

Can a scientist be religious?

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Robert Asher. Credit: Robert Asher

An empirical answer to the question “can a scientist be religious” is easy: yes. Religious scientists are actually quite common. However, many would prefer to know whether or not it is rational for them to be religious. Here we need some qualifications on what exactly ‘religious’ means. If it requires belief in an omnipotent, human-like entity who interferes in the workings of nature, suspending a law here or a rigging a miracle there like a mechanic might fix a car, then I’d say no, religion is not rational. Given what we know about our world and cosmos, based on methodologies on which we depend in nearly all aspects of our lives, it’s not rational to believe that stars hang from a metal firmament in the sky, that the Earth is 6,000 years old, that human virgins have sons, or that decomposed cadavers can come back to life.

Most of those who feel committed to their religion are able to reconcile the incompatibility of certain scriptural claims with what they know

about our world. Like St Augustine in the 4th century, they understand that in a conflict between our interpretation of human-mediated religious texts and our understanding of natural law, something has to give, and this generally means a change in the former, not the latter.

Relatedly, many recognise that a ‘miracle’ – when defined as a spontaneous failure of natural law – is usually an artefact of ignorance, rather than something intrinsic to an object or event. Sixteenth-century Aztecs made the mistake of elevating their ignorance about Spanish horses and pikemen to the miraculous, a fact that (along with smallpox and some angry neighbours) led to the destruction of their society. Reverence of phenomena because they seem inexplicable today makes the same mistake. Conversely, the vista of the Grand Canyon should not be considered less miraculous because we understand erosion; wine is no less sweet when we know that fermentation intervenes between it and water. In my view, the existence of natural laws, and indeed of rationality itself, is a legitimate basis for worship; ignorance about nature is not.

Charles Darwin is sometimes portrayed as a boon for atheism because he articulated a mechanism by which humanity could no longer pretend to lack a connection with the animal world. We are animals – very peculiar ones to be sure, but animals nonetheless. If your religion demands otherwise, then at least in some particulars it is wrong. It is notable, therefore, how Darwin made it clear in the *Origin of Species* that “I see no good reason why the views given in this volume should shock the religious feelings of any one” (1860, p. 482), or in an 1879 letter that “It seems to me absurd to doubt that a man may be an ardent Theist & an evolutionist... In my most extreme fluctuations have I never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of God.” By the end of his life, Darwin apparently did not accept a personal God or the typical Christian explanations for the existence of suffering. Yet, despite frequently being cast as an atheist today, his publications and letters

clearly disavowed any such thing.

This is in part because he was modest (and accurate) about the scope of evolutionary biology, which concerns the diversification of life after it started. Darwinian evolution does not concern life's origin or the existence of God, yet the perception that it does is widespread. This misunderstanding makes it harder to appreciate how compelling the evidence for his theory really is. Darwin made many predictions about what later scientists would find regarding patterns in the fossil record, development, and anatomy among species, and we know that patterns of genetic diversity match his predictions as well.

In my book *Evolution and Belief: Confessions of a Religious Paleontologist*, I review how science has proven him correct in the essential details and describe how biological complexity has arisen from natural processes. While I believe these processes were unrelated to a human-like, master intelligence, I do not thereby deny the existence of God. Comprehension of a natural mechanism is independent of a potential agency behind it; we can no more assert atheism due to our understanding of evolution than claim the non-existence of Thomas Edison due to our understanding of electricity. In my book, I reiterate Darwin's own argument that his theory presents a mechanism by which life has diversified, representing a cause which does not specify any potential agency behind it. Evolutionary biology – along with the natural sciences in general – does contradict superstition, but it does not rule out belief in God.

One of the challenges we face as a society is to honestly identify the conflicts between religious belief and scientific literacy, and help draw the line between religion and superstition. In the case of Christian faith, a good starting point is to recognise the obvious benevolence of scripture; for example, do not slander others (Matthew 15), be humble (Romans 3) and truthful (Matthew 5). These passages are no less sublime

because of others that seem to condone snake handling (Mark 16), misogyny and primogeniture (Deuteronomy 21). At least some scriptures seem genuinely timeless and inspired; other passages seem more intertwined with the local time and culture in which they were written. Every generation of Christians (and those of other faiths) will grapple with such passages, some reasonably suggesting that maybe the ‘objectionable’ ones don’t mean what we think they mean. Like any other human endeavour, religious interpretation should be accorded the capacity for self-reflection and correction as we learn more about ourselves and our cosmos. Like any other natural science, [evolutionary biology](#) is a part of this process.

More information: Dr Robert Asher is a palaeontologist and lecturer at the University of Cambridge Department of Zoology and a curator at the University Museum of Zoology. His book ‘Evolution and Belief: Confessions of a Religious Paleontologist’ was recently published by Cambridge University Press.

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