As such they involve the testing of hypotheses by careful experimentation (often with sophisticated technology), as well as painstaking repetition, all in an effort to discover the laws of nature. Obviously, we don't employ these same methods when we're washing the dishes or going to see a ballgame with friends. Once again, the notion that we treat our entire lives like a glorified laboratory is simply a category mistake.

Faith is one of today's more misunderstood words. Sadly, many Christians tend to agree with atheists that it's shorthand for belief without evidence. Taking into account the biblical picture, however, we quickly see that faith involves a combination of trust, knowledge, and belief. Take Abraham, the "father of the faith." When his faith is put to the ultimate test and he's asked to sacrifice his son Isaac, the heir promised by God, he willingly takes up the knife. We know the rest of the story. The angel of the Lord stays his hand, and God provides a sacrifice to take Isaac's place.

Is this the ultimate example of faith as a "blind leap in the dark"? The great Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard offers this as one possible interpretation in *Fear and Trembling*, his rich and highly complex meditation on the story. Make no mistake, the command to sacrifice Isaac was a severe test of faith that involved a dark night of the soul for Abraham, but any hint of utter blindness is quickly dispelled by Abraham's intimate relationship with God. This is why Abraham is called the "friend of God" (James 2:21–23). His willingness to sacrifice his son was thus predicated on his trust, knowledge, and belief in the righteousness of the God who had decisively revealed Himself to him. Consequently, those who put their faith in God are doing so on the basis of His proven character and power.

Conceiving of faith as a combination of trust, knowledge, and belief also helps us to make sense of its necessary function in daily life. From planes, trains, and automobiles all the way to the summit of our religious convictions, our lives are animated by faith. Just as we place our faith in the captain and crew of a commercial airliner, so we place our faith in "Christ in whom all things hold together" (Col. 1:17). True, we don't understand "all things," but we don't need to. Our Lord has orchestrated it so that trust plays an indispensable role in human life. Even professor Richard Dawkins admits that he has faith in the reported findings of physicists, which makes sense, since his specialty is biology. We're not omniscient, and so we can't do without faith. Failing to make this basic admission only leads to deep confusion.