

Do Christianity and Science Oppose Each Other?: Part 2

One of my favorite theologians is the late Emil Brunner, Karl Barth's nemesis and counterpart in the dialectical theology movement in Switzerland in the 1920s through the 1950s.

I say "nemesis" because they had a very famous and unfortunate, lengthy and complicated argument about "natural theology" in which Barth used very strong language against Brunner and Brunner responded by attacking Barth's views on a number of issues.

I say "counterpart" because they were, in so many ways, very close in their thinking - for example, about Christ as the center of Christian theology and the Bible as a witness to revelation not verbally inspired.

Not long ago, I read for the first time Brunner's excellent little book, "Philosophy of Religion from the Standpoint of Protestant Theology."

There, beginning on page 171, he dived "head first" into this whole controversy with a section on "The Bible and the Scientific View of the World."

He starts out admitting that "By its undreamed of progress science has forced faith to disencumber itself of certain relics of (primitive) science." That seems beyond debate.

Then he continued by arguing that theology has no business intervening in the framing of scientific hypotheses. "It should never have entered the head of Christian theologians to intervene in the controversy over Darwinism, so long as the framing of evolutionary theories was confined in a strictly scientific manner to the domain of what is open to observation."

That's a particularly pithy and insightful statement that takes a lot of unpacking

only because of the complicated tensions that exist between “religion” and “science.”

Basically Brunner was challenging both Christian theology and science to respect their boundaries and limits. In essence, he was slapping [James Burke’s wrist](#) (anachronistically, of course).

Then Brunner makes an astounding statement. “Impossible it is that any essential position of Christian faith should be affected ... by changes in the scientific view of the world.”

One must pay attention to every word in that statement to avoid confusion and wrongheaded objection.

“Essential position” means something different to Brunner than to many conservative evangelical Christians who have elevated the age of the earth to a dogma.

And “scientific view of the world” means something different to Brunner than to many secular popularizers of science who present it as including naturalism - the belief that nature is all there is.

Brunner then explains how necessary it always is to free “the substance of the Bible” from its temporary forms.

Everyone does that whether they realize or admit it or not. The only question is what is included in “the substance of the Bible.” For Brunner, it is Christ and the gospel.

Finally, Brunner stated that the real conflict between “faith” and “science” appears especially when modern scientists (or, I would say, popularizers of science) smuggle “scientific monism” into “science.”

Brunner labels “scientific monism” (which many since him have called “scientism”) “superstition.”

By “scientific monism” he meant the belief that all of life’s questions can be answered by science and that by its own methods science is capable (eventually) of providing a comprehensive understanding of all of reality.

In my experience, very few actual scientists believe in or promote “scientific monism,” but many popularizers of modern science do just that - by implication (for example, James Burke).

Brunner rightly noted, “It is with philosophy that the serious conflict of faith is fought out.”

The problem is that philosophy is often smuggled into the teaching of science - especially by popularizers who either don’t understand science’s limitations or misuse science, misunderstood or misrepresented, to promote their philosophy (that is, naturalism).

Finally, Brunner ends the discussion of “The Bible and the Scientific View of the World” with this astounding conclusion: “Opposition to faith in revelation does not grow out of science, philosophy or culture, but out of false thinking about science, philosophy and culture.”

In other words, there is no necessary conflict between faith and philosophy either. That conflict also arises only when philosophy begins with certain presuppositions that rule out faith from the beginning.

Fortunately, postmodern philosophy is beginning to reverse that trend and re-open philosophy’s door to taking religion seriously (as more than myth).

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Editor’s note: This is the second of a two-part series. Part one is available [here](#).