

# Alvin Plantinga's Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion and Naturalism

A review by Ian Kluge

For almost two decades now, we have witnessed a spirited, at times acrimonious debate between the defenders of science who are generally new atheists and the defenders of religion who are usually, but not always, Christian. While some participants may seek a final knock-out punch for one side or the other, a smaller group strives to find ways of actualizing the Baha'i doctrine of the essential harmony between science and religion. In the words of Abdu'l-Baha, "Science and Religion should go forward together; indeed, they should be like two fingers of one hand." [1] Elsewhere he adds, "for true science is reason and reality, and religion is essentially reality and pure reason; therefore, the two must correspond." [2] Each focuses on reality and employs the methods of reason. Ultimately "truth is one. . ." [3]

It follows from this that any apparent conflict between science and religion is either a misunderstanding of science or religion or both. In his new book, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion and Naturalism*, Alvin Plantinga shows how misunderstandings about science have led to what are in reality pseudo-conflicts. He aims to show that "there is no [serious] conflict between Christian belief and science . . . [and that] there is conflict between naturalism and science." (p. xii) In addition, he strives to show that while there may be some superficial differences between religion and science, there are deep and irresolvable conflicts between science and naturalism. According to him, the real clash is between religion and "a philosophical gloss or add-on to the scientific doctrine of evolution: the claim that evolution is undirected, unguided, unorchestrated by God (or anyone else." (p.xii) As if this weren't enough, Plantinga also shows that, contrary to Humean dogma, miracles can be explained scientifically without violating any classic or quantum laws of nature. Finally, he introduces the concept of "design discourse" as an interpretation of Paley's and others writings about design.

In the pursuit of his goals, Plantinga shows why he is a rarity – a philosopher with religious commitments who is highly regarded even by non-believing philosophers especially in epistemology and metaphysics. His analysis of "warranted" belief, his solution to the problem of evil and an omnipotent and morally good God, and his reworking of modal metaphysics have spread his influence well beyond the confines of Christian-oriented religious philosophy. He and several others such as William Lane Craig (whom Dawkins assiduously avoids debating) and biophysicist/theologian Alister McGrath demonstrate that thinkers working within a religious

tradition can be formidable and important philosophers beyond the borders of their personal faith. Both prove that Sam Harris notwithstanding, the end of (rational) faith has not yet arrived.

Where the Conflict Really Lies begins with a discussion of “evolution and Christian belief” (3) in which Plantinga argues that Christian belief is not incompatible with evolution per se, but is irreconcilable with the concept of “unguided,” (p. 12), undirected and, thereby, totally random evolution. Nature, as the Baha’i Writings say, is “not a fortuitous composition and arrangement.” (Abdu'l-Baha, Some Answered Questions, p.181). However, Plantinga is not content to play a defensive game against the proponents of unguided evolution. He directly challenges their view by asking, “How does the [physical] evidence of evolution reveal such a thing?” (p.14). A moment’s reflection leads us to a series of question that undermine their views. What experiments could we perform to prove that evolution is purely fortuitous? No such experiment can be conceived even in principle, let alone carried out. How could one even formulate the specific testable hypothesis for this question? And even if we could, will the answer to such experiments be scientific, i.e. physical, quantifiable, repeatable or falsifiable? The obvious negative answers support Plantinga’s central contention that the apparent conflict between religion and science is caused by the ideological “add-on” (p. 79) of “unguided” evolution which is not a necessary part of belief in evolution. This add-on can be rejected without rejecting evolution per se.

Ironically, this leads to the conclusion that “naturalism is in conflict with evolution” (p. 310) because we cannot accept both at the same time. Science is empirical, i.e. it limits itself to the evidence it possesses and which meets the standard of being physical, quantifiable, predictable, objective and falsifiable. The problem is that the naturalist “add-on” of unguided evolution cannot meet any of those four criteria. Consequently, naturalism is not scientific, indeed, it “serve[s] of the main functions of a religion: it offers a master narrative, it answers deep and important human questions” (p. 311). With this observation, Plantinga makes good on his promise to show how empirical science and naturalism are in serious logical conflict – which has enormous implication insofar as it allows us to exclude naturalist interpretations from discussions about the unity of science and religion.

This is a vital point because it undercuts any argument that the Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Baha’i – necessarily reject evolution. And by extension, are intrinsically hostile to science. Some interpretations of these faiths may harbor negative attitudes towards science but it is not a matter of inherent necessity. In fairness, of course, it must be noted that the Jesuit paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin was making this point in his 1955 book, *The Phenomenon of Man* in which he shows how material and spiritual evolution are part of the same cosmic process.

Plantinga's position raises several important supplementary issues. First, is there any quantifiable, physical and falsifiable evidence that creation is ordered, i.e. guided, or, or fine-tuned? Plantinga gives his most interesting answer in regards to fine-tuning which claims that Paley's purpose is not to present a logically rigorous argument for design but to present a description to help us perceive the reality of design directly and without any need for argumentation. He calls this "design discourse" (p. 225); "it is perception . . . rather than argument that is involved" (p. 237). Consequently, the various scientific critiques of Paley's book are beside the point. No one disputes the examples of (apparent) order; rather, the dispute is about how the (apparent) order is 'seen' or understood. That is a tougher nut to crack, especially given that the concept of unguided evolution by random mutation has been shown to be an unscientific philosophical "add-on." Proving the illegitimacy of an inherently rational perception warranted by observational evidence is not an easy task. Plantinga applies the same argument to Michael Behe's Darwin's Black Box and The Edge of Evolution. According to Plantinga, Paley and Behe "present us with epistemic situations in which the rational response is design belief" (p. 264). This does not prove there is design in a logically necessary way, but it does show that in light of the evidence, the perception of design is not irrational. Consequently, belief in design cannot be swept aside as a product of irrational religious faith.

This is no small feat in today's heated intellectual climate – and Plantinga deserves credit for it – but we must also admit that it is a minimalist argument: we can't prove design but we can show why it is not irrational to believe in it. It's a good place to come from but I wouldn't want to stay there. For this reason I think Plantinga sells Behe and Paley short on this issue. For example, he fails to press his advantage against the many-universes argument by pointing out that the many-worlds argument is not only unproven but also inherently unprovable. How could we use the laws of our universe – the only universe about which we can know any laws – be used to prove either theoretically or experimentally that a universe with completely different laws is possible let alone exists? We can speculate, of course, but we can never acquire concrete specific evidence to make our speculations more than unscientific pipe-dreams. Even worse, if we were to make contact with such a universe we would obviously share certain commonalities which means they would no longer be two completely different universes. This undercuts the basic premises of the many-universes argument. In short, the many-universes argument by virtue of its intrinsic attributes. We are left with the bare fact that the only universe of which we actually have scientific knowledge shows a fine-tuning for life that is extremely difficult to explain in purely naturalistic terms – and is so mathematically improbable as to render it useless as a scientific explanation. Appealing to such odds is, in effect, on the same footing as appealing God and miracles.

Here is another example of Plantinga selling the theists short. He quotes but makes little use of molecular biologist James Shapiro's statement that "there is "no detailed Darwinian accounts for the evolution of any fundamental biochemical or cellular system, only a variety of wishful speculation" (p. 258). If Shapiro is correct, there are no actual logical or scientific reasons to

reject Behe's "irreducible complexity." Since there are no scientific reasons to give it up, the concept of "irreducible complexity" gains viability and credibility. It is not hard to see why. The most obvious example of "irreducible complexity" is sitting in my driveway. Without all essential parts being simultaneously present in functional condition and in proper arrangement, the engine of my car cannot run and, therefore, would never be 'selected' to survive. Not only is there "no detailed Darwinian account[]" of how "irreducible complexity" arises in nature, there is none for something as relatively simple as my car. Indeed, the situation becomes more desperate for strict evolutionists when we observe obligate mutualism, in which at least two distinct species must be present and functional for either organism to survive. Examples of this are fungus and algae to produce lichens, and siboglinid tube worms and certain bacteria living around thermal vents in the oceans. Since neither can live without the other, we are required to imagine an entire cascade of random positive and perfectly adapted simultaneous mutations. As noted above, appealing to such odds is, in effect, not much different from appealing to God.

Plantinga also has a noteworthy answer to the supposed problem of God's intervention in the cosmic processes. This difficulty is the problem of miracles, for as Hume noted in the 18th Century, divine intervention i.e. miracles requires God to break the very laws of nature He established. Therefore, God cannot guide evolution. Plantinga rejects this position for two reasons. In regards to classical physics, he notes that even though the laws of physics do not themselves postulate an isolated or closed universe, this assumption is a "metaphysical add-on" (p. 78). There is nothing in the laws themselves which necessitates causal closure. This "add-on" supposedly makes divine intervention impossible. The problem is that even today science does not know whether the universe is causally open or closed and so divine intervention cannot be absolutely ruled out. More importantly, any occasion on which God performs a miracle is an occasion when the universe is not causally closed; and the laws say nothing about what happens when the universe is not causally closed. (p. 82 – 83)

Hume and his followers notwithstanding, divine intervention does not necessarily violate any natural laws and therefore, miracles are not prohibited by science.

According to Plantinga, "quantum mechanics offers even less of a problem for divine intervention than classical science" (p. 91) because QM works on probabilities, not strictly determinist laws. There is no absolutely necessary outcome, "only a distribution of probabilities across many possible outcomes" (p. 93) Given a quantum mechanical system, therefore, QM doesn't say which configuration will in fact result from the initial conditions; instead we assign a spectrum of probabilities to possible outcomes (p. 93).

In other words, there is no physical reason why divine intervention, i.e. 'miraculous' effects cannot occur since they are not categorically forbidden by QM. Plantinga admits that there is

some controversy among Christian philosophers whether or not QM can explain such miracles as raising Lazarus from the dead, parting the Red Sea or walking on water. However, what counts or does not count as a miracle is a different question; what remains is the principle that divine intervention and miracles are not incompatible with scientific laws. According to Plantinga, there is a “deep concord between theistic religion and science” (p. 265). He states, “Much of this alleged conflict is merely illusionary” (p. 265). In support he quotes the famous physicist (and philosopher) C.F. Von Weizsaecker: “I call modern science a legacy of Christianity” (p. 266). The reason is not hard to find. The medievals (above all Aquinas) insisted on “the rationality of God” (p. 265) as Whitehead writes, and since man is made in the image of God, man not only has an intellect by which he can understand nature but is impelled to do so in his quest for religious perfection. Aquinas, who gave this concept its best philosophical expression called it “the adequation of the intellect to reality” (p. 269). Not only are we able to understand reality but are required to do so in order to make use of the gifts (or “talents” in the Biblical allegory). Thus, religious faith, and Christianity in particular, created the attitudes needed to make science a necessary part of salvation, i.e. using one’s “talents” to know God’s creation. The book of revelation, the Bible, could be known by faith; the book of nature as it was called was knowable by careful study, i.e. induction and by reason.

Plantinga also notes the deep “concord” between theism and science insofar as the belief in “regularity, predictability and constancy” (p. 282) is common and necessary to both. Without faith in these three – even statistical order is still a calculable order – science is impossible. While naturalism cannot provide even the slightest suggestion as to the origin of these law, theism rooted them in God’s will, as physical expressions thereof, and thereby once again gave the study of nature a religious foundation and urgency. What he shows – and it would not be new to any graduate from a Catholic university even fifty years ago – is that science and religion are two flowers from the same plant and that their apparent conflict today is an aberration to be remedied. As Abdu’l-Baha says, “Religion and Science are inter-twined with each other and cannot be separated. These are the two wings with which humanity must fly. One wing is not enough.[4]

He makes the reasons clear: "Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism." [5] This materialism has many aspects. One is ontological, which denies the existence of the soul, objective values, meaning and purpose. Another is sociological, reducing human beings to consumption machines and sexual robots. A third is scientific, which reduces humans to electro-chemical machines whose deepest thoughts and intuitions are no more than blips in a fMRI machine. Few people would actually consider this an adequate view of human nature.

Where the Conflict Really takes several important steps down the road to discovering the foundational unity of science and religion. The first step is modeling the cool-headed analysis of

concepts that is necessary if the debates between science and religion are to achieve progress in understanding. The debate must remain avoid provocative rhetoric and emotional appeals in order to remain rational, analytical and focused on carefully defined issues. The second step is careful distinction between naturalism and science – a distinction that has far-flung consequences that may even have applications in sciences other than evolutionary biology. The third step is Plantinga's defense of divine intervention within the laws of classical and quantum physics. The fourth and final step is his revival of the Thomistic argument that science and religion share the same intellectual roots.

Where the Conflict Lies will challenge some readers but it is well-worth the effort.

## Footnotes:

[1] (*Abdu'l-Baha in London*, p. 71)

[2] *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 107.

[3] *Paris Talks*, p. 145.

[4] Abdu'l-Baha, *Abdu'l-Baha in London*, p. 28.

[5] Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, p. 143.

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