



GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

MORTIMER J. ADLER

PART I (Continued)

Questions About Philosophy, Science, and Religion

6. THE CONFLICT OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION

Dear Dr. Adler,

Do science and religion conflict? I don't see how the literal text of the Bible can be reconciled with modern scientific knowledge. Don't the findings of modern physics, geology, astronomy, and bi-

ology contradict the story told in Genesis about the creation of the world and man?

E. V.

Dear E. V.,

Cardinal Barberini, who was a friend of Galileo's, once explained to him why there should be no conflict between science and religion. He said: "You teach how the heavens go; we teach how to go to heaven." With their missions thus distinguished, astronomers and theologians should have no quarrels.

The point Cardinal Barberini was making to Galileo can be generalized. If science and religion have different aims—that is, if they try to answer different questions, and if they try to do different things for men—there should be no conflict between them.

What are the questions religion tries to answer? Questions about the existence and nature of God, about man's relation to God, about God's government of the universe, and especially His concern for man. All these are utterly beyond the competence of science to deal with, now or ever. Different religions give different answers to these questions; but in deciding whether their answers are true or false, we can get no help from science.

And what does religion try to do practically for man? To bring man into personal relationship with God, to give his life its basic meaning and worth, and above all to provide the medium through which men can seek and obtain God's help to follow His commandments. If we know anything at all about science, we know it can do none of these things, and so there can be no rivalry on this score.

Science answers other questions and does other things for us. It describes the world in which we live. It accounts for the structure and behavior of things—how they come to be what they are, and hence how we can make use of them for good or ill. We can apply its findings to produce a wide variety of things, from baby foods to hydrogen bombs. But science does not attempt to tell us the why and wherefore of things; nor does it prevent us from misusing the power it gives us. The same scientific knowledge enables us to poison as well as to cure, to destroy as well as to construct.

We might conclude from this that there is no problem about reconciling science and religion—that there is no more need to choose

between technology and prayer than between having a body and having a soul. But, unfortunately, we would then be overlooking certain real difficulties. Your question about Darwin's theory of evolution and the Biblical story of creation raises one such difficulty that we must face.

If we read the opening chapters of Genesis as though they were a literal description of the historical processes by which the world and man came into existence, then the account they give obviously comes into conflict with the account of these matters given by modern science, from astronomy to zoology. But, according to Augustine and other theologians, a deeper reading of Genesis leads to interpretations of its meaning which go a long way toward avoiding such conflict.

Augustine tells us, for example, that the "six days" referred to are not units of time. They represent an order of development. According to Augustine, God created all things at once in their causes, and laid down the order in which they would develop in the course of time. Science tells us a great deal about the actual history of that development, most of which does not conflict with the kind of interpretation that Augustine places upon the opening chapters of Genesis.

But on one point there is a serious conflict. Genesis tells us that God made man in His own image, and that of all earthly creatures man alone is made in the image of God. This is usually interpreted to mean that man is essentially different from all other things, even the highest forms of animal life. He alone is a person, a being with reason and free will. He is not just another animal, differing from other animals merely in degree. He is radically different in kind.

According to the Darwinian theory of man's kinship with the apes, man differs from ape only in degree, not in kind. The discovery of the "missing links" in the evolutionary series is supposed to show the continuity between man and ape. In declaring that man alone is made in the image of God, Genesis insists upon a certain discontinuity between man and all other forms of life on earth. On this question, the Bible and biology cannot both be right.

In my opinion, here is a real, not an apparent, conflict between one part of science and one fundamental religious belief. There are not many other conflicts like this one, certainly not many as clear. It is striking that this one should be about the nature of man. Whether it will ever be resolved and, if so, how, it is not for me to say in this place.

7. GREEK PHILOSOPHY AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Dear Dr. Adler,

Scholars tell us that the pagan Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle played an important role in the development of Christian theology. Augustine owed many of his ideas to Plato, and Aquinas found his basic philosophy in Aristotle. This seems very odd to me. How in the world could these Christian saints and theologians find their basic ideas in pagan philosophers who did not believe in the Christian God or in the fundamentals of the Christian faith?

S. C.

Dear S. C.,

Let us go back to the beginning of Christianity. It was born out of Judaism, and in the Hellenistic culture of the Roman Empire. It offered a way of salvation and a doctrine of man's special relation to God.

Adherence to the way and the doctrine was essentially an act of faith in divine revelation. But to understand the full meaning of the Christian faith required the formative thinkers of the early church to relate the teachings of revelation to the basic ideas and truths which had been developed by philosophical or scientific inquiry. Is it any wonder that early Christian thinkers made use of the highly developed Greek learning that was at hand and which they knew intimately? Indeed, some of them, such as Justin Martyr and Augustine, were pagan philosophers before their conversion to Christianity.

But, you may ask, wasn't early Christianity opposed to paganism and all its works? Didn't it hold that Christianity alone possessed all truth and right? Wasn't paganism regarded as untruth and unrighteousness? Wouldn't a combination of Christian faith and Greek philosophy have seemed an absurd contradiction to early Christians?

There is no doubt that some of them thought precisely that. Tertulian, one of the most brilliant apologists of the early Christian church, says: "What, indeed, has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the [Platonic] Academy and the Church? ... Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christian-

ity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition!” Tertullian speaks for a school of Christian thought that exists down to the present day.

However, other early Christian thinkers claim pagan culture as the rightful inheritance of Christianity. Augustine compares it to the treasures which the Israelites appropriated when they departed from Egypt. He says that Greek philosophy contains “liberal instruction which is better adapted to the use of the truth, and some most excellent precepts of morality; and some truths in regard even to the worship of the One God are found among them.” Augustine’s use of Platonic philosophy to interpret Christian doctrine was a decisive factor in the Christianization of pagan thought and culture.

Thomas Aquinas’ contribution came at a time when the basic works of Aristotle had just been recovered and made available in Latin. These works comprise the whole range of the natural sciences and of philosophical inquiry. Some of the fundamental views advanced by Aristotle at first appeared to be in sharp conflict with the dogmas of Christianity; and in many quarters Aristotelianism was denounced and even officially condemned. But Aquinas insisted that there could be no conflict between the truths of reason and the truths of faith; and so he unswervingly undertook to appropriate for Christianity all the truth he could find in Aristotle.

It is true, as you say, that the content of Greek thought and Christian faith are not the same. The God of the Greek philosophers is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, nor the God of the Gospels. The natural theology of Plato and Aristotle does not include anything like the characteristically Christian doctrines of creation, providence, and redemption. Nevertheless, it does contain some basic truths about the nature of being and becoming, the material and the spiritual, the temporal and the eternal, all of which were of profound significance in the development of Christian thought.

In making use of these materials, the great Christian thinkers do not mimic Plato and Aristotle. Their starting point is always the dogmas of the Christian faith, not the principles of Greek philosophy. To know itself fully, faith sought understanding; and in so doing, it created something new. Augustine does not give us Plato plain, but a Christianized Plato for the purpose of illuminating Christian faith. Aquinas does the same with Aristotle. And wherever key Christian doctrines required it, Augustine and Aquinas flatly reject the teachings of the Greeks.

8. WHY READ THE SCIENTIFIC WRITINGS OF ANTIQUITY?

Dear Dr. Adler,

I can understand why you include the writings of ancient poets, philosophers, and historians in the great-books program of readings and discussions. But what sense is there in reading outdated and erroneous works on biology, physics, astronomy, and medicine written more than two thousand years ago? Isn't this a complete waste of time and effort?

Wouldn't it be more sensible to read a good history of science or a sound popularization of modern scientific knowledge?

T. M.

Dear T. M.,

When we selected the great writings of the past for inclusion in a set intended to be read by people living in the present day, we were well aware that the ancient scientific classics are defective in the light of modern knowledge. They contain inexact or inadequate observation of facts, and their interpretations of the facts have been replaced by more adequate theories.

However, you realize, I am sure, that even the findings and theories of the scientists of a hundred years ago are also out of date. Should we not read the writings of Darwin, Lavoisier, and Faraday because of the tremendous strides that have been made in biology, chemistry, and physics since their day?

And you also recognize, I hope, that not all the findings or formulations of ancient scientists are false. For instance, the descriptions of disease given us in Hippocrates' case histories duplicate many of the observations of contemporary medicine. Archimedes' law of the lever is still the cornerstone of the science of statics. Ptolemy's outmoded theory that the earth is the center of the universe still has its uses—for instance, in navigation. Newton's laws of mechanics are being applied in bridge building today.

The main purpose in selecting the great works of science—ancient and modern—was not to furnish reliable scientific information. You are correct in observing that a good history of science could quickly summarize what is still valid in these books. But the great scientific documents give us something different than a history of science can give us.

They teach us concretely and directly how scientists attain knowledge. We learn their method of approach at first hand. We read what the great scientists themselves have to say about discoveries. We see how they got at their facts, how they interpreted the facts, and how they reached their conclusions. We learn what observation and experiment means to scientists, and the role of theory or hypothesis in their thought.

The fact that the early scientific writings are crude and primitive, as compared with the findings and theories of modern science, does not affect their value in teaching us the fundamentals of science and scientific method. For the nonspecialist, these fundamentals stand out more clearly in the earlier formative writings than they do in the later, more complicated ones.

The great scientific classics give us a firsthand, intimate knowledge of scientific thought that no book about these books could give. They require an active participation in the actual work of the scientific mind which no predigested and prearranged summary demands. The reason we read the great books—of literature, science, or philosophy—is to deepen and broaden our intelligence and imagination, not to acquire up-to-date information.

The men who selected these works for modern readers were convinced that science, as well as philosophy and literature, cultivates the human mind. No collection which left out the scientific classics would do justice to Western culture. This judgment was made long before Sputnik and has nothing to do with the cold war or the educational nostrums proposed for accelerating our technical proficiency.

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