

Brian Welter

Science and the Christian Faith
by Christopher C. Knight*

Christopher Knight combines his insights as an Orthodox priest and holder of a PhD in astrophysics to make a notable contribution to the field of religion-science dialogue. He sheds light on the wide differences between Orthodox and western theology on the nature of humans, sin, and the created order. Many readers, accustomed to a Catholic-oriented dialogue, may need to reset their stance on religion and science if they accept Knight’s claims. The author applies his Orthodox-inspired perspective to many key aspects and terms, such as the fall and its ramifications, miracles, grace, the sacraments, the western distinction between the natural and the supernatural, and the link between the *Logos* and the *logoi*. Some of the theological issues may be unfamiliar to Catholic readers, which makes *Science and the Christian Faith* all the more fascinating though quite challenging at times.

The author provides the Christian with a clear method and attitude to adopt when discussing science and religion. He notes the importance in Orthodox theology of following the “mind of the Fathers.” Even though the Church Fathers had no notion of modern science and technology, we can follow their attitude when evaluating these. Just as

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the Fathers accepted the Greek science of their day and even employed it in their apologetic work, so we can accept the science of our day and use it to defend and develop a Christian view on various issues. Yet Knight issues the Orthodox caveat that the chaff of the Fathers must be separated from the wheat. Thus even the Fathers must be read critically. We must avoid becoming patristic fundamentalists in the discussion with science. What this means is a flexible spirit, the same one that prompts an allegorical reading of Scripture, particularly with passages such as the creation accounts in Genesis, which we can read in a nonliteral sense. Knight, practical and well-grounded in Orthodoxy, notes how this allegorical reading of the Bible parallels an analogical reading of the created world. Scientific findings can be interpreted in analogical ways, as ways for us to learn more about God. This turns science into a kind of theological endeavor, much as it was for some medieval western scientists such as Robert Grosseteste.

Throughout *Science and the Christian Faith*, the author highlights the limits of science and warns against science overstepping its boundaries. He also underscores the theological significance of scientific views and practice. As with many Catholic writers such as John Paul II or Stanley Jaki, he warns against *scientism*, which he characterizes as a philosophical position that some overzealous scientists take when they dismiss metaphysics or God because these cannot be experimentally verified or measured. He notes that most scientists make for lousy philosophers given their typical lack of training in this area. But western theology is not innocent. Its “tendency to separate grace and nature” has contributed to a split in its vision of the world, such as between metaphysics and the material world.¹ The Orthodox see God as present in nature far more powerfully than western theologians do. The latter mostly envision God as operating upon nature from the outside.

¹ Knight, *Science and the Christian Faith*, 19.

Knight accuses western theology of practicing a type of Deism, as reflected in the natural-supernatural split, which separates grace and nature.² God seemingly acts in a special way to temporarily suspend the laws of nature which He established when he made the world. The Orthodox view of nature, including the lack of a natural-supernatural split, shows how Catholic thinkers may be misguided when trying to reconcile science and religion. Nothing needs reconciling. The theory of evolution, for instance, poses no threat to Christian belief. Some Church Fathers, both Latin and Greek, hinted at “a gradual unfolding of the potential of what God created ‘in the beginning’.”³ St. Augustine developed the notion of “created potentialities,” which remain dormant like seeds until the right time.⁴ St. Basil espoused something similar. If anything, the theory of evolution reflects the prescience of certain Church Fathers.

Another key to resolving the science-religion split is the Orthodox theology of the fall. Knight appeals to the Orthodox idea of the fall to help develop his argument in a bold and beautiful way. With Adam’s sin, the natural world, the world that God intended, fell into a “subnatural” state. That explains natural evil such as tsunamis and tornadoes, and why the Bible promises that in the eschatological age to come the lion will lie down with the lamb. But even now, God is never outside of nature, suddenly inputting grace and producing a miracle. Grace and the miraculous are always present. Crucial to this argument is the notion that “miraculous events represent, not the ‘supernatural’ action of an outside agent, but an anticipation of the character of the ‘world to come’.” The state that these events unveil is *above nature* only in the sense that it is above the *subnatural* state in which, because of the fall, we now find ourselves. Miracles [and, later, the author includes the sac-

² *Ibid.*, 165.

³ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

raments] represent the *true nature* of the world intended by God in his creation of it.”⁵ This “cosmos shot through with the radiance of divinity.”⁶ is a beautiful, hopeful, and (for westerners) even revolutionary vision.

The author is just as challenging in his rejection of the oft-accepted mind-body duality. He refers to exciting advances in neuroscience which seem to question this duality by showing that humans are embodied beings. In other words, the mind is very closely tied to the brain’s physical structure. Knight expresses no theological alarm over this. His fascinating discussion of the *nous* supports his Orthodox vision of the human being as the microcosm of the universe. The *nous* is the psychological element that allows a human to connect to God. This has been imperfectly translated into Latin as the *intellectus*. The *nous*-centered connection leads to the illumination that Augustine also identified. Yet western theologians failed to capture the entire notion. Knight notes the crucial role of *apophatic* theology for the Orthodox. This “negative theology,” which has often been ignored by western theologians, differs from “positive,” or *cataphatic*, theology. The author defines these terms clearly, and outlines their influence on the spiritual life: “cataphatic affirmations are seen primarily as providing a kind of ladder towards an increasingly contemplative and non-conceptual knowledge of God.”⁷ How does this impact the religion-science debate? St. Basil noted that not only is God’s essence unknowable, but the essence of created things can also not be fully expressed. This points to a significant epistemological lack which scientists need to come to terms with: “it is the unknowable depth of things, that which constitutes their true, indefinable essence.”⁸ Such a belief invites scientists to reconsider

⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

the vital role of metaphysics in describing the cosmos, as St. Basil's teaching implies that this unknowable essence is an ontological issue.

This metaphysical stance could help scientists better understand how they see the world, particularly in the extent to which scientific theories can explain reality. Knight discusses Popper's *critical realism*, Kuhn's *anti-realism*, and Mary Hesse's *structural realism*. Knight identifies a correspondence between structural realism and St. Basil's teaching on the unknowability of the essence of things. Structural realism includes the idea that "we should . . . be realists about the structures that science claims to reveal, but not about the ontology that is assumed in the description and investigation of these structures."⁹ Such a philosophy of science may provide the best antidote to scientism by providing the meeting place of "scientific rationality" and "theological rationality." More specifically, this indicates the meeting of scientific realism with theological realism. Knight helpfully clarifies what he means by such realism. Quarks can only be inferred "through theoretical exploration of experimental results."¹⁰ This parallels Christians "when they speak about the God whom they cannot observe directly."¹¹ The methodologies of theologians and scientists seem to have unanticipated yet fascinating parallels.

One parallel is the way that theology, like physics, requires a both-and mindset. Both Newtonian physics and general relativity provide workable models for scientists, depending on the level at which they are working. Also, light behaves as both waves and particles. In the same way, God is both immanent and transcendent. Knight refers to St. Athanasius, "for whom God has no affinity with the world in his *essence*, but by his *powers* pervades the whole cosmos."¹² The author is

⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 143.

at his most convincing when he invokes St. Gregory Palamas's teachings on the divine energies and the divine essence because this type of theological thinking remains undeveloped in the West, and has therefore made no contribution to the religion-science dialogue. Yet this essence-energies distinction, or *antinomy* as Knight calls it, encapsulates the *panentheism* (not to be confused with pantheism) that Knight argues is found in the Orthodox view of creation: "in his energies—which are nothing less than God himself in action—God is inexhaustibly immanent, maintaining all things in being, animating them, making each of them a sacrament of his dynamic presence."¹³ Along with the discussion on the *nous*, this insight could add tremendously to the science-religion dialogue by showing that the gap or conflict between science and religion is not as deep or unbridgeable as some may assume.

Knight also applies the *Logos-logoi* connection to God's immanence and the Orthodox teaching of panentheism. The things of nature each possess their unique essence because of their individual *logos*, but these individual *logoi* are connected to the one *Logos* of the Godhead, which is the creative principle of the universe. This echoes in Christianized form the Platonic teaching of the *idea* or *form* that each created thing participates in. The author is very coherent here in showing how this panentheism avoids becoming heresy because it shows how nature and God remain separate even though nature is imbued with the Creator. He also notes St. Maximos the Confessor's teaching that the *logoi* also denote the teleology of a thing of nature, and how this pulls this thing toward God: "The *logos* of each created thing is—as Metropolitan Kallistos has put it—'God's intention for that thing, its inner essence, which makes it distinctively itself and at the same time draws it towards the divine realm'."¹⁴ The fact that the cosmos has a purpose is a meta-

¹³ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 146.

physical, not scientific, issue, though this teaching could help scientists see the limits of their discipline. Science tells us *how* and *what*, but not *why*.

The author succeeds at conveying how the individual pieces of Orthodox teaching on the cosmos fit together into a balanced and coherent whole. Knight describes this teaching as without the gaps in logic or unresolvable tensions that western Christians have wrestled with. The Orthodox vision of the universe is not in competition with science. Much of Orthodox theology seems to be interwoven with other parts of theology. So much of this vision can also be interwoven with science because science complements Orthodox theology. In this way, scientists and theologians can learn from each other.



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SUMMARY

This paper is a review of Christopher C. Knight's book, *Science and the Christian Faith*. According to the author, Knight's book sheds light on the wide differences between Orthodox and western theology and applies Orthodox-inspired perspectives to explaining many key aspects and terms, such as the fall and its ramifications, miracles, grace, the sacraments, the western distinction between the natural and the supernatural, and the link between the *Logos* and the *logoi*. The author concludes that Knight's book is an attempt to show that the Orthodox vision of the universe is not in competition with science.

KEYWORDS

Christopher C. Knight, science, Christianity, Orthodox theology, western theology, the natural, the supernatural, *Logos*, *logoi*.

REFERENCES

Knight, Christopher C. *Science and the Christian Faith*. Yonkers, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2020.