



# Sermon Series – Road Blocks for Faith

## #2 Science vs Faith

### Intro

How good are thoughts and prayers?

Any view held by politicians that “thoughts and prayers”



might be satisfying as a response to terrifying bushfires was dispelled this past week. There’s been a **genuine contest in public view** between **Government** ministers desperately evading questions about the impact of climate change on weather and

bushfire conditions and **growing public sentiment** towards the case for a climate crisis in Australia.



Are you someone who **listens to the scientists?**

Greta Thunberg made this motto famous, calling all governments to “**listen to the scientists**” regarding climate change. But what would happen if we put Greta’s challenge to **Christians** in relation to our claims about the existence and goodness of God?

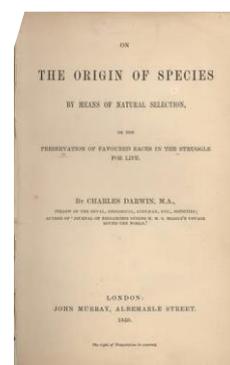


Today I’m addressing the **2nd** of 3 **common classic objections** to faith in God.

For many years now, the apparent contest between **evolutionary science and Christianity** has proved to be a significant **roadblock for faith** to many people. Even today, prominent prophets claim that **science has disproved God and that science and faith are incompatible**. What should we say to that?

When Charles Darwin published “Origin of the species” in 1859 it was a **game-changer**: a revolution for science and a bold challenge to religion. Before Darwin, it’s difficult to find a scientist who genuinely disputed a deity.

Consider these fine scientists before Darwin’s time...





**Copernicus** (1473-1543) founder of modern astronomy. He was also Canon of Frauenburg Cathedral in Poland.

"God is the best and most orderly workman of all."



**Galileo** (1564-1642) mathematician, physicist, astronomer. Also a devout Catholic.

"There are two big books, the book of nature and the book of supernature – the Bible."



**Sir Isaac Newton** (1642 – 1727) formulated the laws of gravity, expert in optics, astronomy & calculus. Inspired by Scripture & wrote many Christian books.

"In the absence of any other proof, the thumb alone would convince me of God's existence."

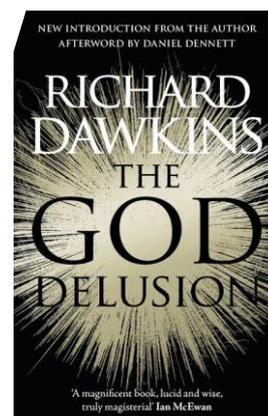


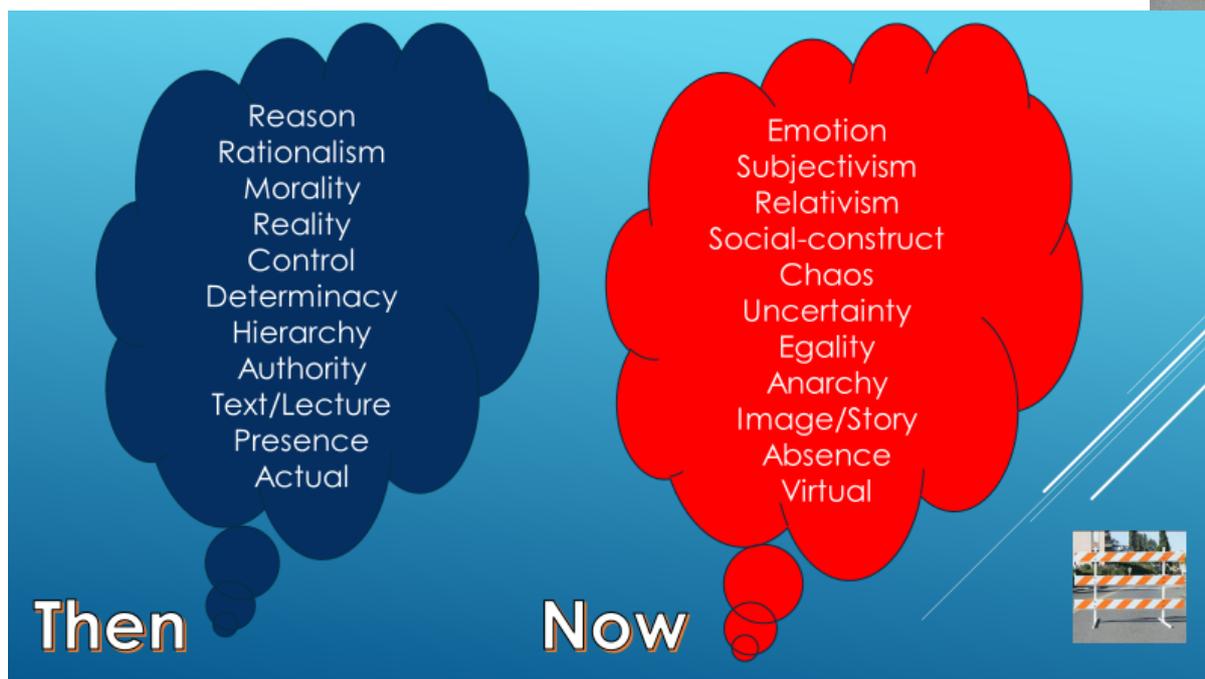
Of course, the above-mentioned scientists **lived centuries ago** in an era referred to as **Christendom**. Some atheists today point out that these men could hardly have had any objectivity regarding belief in a deity – could they?

**After Darwin**, it is easier to find scientists who question the very existence of God. A new movement based on **evolutionary science was born** at the same time Nietzsche claimed: "**God is dead**". This opened a new way for science to **contest religious beliefs** held for thousands of years.

**Richard Dawkins**, a Darwin devotee and author of the best-selling *The God Delusion*, claims that **all religions are based on something untrue** and that **belief in God is now unnecessary and obsolete**.

A major flaw in the premise of Dawkins' ideas is his starting point in terms of **epistemology** (how humans know stuff and **how much humans can know**). In a recent interview, for example, the author claimed that in the not-too-distant future humans **will know everything** about the cosmos. This hubris and over-estimation of human ingenuity and capacity is not usually found among eminent scientists. **The words he uses seem stuck in an old modernist framework of certainty, control, authority and utopian possibilities.**





Dawkins speaks in words reminiscent of scientific hubris in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. But likewise, the Church, has often used similar word-sets to pronounce its many truths in a pontificating style, as if all one needed to know could be neatly wrapped up in Western Evangelical doctrines.

By contrast, most ordinary people **now** use words represented in the bubble on the right-hand side of the above illustration to describe their daily existence. The language of today is more honest; reflecting a more humble approach in terms of epistemology. The real-world experience of people today is affinity with uncertainty, recognition of relativism, appreciating emotion and coping with chaos. When either science or religion seems stuck in the word-sets of the past, they fail to meet people meaningfully where they are at with their pronouncements, promises and prophecies.

But is there another way? **Can Christians listen to the scientists AND exercise faith in a true and living God? Can there be common, collaborative ground held between evolutionary science and Christian faith to the benefit of all?**

My answer both **“no” AND “yes”**. Let me explain.



On the negative side, let me offer are some cautionary responses to Richard Dawkins’ scientific claims against the existence of God and the “intelligence” of faith...



## 1. Dawkins' objection to belief in miracles is a circular argument

Let's say you have a friend who finds the idea of miracles a real roadblock to faith in God: we can point out how **Dawkins' dismissal of God or anything "supernatural" is a circular.**

Dawkins claims science works **entirely argument on what can be measured**. He says that we can't measure the supernatural, therefore **it can't exist**. For Dawkins, everything is governed by **cause and effect** - what can't be measured, can't be real.<sup>1</sup> Dawkins', therefore, does accept that miracles happen.

I have sympathy for find miracles a real roadblock for faith, because miracles are rare, and they are genuinely hard to believe.

Yet, even atheist evolutionary scientists, like the late Stephen Jay Gould of Harvard University, **dispute Dawkins' claim**. He, and others in his field of expertise, have called out the circular nature of Dawkins' argument. Gould said, "What does the lack of measuring methods for supernatural events prove? Only that evolutionary science is confined to a **certain part of reality.**"

We can put the **very opposite view** to our friend to open up a dialogue and ask, "If there is a God who created the world out of nothing, how can it be illogical to expect the possibility of miracles."<sup>2</sup>

## 2. We can show that many eminent scientists today have faith in God.

A **second** challenge to Dawkins that may assist our friend to get through the roadblock towards faith is to point out that **many eminent, intelligent scientists today** are also Christians.

Dawkins boldly claims it's **impossible to be an intelligent scientist and believe in God**.<sup>3</sup> Yet, there are many living scientists who are notably **intelligent** and notably **expert** in biology and evolutionary sciences.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This assertion is disputed by scientists! Heisenberg's "uncertainty theorem", for instance, counters Dawkins' claims. An example is when light is shined on a particle: the more distorted the image becomes so we can't actually fully measure a phenomenon; we can only approximate it. This points both to our limits in measuring unknown things, and the unknowability of some things altogether in fulness.

<sup>2</sup> "Miracles" includes the Bible's claims about the incarnation and resurrection, not just healing, prophecy, etc.



For example, take the time to research the life and work of living scientists today such as Francis Collins, Owen Gingerich, Jane Roughgarden, and Francisco J Ayala. None of these are proponents of “intelligent design” or evolution as a materialist philosophy, but each is an expert in evolutionary science and each expresses a lively faith in Jesus Christ.

It may help our friend who is roadblocked by science to learn that many eminent, intelligent scientists **also have faith in God.**

### **3. Appeal to conscience and morality**

A **third approach** is to **ask of evolutionary science** these **four, fundamental questions**:

- 1. where do we come from? (origins)**
- 2. who are we meant to be? (identity)**
- 3. how are we supposed to behave? (ethics)**
- 4. where are we going? (destiny)**

All religions and philosophies of life must pass these four tests. When Richard Dawkins is asked these four questions the silence is deafening on some points, and the grossly inadequate on others.

How well does evolutionary science as a materialist philosophy go in addressing these four questions? It’s interesting to note that Charles Darwin himself looked beyond his own deductive powers in life. He said:

“(It’s impossible to conceive) this immense and wonderful universe including (humans) as a result of blind chance .... I feel compelled to look to a first cause having an intelligent mind in some degree analogous to that of (humans) and I deserve to be called a theist.”<sup>5</sup>

The late great Stephen Hawking sums up, saying,

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<sup>3</sup> In a recent public interview Dawkins was asked, “If you could change the world, I guess you’d want to rid it of all religions?” Dawkins agreed, but went on to say, “I’d want to rid the world of any thought that’s not evidence-based.”

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Christians\\_in\\_science\\_and\\_technology#Biological\\_and\\_biomedical\\_sciences](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Christians_in_science_and_technology#Biological_and_biomedical_sciences)

<sup>5</sup> Darwin himself stressed that evolution and religion were not incompatible. He pointed to his dear friend Asa Gray, who fought to have the theory of natural selection accepted in America, as an example of “an ardent theist and an evolutionist.” Yet Darwin knew that he himself lacked the comfort of a steady faith.



“Science may solve the problem of **how** the universe began, but it cannot answer the question: **why** does the universe bother to exist?”

The four big questions are often answered more satisfactorily in life by **stories, art, music, history, testimonies and prophecies**. The “proofs” of our assertions about meaning and ethics and destiny are more-often backed up by examples of **sacrificial love, generosity, conscience, and acts of justice** than science per se - data that evolutionary science is not usually interested in.

Do we need forensic science? Of course, and to the great benefit of humankind. But the big **four fundamental questions** of life need other disciplines of knowledge at work to be satisfied.

So, we have at least negatives to point to in Dawkins’ assertions that may block people from considering faith in God. But, should we also listen to the scientists? Are there positives to use from science to help people find faith in God?



To this we say “Yes”! In the end, it is possible to approach science and theology as complementary **disciplines**.

Ian Barbour, author of *When Science meets religion*, proposes four ways science and religion **relate to each other on a spectrum...**

**Conflict   Dialogue   Integration   Independence**

At the one end of the spectrum, conflict between science and faith is the norm. But equally bad, says Barbour, is when both scientists and Christians won’t listen to each other but prefer remaining in an independent bubble. He argues for both sides to choose dialogue and to work towards integration wherever possible for the sake of good outcomes for the world.

#### **4. Show that faith is “evidence-based” in the Gospels**

A fourth way to help our roadblocked friend is to agree with Dawkins’ strongest statement that what people believe in should be evidence-**based**.

Sometimes Christians indeed appear to have no substance as a foundation for what they claim to believe and put their trust in. We owe it to others to be **able to explain how and what** we believe.



When we look at the evidence that caused adults of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century to believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, we can indeed show how thoughtful and sufficiently tested their faith was – as it can be for us today.

*The Gospel of John*, in chapter 20, has three such examples of doubters becoming believers on the basis of the evidence before them.

i. **Physical Evidence** - John 20:6-8

*¶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ¶and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ¶Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed;*

Early in chapter 20 the apostle John comes to believe the resurrection of Jesus through **circumstantial evidence** - the **open tomb and grave clothes** left within it. In vs. 8 we read, “having seen this, he believed.” Based on his testimony down the ages, many others have believed too.

ii. **Scripture** - John 20:9

*¶for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.*

In the following verse (9) the author tells us the basis of the doubt of those disciples. They had not yet pieced together the evidence awaiting them in the writings of **Old Testament prophecies** and **Psalms** that foretold the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>6</sup> For example, Psalm 16:9-11 speaks in words fit for a resurrected messiah,

*Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.*

For many since John and Peter and the other disciples, faith has come through the evidence offered in the Scriptures.

iii. **Personal Encounter** – John 20:18,28

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 24:45 tells how the risen Jesus led his followers through a study of the Scriptures for this purpose



*<sup>18</sup>Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.*

*<sup>28</sup>Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'*

Two other doubters were converted to a third kind of evidence-based faith – one based on a **personal encounter**. Both Mary of Magdala and Thomas (also known as Didymus), both disciples of Jesus, were brought to faith by an encounter with the risen Christ. Mary's eyes were opened, and Thomas' doubting was dispelled.

Even today, some people come to faith after a spiritual encounter with God. We sometimes hear someone testify to knowing the presence of the risen Christ – another kind of “evidence-based” approach to faith.

I don't wish to classify the above three examples of evidence in the same realm of scientific process required by someone like Dawkins for the findings to be “true”. But it is wrong to say these and other bases for faith are not in a real way “evidence-based”.

John records forecast Jesus Christ gave to his followers about how people like us might come to faith today, saying to Thomas...

*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. (John 20:29)*

## Concluding remarks

We should have great empathy with those who **genuinely struggle** with faith in God or with the idea of God intervening in the natural order of things. Some of the first followers of Jesus found it difficult too. At the end of The Gospel of Matthew, the risen Christ gathers his disciples around him and gives them instruction about the road ahead before departing from them. In Chapter 28, verse 17 we read...

*“they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted”*

Even the first witnesses in the ancient world struggled to believe in the miracle of the resurrection of Jesus!

Clever arguments won't necessarily help someone remove the roadblock and come to faith. More likely, our shared dialogue and shared curiosity and wonder at the world around us will offer the best opportunity for integration.



Science and Christianity may join in the song of Psalm 8 together as a result when it sings...

*<sup>3</sup>When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;  
<sup>4</sup>what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals<sup>[a]</sup> that you care for them?  
<sup>5</sup>Yet you have made them a little lower than God,<sup>[b]</sup>  
and crowned them with glory and honour.*