EDITORIAL

The War Between Faith and Fact
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ABSTRACT
Is there a war going on between science and religion or not? The Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences and many other bridge-building advocates deny that a war must be fought between genuine science and authentic faith. Yet, a new book, *Faith vs. Fact*, by Jerry Coyne, launches a new attack against those with faith in God. This essay asks whether such an attack comes from genuine science or from scientism—a materialist ideology that claims rational science as its ally.

KEYWORDS
Science and Religion; Theology; Jerry Coyne; CTNS

Here at CTNS we work night ‘n’ day to dispel the urban myth that there is a war going on between science and religion. Perhaps Joshua Moritz, managing editor of *Theology and Science*, most clearly identifies the misunderstanding at hand: “Science and religion are at war is a myth in two key senses of the word: it is foundational to a certain anti-religious worldview, and it is historically false.”1 By exposing the falsity of this urban myth, we drive the pilings for what will become the bridge of peace between genuine science and authentic faith.

We at CTNS are working to construct a bridge of peace between science and faith in which the traffic runs both directions. We build this bridge in confidence because we have observed that nobody—nobody who’s religious—actually dislikes science. We all love science. So, if there’s a war going on, it’s not between science and an enemy of science.

If CTNS were to hold a bridge-builders BBQ, the invitations we would send out might include something like this, written by Bob Russell and Kirk Wegter-McNelly.

Science at its best, and theology at its best, both pursue truth [ … ] If it be true, as theologians claim, that the God of Israel is the creator of this magnificent universe, then every truth about this universe discovered by science only enhances appreciation for God’s creative handiwork.2

Who would appear on that BBQ guest list? We’d definitely invite bridge builders such as John Calvin who touted, science is “God’s gift.”3 We’d also invite Albert Einstein, “Science without religion is lame and religion without science is blind.”4 How about Pope Francis? In his extraordinary recent elocution, *Laudato Si*, we find §62, “science and religion, with their distinctive approaches to understanding reality, can enter into an intense dialogue fruitful for both.”5 This leads Jesuits at the Vatican Observatory to declare, “religion and science are not at war at all.”6 At the bridge-building BBQ we
could raise our glasses and toast a peaceful and mutually supportive harmony between science and faith.

But from one side of the bridge, we might hear protestors. We might hear chants and read posters saying, “we want war!” Now, who wants war between science and faith?

This brings me to a new book I’m now reading, which attempts to dismantle our bridge by declaring war against religion in the name of science. Note the title: *Faith vs. Fact*. Obviously, faith is bad while fact is good. And, who has the facts? Scientists, of course. More. The scientists have all the facts and faith has none. Here is the subtitle of the book: *Why Science and Religion are Incompatible*. Like a U.S. drone strike on a bridge in ISIS-held Syrian territory, this book attempts to blow up what we at CTNS have been trying to construct.

Religion and science are engaged in a kind of war: a war for understanding, a war about whether we should have good reasons for what we accept as true […] I see this as only one battle in a wider war—an war between rationality and superstition. Religion is but a single brand of superstition (others include beliefs in astrology, paranormal phenomena, homeopathy, and spiritual healing), but it is the most widespread and harmful form of superstition.7

Those of us who believe in God are superstitious, according to this book’s author. But scientists, of course, are not superstitious. Rather, science produces something religion and other superstitions cannot produce, namely, truth. Science is solely responsible for truth, purportedly. “When I characterize science as a way to find truth,” he writes, “I mean truth about the universe […] truth is simply what is.”8

As support for the exclusive patent on truth is this purported fact: scientific knowledge is one while religious superstition is plural. “There is only science, combining brainpower from the whole world to produce one accepted body of knowledge. In contrast, there are thousands of religions, most differing profoundly in what they see as true.”9 In sum, scientists the world over agree on a single body of truth about the universe, while superstitious religious people make a variety of truth claims that contradict each other. This justifies affirming the high value of fact and eschewing factless faith.

Dialogue? No. There can be no dialogue between science and faith because science has nothing to learn from believers. This book’s author will however, concede a “monologue—one in which science does all the talking and religion the listening […] religion has nothing to tell scientists to improve their trade.”10

Because faith and fact are incompatible and because one should never allow scientific fact to be polluted by religious faith, it follows that faith and fact cannot avoid war with one another. Organizations such as CTNS, says this author, only make the situation worse. CTNS, named in the book, along with other agencies attempting to bridge science and religion are guilty of accommodationism. Their crime is to see “the two areas as compatible, mutually supportive, or at least not in conflict.”11 The problem with accommodationism is that it betrays the essence of religion, which is its superstitious anti-scientific stand. In other words, CTNS and other accommodationists are betraying their essential religious commitments by liking science.

Consider this possibility. A religious person stands up and shouts in public, “I love science.” The author of *Faith vs. Fact* would respond, “please sit down and be quiet. Because you’re religious, you’re really anti-science, whether you admit it or not. You
can like science only insofar as you deny your religious fundamentals.” In short, at work here is the fallacy of arguing in a circle, of assuming the consequent.

The war must resume, we are told. With science on the banner, fact marches into battle against faith. But, may I ask: does this declaration of war exhibit the traits of genuine science? Is science unavoidably and ineluctably anti-faith? Or, might we have at work here what we know as scientism? Scientism is science plus. Scientism is a form of materialist ideology which claims that only scientific knowledge counts as knowledge and that the whole truth-seeking world must feed in the scientific trough. Scientism “is a secular religion in the sense of generating loyal commitments (a type of faith) to a method, a body of knowledge, and a hope for a better tomorrow,” brags Scientific American columnist and atheist, Michael Shermer.12

Huston Smith, philosopher of the world’s religions who taught for many years at MIT, protests. “The problem is not science, but scientism—namely, to assume that what science turns up and can turn up is the sum of all there is.”13 Dominican theologian Michael Dodds affirms the genuine need in science for a materialist research method while repudiating the materialist worldview preached by scientism:

Scientism is fundamentally the transformation of the methodology of empirical science into a metaphysics, a move from the quantitative investigation of nature to the assumption that being is always quantitative. While the former is a legitimate methodology, the latter is mere ideology.14

Let’s take another look at that bridge. The bridge CTNS scholars and BBQ friends are trying to build connects genuine science with thoughtful faith. Thoughtful faith, in the tradition of Augustine and Anselm, is faith seeking understanding (fides quaerens intellectum), and science provides one attractive path toward that understanding.

Regardless of how people of faith define themselves, this new book’s author argues that, deep down, people of faith are irrational and superstitious and worthy of being declared enemies of science. This position appears to me to be a dogma of scientism, not an accurate observation of people of faith.

Scientism, in contrast to science, attempts to dismantle the bridge of peace and replace it with intellectual gunfire across the gulf. Who’ll win? Those who wish to prosecute war? Or, the bridge-builders?

Endnotes

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3. John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion (1559), ed. John T. McNeill, Library of Christian Classics XX, XXI (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), II, ii, 15, 273.
4. Albert Einstein, Out of My Later Years (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950), 26.
5. Pope Francis, Laudato si (May 24, 2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf (accessed December 19, 2015).
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7. Jerry A. Coyne, *Faith vs. Fact: Why Science and Religion are Incompatible* (New York: Viking, 2015), xii.
8. Ibid., 29.
9. Ibid., 39.
10. Ibid., 257.
11. Ibid., xv; see 6, 77.
12. Michael Shermer, *How We Believe: The Search for God in an Age of Science* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 2000), 61.
13. Huston Smith, *The Way Things Are: Conversations with Huston Smith on the Spiritual Life*, ed. Phil Cousineau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 118.
14. Michael J. Dodds, O.P., *Unlocking Divine Action: Contemporary Science and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington DC: Catholic University Press of America, 2012), 51, n27.