
A CREDIBLE FAITH

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Western culture is undergoing a fundamental ideological transformation. Historically based upon Judeo-Christian ideology, scientific methodology, and critical reasoning, it is now migrating toward a culture based upon far less reliable guides. Social scientists refer to this trend as “postmodernism.”

Modern western societies have advanced technologically far beyond all historical precedents. Advances in medicine, engineering, and agriculture have produced higher standards of living for more individuals than ever before. Scientific methodology has played a critical role in this success, and is thus highly esteemed in western cultures. This esteem is so high that scientific opinions are often more highly regarded than “Judeo-Christian” ones, even among people of faith. And why not? Science has put a man on the moon, split the atom, given us the telephone, television, computer, genetic engineering, and promises to eventually cure all of our medical ills—even reverse the aging process. Who needs God? Judeo-Christian ideology has given us irrational, intolerant radicals who lead violent crusades, teach that the Earth is flat, deny the existence of dinosaurs, and try to make us feel guilty about everything. Despite its apparent failures, conservative historians correctly argue that the Judeo-Christian ethic has played an essential role in the success of Western culture¹. Nevertheless, the preference for science over faith is so much a part of our society’s structure that the argument carries little sway.

Although the situation is changing, I have become convinced that the preference for science over faith is more prevalent in western culture than many people recognize. One obvious consequence of this preference is the widespread notion that science and religion are fundamentally in conflict, to the degree that it is difficult to reconcile how a person can be both a scientist and a devoted person of faith. Although I find this notion preposterous, it is somewhat understandable given the behavior of scientists and religious leaders.

On the one hand, the general public does not understand what science is, due in large part to the deteriorating state of modern education. The situation is aggravated by scientists who do not consider the listener when making scientific statements. That is, the average listener understands scientists to be sources of objective, absolute facts. He doesn’t realize that when a scientist says that he has “proven something,” he is really saying, “based upon this set of assumptions and this set of data, this explanation is the most probable one offered to date.”

On the other hand, we must recognize that some scientists have behaved poorly. Scientists, too, are human. Too many scientists have abused their credibility, making stronger claims than are justified by their data without qualifying them

accordingly. They have *presented as fact* conclusions which flow from personal biases rather than from objective data: “expert” witnesses are paid substantially for scientific testimony which incidentally bolsters the client’s case, and researchers perform “objective” studies which conveniently justify the social/economic agenda of their political/industrial sponsor. The situation has so deteriorated in recent years that scientific societies are now publishing guidelines on ethical scientific behavior and establishing courts to enforce them. Some universities now include a required course on ethical scientific behavior in their curriculum. This situation has not gone unnoticed by the general public, and the credibility of science is lower today than it has been for decades.

Evidence the rise of postmodernism. Increasingly, individuals are looking to non-traditional means to obtain “truth,” such as intuition, mysticism, or psychic phenomena². Sadly, the organized church and practitioners of science have so violated the public trust that they have lost credibility, and society is now obsessing on their failures. Traditional approaches are viewed as inept in the face of persistent problems such as crime, violence, and disease. Cultural relativism, political correctness, revisionist history, pathological science³, and alternative medicine are clear symptoms of this postmodernist trend. Although the trend may persist for only a few decades, the long-term consequences of *reimagining*⁴ one’s faith or reinventing history will be significant. Generations of minds will be ungrounded in rational thought, and the practice of more reliable methodologies will diminish. I don’t know how long this damaging trend will persist, but I don’t like the view from here.

I personally embrace a paradigm based upon Judeo-Christian and scientific foundations, where both are rooted in analytical reasoning and are complementary, yet equally reliable means of knowing. This does not mean that I am not open to new discoveries and ideas; only that I will not assimilate them until they have passed through the same rigorous analytical filters which I have found to be the most reliable. In this synthesis, I evaluate new ideas in the context of history and against the most successful prior paradigms. The rigorous combination of scientific methodology and Christian ideology is not new. Science finds its origins in Christianity. Modern science was born in an environment in which the rigorous pursuit of truth and knowledge was fostered by the church. Unfortunately, the organized church failed then, and persists in mishandling scientific results today. But foolish behavior by churches does

not make Christianity foolish. Likewise, foolish behavior by some scientists does not invalidate the scientific method.

In my personal paradigm, science and Christianity are more than just compatible, they are complementary and mutually supporting. One discipline does not supplant the other, but faith provides the *why* and science the *how*. Albert Einstein also expressed this conviction, writing, “*Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.*”⁵ Because scientific methodology *presupposes* a physical explanation for all phenomena, scientists who deny the existence of God are actually practicing the *religious* philosophy of Naturalism. Ironically, it is actually more objective to allow for the possibility of supernatural phenomena than not. Conversely, persons of faith who deny empirical conclusions deny that “*the universe is full of logic,*”⁶ and require a “God of the gaps” mentality to account for God’s constant intervention in physical reality. Thus, when natural explanations are found for events originally considered “miraculous,” superstition is exposed and the need for God appears diminished.

Combining faith and science in this way allows each discipline to embellish the other, affecting the other’s motivation, not methodology. Thus, I experience the spiritual joy of wonderment when I explore a natural phenomenon with scientific eyes, free to explore *how* nature behaves, undistracted by *why*. The wonderment leads to a sense of humility, which experience has shown is the best way to approach scientific questions. I am then free both to explore *and* appreciate nature. Copernicus expressed this elegantly:

*To know the mighty works of God; to comprehend His wisdom and majesty and power; to appreciate, in degree, the wonderful working of His Laws, surely all this must be a pleasing and acceptable mode of worship to the Most High, to whom ignorance cannot be more grateful than knowledge.*⁷

Admittedly, this paradigm is traditional and conservative. It is anchored in critical reasoning, objective observation, and 4000 years of collected history and wisdom. But it is not antiquated. For of what use is a faith that cannot withstand one’s own scrutiny?

¹ R. Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (Harmony Books, New York, 1991)

² D. P. O’Mathuna, *C&E News*, May 27 (1996) 2.

³ D. L. Rousseau, *Case Studies in Pathological Science*, *American Scientist*, 80 (1992) 54.

⁴ S. Cyre, *The Presbyterian Layman*, **29-3** (1996) 6.

⁵ A. Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions* (Bonanza Books, New York, 1954) p. 46.

⁶ C. H. Townes, *Making Waves* (American Institute of Physics, New York, 1995).

⁷ Copernicus, in E. Hubbard, *Little Journeys to the Homes of Great Scientists* (The Roycrofters, New York, 1905).

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