

Russell Stannard: "Reconciling" Science and Religion

Modern people feel that the Bible was written by people who lived long before the discoveries of science and therefore espouses a primitive and superstitious worldview. A worldview is a particular philosophy of life or conception of the world. Is the Bible really in conflict with science?

Russell Stannard is one of the best sources of current Christian thinking on how to reconcile the Christian religion and science. Is he right that they are compatible?

Let's examine the seeming problems between science and the Bible pertaining to the "big issues":

- 1 Creation
- 2 Evolution
- 3 Miracles

The Christian physicist Russell Stannard reports the doctrines of modern science accurately and tries to reconcile them with biblical Christianity. We will look at the alleged conflict in the light of his work.

Stannard & Creation

The Book of Genesis in the Bible says that in the beginning God made the heavens and the earth. Christians assume that this is referring to the big bang, the explosion that resulted in the universe, space and time.

"There is a close connection between space and time - to the extent that that the three dimensions of space and the one dimension of time are to be regarded as indissolubly welded together to form a four-dimensional continuum called space-time. The link is so close that we cannot have space without time, or time without space....if the big bang marked the coming into existence of space, it must also have marked the coming into existence of time. There was no time before the big bang" (page 55) and argues "where the big bang was concerned, there was no before. Although the question, 'What caused the big bang?' strikes us as a perfectly reasonable thing to ask, it is not. Our line of argument appears to lead to the conclusion that the question is meaningless" (page 56).

The Biblical response to this is that the fool says there is no God and by implication the agnostic is just as foolish. And Stannard's reasoning denies that we have any real reason to believe in God. He rejects the question,

"Why is there something rather than nothing?"

That is the core question for those who are trying to find proofs for God's existence. His view that there is no real reason to believe in God leads to atheism. He argues that creation can be explained without God but as God is not subject to scientific examination we can still believe. But that is not belief - that is only assuming God exists. It is using the God idea to plug a gap or hole.

The "God of the Gaps" line of argument is quite unpopular today. In the past, Christians noticed how science not make life in the laboratory and concluded, "There only God could have done that!" That's an example of the line of argument. Stannard says that the argument suffers from the problem that "the gaps have a nasty habit of getting filled up, leaving an intervening God with less to do" (page 28). It is important that we grasp that this completely repudiates the Bible's claim that God's existence can be clearly seen from nature.

Using God to plug holes is a denial that God is by definition the perfect being and that we should do good just for him. It is only using God instead of serving him.

It is not true that "Why is there something rather than nothing?" is the most important question for believers in God. The question, "Why is there a God rather than nothing?" is the most important question. If God originated the universe then he is more important than it. It is so unimportant in comparison that he didn't even have to make it. It follows the question about the why of God is what matters and the question about the why of the universe takes second place. Why is there a God rather than nothing? The believers just reply that God is there and that is that. That is not an answer. If that is not an answer then it follows that "Why is there something rather than nothing?" cannot be answered either. If you believe in a creator God, then you cannot ask why the universe exists when it might not have done unless you tie it in with the question, "Why is there a God rather than nothing?"

Why is there something rather than nothing?" is unanswerable if you assume the existence of God because the why of God's existence cannot be understood or answered.

If "Why is there something rather than nothing?" is unanswerable for the atheist God only makes it worse. It follows then that it would make more sense to be atheist than a believer.

If the question is unanswerable that is not the same as saying the existence of the universe is purposeless. It only makes purposelessness a possibility.

If the question is unanswerable then the atheist can answer or guess that there is no purpose. There being no purpose is a legitimate answer. There does not have to be a purpose for everything.

It's foolish to ask, "Why the universe?" and not also "Why God?". The two questions cannot be separated. Religious manipulators have us looking at the universe and asking, "Why is there something - meaning all this - when there might have been nothing? There must be a reason." The question is deliberately put like that in the hope of nudging people towards thinking that the universe's existence must be down to a magical God. The manipulators know that this is less likely to happen if it's phrased as it should be, "Why is there a God and universe when there might have been nothing?"

Some feel that space and time being made in addition to the universe at the big bang makes the God hypothesis more necessary than ever. The reason they give is that it leaves the existence of space and time in need of explanation as well as the universe's existence. This would mean that if there was time but no space or no universe we would need God to explain time's existence. It also implies that if there is nothing but a single grain of dirt then that needs the God hypothesis as much as an infinite number of universes bigger than ours would. We can sense that there is something badly wrong in this logic. When it is put that way, the problem shows that the God answer is not the great answer it is made out to be.

Stannard and how Chance Made All Things

Believers say that whether the universe and ourselves were made the way the Bible says or by chance as science would say we still need God as an explanation. But the chance theory has less need for God no matter what they say. He may still be needed. Stannard accepts that science is correct in saying that chance made all things and evolution produced us.

The Theory of Evolution clearly claims that it was chance that made all life the way it is. Some Christians say that God used chance to make us. Stannard correctly points out how if it were really chance then God had no idea what he was going to end up with. He says that the answer is that God has foreknowledge - he sees how things will turn out. But it is Christian belief that God sees and can foretell the future without making a mistake. The view that God knows exactly what would happen in the world if Princess Diana had never died makes no sense. He cannot see a future that will never be. God cannot then make decisions in the present because of what he sees in the future. He makes decisions now and sees what the outcome will be. The future does not have an effect on the past. Stannard is watching too many episodes of Dr Who in which the future affects and changes the past. That is as illogical as a time machine going into the past and allowing you to murder your father before he met your mother.

Christians are uncomfortable with the notion of a God who uses such a cruel process as evolution to produce us and the other creatures we share the planet with. Evolution is based on survival not love. It is based on power not mercy. The entity that survives has the best survival mechanism and love does not come into it. Scripture says that God is love, 1 John 4:8.

Contrast that with Stannard's science which argues that God lovingly set up the evolution system and its cruelty is not that bad for animals do not suffer much - page 31. It would be dangerous to assume that harming anything is fine as long as it is not fully aware that it is being injured. It would refute morality. It would be a very cold attitude to take. And what for? For the sake of religion?

Stannard then tries another way to reconcile the cruel plan of evolution with the love of God. It is ingenious and Christians who believe in evolution seem to have no choice but to adopt it. Given that God "was the sole creator, [he needed a way to] endow his creatures with a measure of independence from him in order that he might genuinely win them over. His answer? Chance. God would not specify all the details of our construction. He set in motion the broad principles of evolution and then let nature take its course. In a sense, we made ourselves" page 32.

You would be forgiven for saying that we gradually make ourselves good and since God continually creates us we might as well do without the process. If our genes influencing us to do good is the reason why we do good then why didn't God give us genes that help us become even better people?

If God is in control of the process, we did not make ourselves in any real sense. Scripture speaks of our absolute dependence on God. God is the master and sustainer of all that he has made Ps 147:8,9 He covers the sky with clouds; he supplies the earth with rain and makes grass grow on the hills. He provides food for the cattle and for the young ravens

when they call.

God is almighty and therefore in control. So chance cannot truly exist. Stannard's God is not the God of Christianity but the Supreme Being of the Deists. Also, his God after making us in such a cruel fashion does not have almighty power so can we be confident that he can eradicate evil and give us eternal happiness? In addition to the cruel way we were made, we also have to endure this uncertainty. What a position that God has put us in! Stannard contradicts the biblical doctrine of creation.

Stannard may believe that his Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit - Matthew 1:20. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit".

Stannard's argument that we have to make ourselves would imply that Jesus was only partly the product of evolution and therefore had less free will and personal responsibility than the rest of us. This idea is contradicting the Bible doctrine of Jesus' full humanity. See Heb 2:17. Jesus had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest.

Stannard's answer to the question about how we know this God of evolution loves us, is that God became man, Jesus, and suffered and died with us for "There was no other way for him to confirm the nature of his relationship with us" page 33. The Bible indeed does teach that God did that and proved his love. This proof is so powerful and strong that the apostle proclaimed that the gospel is simply the death and resurrection of Jesus 1 Cor 15:3-4, For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. But evolution undermines the strength of that proof. Because, according to Christianity, God loves us he gives us free will so that we can love him back. Real love is not forced. Only a person with the power to do evil and rebel against God can love him. Evolution implies that until the human ancestor developed an adequate degree of consciousness there was no free will. Evolution demolishes the biblical explanation for why evil exists ie: it's not God's fault but our own for he made all things good - Gen 1:31 it was very good.

Stannard argues that you say chance made all things we need an explanation for why chance exists and why it has produced such greatness and wonder in the universe. But you don't assume a why for chance! Chance is to be seen as a brute fact. You do not need to ask the why. You just accept that chance has been at work and leave it at that. If you win the lottery you do not start investigating why you won! That would be strange.

Stannard then claims that "it is simply not true that to say that random chance that lies at the basis of the evolutionary process makes the outcome wholly unpredictable" page 29. He goes on to argue that though random, chance has a role, a system will develop and "characteristics conducive to survival will emerge" - page 29. For example the entities that are produced by evolution will develop the power to see. This would happen if we were able to start off evolution on another planet from scratch. Suppose such a system is there, lots of things are not part of it. For example, there are still entities that do not see and which are helpless. They are alive not because they have survived but because luckily there are no predators about. The Bible however says we are not mere survivors but children of God. 1 John 3:1, See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

Stannard's thinking unacceptable to Christians for scripture says that God looks after all his creatures even the lowliest - Matthew 10:29. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care.. He is saying that our evolution and our existence are down to purely natural causes - an example of how some Christians are agreeing with the atheists! It is only luck that causes evolution to form a system that procures entities that can survive.

Conclusion

Stannard is only undermining his own scientific knowledge and credibility by wasting time writing a book on Science and Religion. He is taking advantage of the fact that society is too prejudiced to get upset by this. If it were somebody trying to show how Alice in Wonderland/the Vedas/the Mormon Book of Abraham compliments science his credibility would be in tatters. And especially if he chose the Bible of Scientology Dianetics. The loyalty to science in a person who idolises a book that does not even mention evolution is quite low. Period.

Bibliography

Atkins, P. On Being (Oxford, New York) 2011

Griffiths, R. Ed. Hitchens vs Blair, Is Religion a Force for Good in the World? (Black Swan, 2011)

McGrath, A. Bridge-Building (Inter-Varsity Press, 1954)

Newman, R. Questioning Evangelism (Kregel Publications, 2007)

Reid, A. Apologetics (Moore Theological College, 1996)

Stannard, R. Science & Belief, The Big Issues (Lion, 2012)

Vernon, M. The Big Questions, God (Quercus, 2012)

Warfield, B B, On the Antiquity and the Unity of the Human Race (The Princeton Theological Review, 1911)