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Which historical aspect of the relationship between science and religion do you think has been the most significant?

*“Nothing has come to characterize modern science more than its rejection of appeals to God in explaining the workings of nature”.*<sup>1</sup>

Professor Ronald L. Numbers – historian of Science

When talking historically about the most significant aspect of the relationship between science and religion, one may naturally revert to the scientific revolution in which biblical principles laid down the foundations for the new experimental method in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century giving rise to modern science as we know it today.<sup>2</sup> As positive and monumental as this event was, there is another aspect which is much less positive, often misunderstood and/or completely overlooked by the general public that I would consider much more significant. That is the shift from theistic to naturalist science within the 19<sup>th</sup> century in which theistic implications were slowly purged from scientific discourse.<sup>3</sup>

The Western world today is largely infused with the idea that scientific work should only base its methods of explanation on naturalistic accounts (this is known as *methodological naturalism*); this means that scientific explanations cannot invoke supernatural entities such as God as an answer. Due to this modern assumption, we often hear claims such as: *science and religion are at war, or, as science develops religion will die out*. Both of these claims are not new but rather trace back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In America two hugely influential popularisers of science, Andrew Dickson White and John William Draper, argued that science and religion had constantly been at war and that science always eventually triumphed,<sup>4 5</sup> and around the same period French philosopher Auguste Comte suggested that societies pass through three stages: religious, metaphysical and lastly scientific<sup>6</sup>

Modern historical research however, reveals to us that science was previously embedded not only with theism but biblical theism. God was a natural part of scientific discussion. (This was the case prior to and after the rise of modern science). Well established names such as Newton, Copernicus, Galileo and Leibnitz would frequently discuss God freely as part of their scientific endeavours utilizing ‘natural theology’ - the act of studying nature in order to reason towards the existence and attributes of God – as an extension of their ‘natural philosophy’, what we know today as science.<sup>7 8</sup>

This practice continued well into the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with leading Christian scientists such as Maxwell, Faraday and Hershel. So what changed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? It may be easy to assume that Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution was the sole cause of this shift, however, historians of science have shown that this is not an accurate representation. When the *Origin of Species* came out in 1859, a man named Thomas Huxley took the opportunity to utilize the book to his advantage. Huxley was a scientist and populariser of science who did not accept the framework of his time in which the Church had control over scientific education. Whilst he was not against religion itself, he certainly did not want dogmatic theology or the idea of God infused within scientific practice and so he formed a private dining group in London named the X Club (1864 – 1892) which included nine men in total all in various and prominent positions within science, philosophy or the media.<sup>9</sup> The X

Club were devoted to one central aim, 'science, pure and free untrammelled by religious dogma'.<sup>10</sup> According to historian Matthew Stanley "The naturalists' [Huxley's team's] strategy was to rewrite the history of their discipline to erase the long tradition of theistic science"<sup>11</sup> and the eventual effect of this was that "virtually all scientists...whether Christians or non-Christians, came by the late nineteenth century to agree that God-talk lay beyond the boundaries of science."<sup>12</sup>

To go into detail regarding the complex events of the 19<sup>th</sup> century would far exceed the space I have here, however, the main point for us to understand is that far from science naturally progressing forwards as it slowly abandoned its theological ties, theological concepts were an integral and complimentary part of science for centuries until 'God-talk' was purposefully forced out of scientific practice - particularly in Britain and America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As shown above, Draper, White, Huxley and the X Club are the names hugely responsible for our current and popular naturalistic narrative upon which science is frequently used as a weapon against Christianity. Furthermore and contrary to belief, Darwin's theory of evolution - by itself - was not the *coup de grâce* for Christianity, however, in the hands of Huxley, Draper and White, Darwinian evolution became a highly effective tool used to successfully promote their agendas.

So what might this tell us about the relationship between science and religion? Firstly, for the majority of scientific history, science and Christianity have not been at war, rather they have co-existed in harmony. This is the same today as recent sociological studies have revealed.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, naturalistic science still relies on theological principles - even if the current community are reluctant to admit this. For example, the idea that there are laws of nature regulating the universe stems from the bible (Jeremiah 33:25). The 'uniformity of nature' i.e. the idea that the future will resemble the past is an idea that, as the Scottish philosopher David Hume correctly noted, cannot be justified on naturalism. Only on Christian theism does uniformity make sense and make science possible (Genesis 8:22).

The media tends to enable atheists such as Richard Dawkins to narrative to us a history in which science progressively erodes religion away. Ironically sociological studies have suggested that these colorful histories by Dawkins and co *themselves* border on religion, presenting us with a fully-fledged alternative to the traditional Christian faith.<sup>14</sup> In reality, science is - and has historically been - a tool given to us by God in order that we might come to see His revealed glory more and more. As the Psalmist says, 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.'<sup>15</sup>

## References

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- 15) Psalms 19:1