

# Science's God of the Gaps

It can be easy to forget that atheism is a relatively modern invention.

Throughout history, religion was always central to the life of empires. Kings claimed a divine right to rule, the temple was as important to a city as the palace and priests acted as magistrates. There was no perceived divide between the sacred and the secular.

This was the world into which Christianity was born as it spread throughout the middle east, north Africa and Europe, and soon obedience to the pope became the uniting force for most of the countries of Europe.

Shaped by Greek philosophy, Christian trust in a creator and monastic schools of learning, Europe proved to be rich soil for the early flourishing of science. And Christianity was indeed a wonderful incubator for science and modern western values, as the atheist historian Tom Holland describes.

The worldview of Christianity created modern science, as C.S Lewis explained: *"men became scientific because they expected law in nature and they expected law in nature because they believed in a lawgiver."* And indeed, most of the fathers of modern science were devout Christians. When they witnessed the precision of mathematics, the reliability of physics, and the symmetries of the cosmos, it didn't seem to them like they were observing cold science; they felt as if they were seeing a living fingerprint, the shadow of some great architect. It was this excitement which drove them to dig deeper into science.

However, not long after the scientific greats, a new era of thought began. It's common in human nature to idolise good things as ultimate things, and science is no exception. Instead of awarding the natural world to the work of the Divine, men began to wonder whether the natural world is simply self-referring, i.e. not requiring any further explanation beyond itself, so that the answers to the deep questions of life and reality can be found, not in seeking a Heavenly Father, but in Mother nature.

Therefore, it was in this vein that some scientists started to come into conflict with Christian institutions, starting mainly in the 17th Century. Thought-leaders started to fundamentally question the authority of church and state. The big new idea was that to understand the nature of reality we must start with the brute fact of the physical world. This approach was contrary to the teachings of Christianity at the time, which taught that we ought to start with the brute fact of a divine will and purpose behind the physical world. To many the institutions of Christianity increasingly represented the old oppressive order, standing in the way of progress and the future flourishing of humanity. Things got tense. Galileo's cosmology became a case in point as the Catholic church denounced him as a heretic and placed him under house arrest for teaching that the earth wasn't the centre of the universe.

In addition to developments in the sciences, the political balance of Europe experienced some monumental shifts, and throughout the 17th and 18th Centuries, this new 'Age of Enlightenment' grew into a renaissance of art, philosophy, economics and law. Science started to flourish free from the confines of the corrupt established powers. Instead of pursuing science as a means to understand God's handiwork, men began pursuing science as a means of replacing God. Science filed for a divorce from religion, and gradually secularism grew in its place.

Secularism had a big job on its hands as it had to completely rebuild everything religion had taught

about the world, almost from the ground up. Sacred texts and divine authority could no longer be our trusted guide and the scientific method became the rubric for truth. To be fair, Christianity needed the wake-up call.

## The gaps start closing

Religion used to have an answer for everything.

The Egyptians believed times of drought and plenty were determined by their gods. Ancient Greeks credited the gods for the rising of the sun. Nowadays, modern religious people invoke God to explain the origin of the universe. Isn't this all the same?

When we jump to conclude a divine cause for some effect without sufficient evidence, this is what we call the god of the gaps. "God did it" used to be the explanation for everything we didn't yet understand. We appeal to powerful spiritual beings to plaster over our ignorance. In this view, God fills in the gaps left by science, and the upshot is that as science progresses the God of mystery lives on an ever-shrinking island of influence as rational science takes over His territory.

There are clearly deep problems with this approach of jumping to use God to explain everything that hasn't yet been explained. For starters, it commits the 'argument from ignorance' fallacy - the mistaken notion that a proposition is true because it has not yet been proven false (or its equal opposite - that a proposition is false because it has not yet been proven true). But this line of argumentation can be used to "prove" any kind of nonsense, for instance, the claim that there's a magical golden teapot orbiting Saturn. What created Saturn's rings? It was the magical golden teapot. Prove me wrong.

Children tend to gravitate to *teleological* explanations, meaning they are more likely to try to explain things in the natural world according to their understanding of their purpose, rather than what causes them. For instance: why are rocks round? So we don't hurt ourselves. However, it would clearly be a mistake to credit any person or any process (whether intelligent, deliberate, accidental or inanimate) as the cause of something without sufficient reason.

## A Christian warning

Surprisingly for some, this warning against appealing to a 'god of the gaps' as a superficial explanation for what we see around us didn't come from atheistic scientists, it came from Christian theologians. They wanted to push back at the "god of the gaps" approach, explaining its flaws.

German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote the following from a Nazi prison during WWII:

*"How wrong it is to use God as a stop-gap for the incompleteness of our knowledge. If in fact the frontiers of knowledge are being pushed further and further back (and that is bound to be the case), then God is being pushed back with them and is therefore continually in retreat. We are to find God in what we know, not in what we don't know."*

And earlier, in 1933, the Bishop of Birmingham Ernest Barnes pleaded:

*"Must we then assume Divine intervention?... I confess an unwillingness to bring God into the scene like this. The circumstances which seem to demand his presence in this way are too remote and too obscure to truly satisfy me. Men have expected to find God at the special creation of their own species, or active when mind or life first appeared on earth. They have made him God of the gaps in*

*human knowledge. To me, the God of the trigger is as unsatisfying as the God of the gaps. It is because throughout the physical universe I find thought and plan and power that behind it I see God as the creator."*

It is ironic that this warning from astute Christian theologians has been jumped on by many New Atheist evangelists, unfamiliar with the sound Christian reasoning behind it.

## **Ours is not a gappy God**

There is a widespread misconception today that the God of the Bible is a God of the gaps, a fairytale explanation that gradually dissolves as science advances. Now, if you define God as a temporary explanation for something science has not yet explained, then of course you're going to have to choose between God and science because that's how you've defined God. That is how secularism has defined God. But that's not the God I believe in.

As Professor of Mathematics at Oxford University, John Lennox, said: *"All the gods of the ancient kingdoms had their origins described in terms of being 'descended from the heavens and the earth.' They were products of the primaeval chaos of mass and energy and so were essentially material gods. However, the god of the bible is not described as a material God but rather the creator of heaven and earth. He's not a God of the gaps."*

The bible doesn't describe a God who is merely one player within creation, but the source and sustainer of the whole cosmos. We read: *"in Him we live and move and have our being"* (Acts 17:28), and *"in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made"* (John 1:1-3). God is present in the whole universe - both the bits we don't understand and the bits we do. He's behind it all.

When Newton discovered the law of gravity, he didn't say *"now we have found gravity we don't need God"*, what he did express was that his calculations and observations reveal to the thinking person that there is a deity. The more Newton understood how the universe worked, the more he admired the genius of the God who made it operate that way. The more you learn about a piece of art, the more you fall in awe of the artist. The more I appreciate the taste of flour, sugar, oils and an egg mixed together and exposed to a certain temperature, the more I appreciate my mum's baking. Understanding how temperature and proximity cause chemicals to react together doesn't make me lose faith in my mum, in fact, it strengthens it. Therefore, God does not compete with science as an explanation.

## **Everything's gappy**

It's obvious why New Atheists would point out the 'god of the gaps' fallacy in an attempt to discredit faith in God - they fundamentally misunderstand why the majority of practising Christians believe in God. But putting aside this arrogant, lazy ignorance, for now, let's address why calling upon this fallacy to discredit theism as it's widely taught and understood doesn't make sense.

Let me explain with an analogy.

When an archaeologist digs up a flint spearhead he examines it and suddenly believes in a caveman of the gaps. We could say he just hasn't yet discovered the natural process whereby that lump of flint received a complex series of chips from other flint rocks. Given enough time and chance, it's possible for the movement of flint down a hillside to collide with other rocks in that way. You have to

admit it.

Every theory is a theory of the gaps, in that its validity depends on its explanatory power filling a gap where competing theories fall short. Evolution of the gaps. Gravitation of the gaps. Standard model of physics of the gaps. All of them.

They're all pieces of a grand 3D puzzle, and they all find their place as they slot into their own gap. We accept ideas according to how sufficiently they explain phenomena, and we reject them when other explanations have greater explanatory power.

Science, then, is a matter of probability. Scientifically minded people don't expect theories to have 100% rock-solid proof but they consider them in terms of probability. Scientists accept theories if they have sufficient explanatory power to explain what we see. Going back to our caveman analogy, it is indeed possible for flintstones to fall down a hillside and over time completely accidentally become chipped down into shapes that look to us like spearheads. However, the more of these spearhead-like shapes we find the less probable it seems that chance alone could have created them all.

In the case of stones shaped into spearheads, it would be rational to posit an intelligent cause. In the same way, as we consider probabilities and competing hypotheses it can be entirely rational to posit intelligence as the best explanation for things we see in the natural world.

## **Atheism's own god of the gaps is the real problem**

We have to admit - there are bad reasons for believing in Christianity. We've had our fair share of flimsy god of the gaps explanations. Yet are atheists any less guilty? This can work both ways, and if we put atheism under the microscope we find some glaring gaps in reasoning. Naturalism claims that the astonishing complexity and sheer beauty of this universe is all the outcome of a blind, aimless universe that spontaneously created itself from effectively nothing. How did this all happen? It's a coincidence. Against all odds everything created itself. It turns out nature moves in mysterious ways. Atheism has its own god of the gaps: his name is "chance". However, unlike the Christian flavour of this fallacy, in atheism, this blind-spot is completely accepted.

When we approach scientific enquiry forbidding certain hypotheses like intelligence, right from the start, these a priori exclusions are directly and blatantly unscientific. The Age of Enlightenment freed science from the shackles of religious orthodoxy, but in reaction, atheism has created a new oppressive orthodoxy. Science should be free to follow the evidence wherever it leads, and no one should be shunned from the scientific community like Galileo under house arrest, for doing so. Naturalism, with its rejection of intelligence in all but derivative causes, therefore, is simply bad science at the most fundamental level. Not to mention that naturalism's rejection of all non-scientific reasoning on a (non-scientific) philosophical basis is self-defeating.

In Christian faith, God is both the box that contains the puzzle, the fibre of the puzzle pieces and occasionally a piece himself.

I shall finish with a final quote from C.S Lewis that wraps it up nicely:

*"Looking for God — or Heaven — by exploring space is like reading or seeing all Shakespeare's plays in the hope you will find Shakespeare as one of the characters or Stratford as one of the places. Shakespeare is in one sense present at every moment in every play. But he is never present in the same way as Falstaff or Lady Macbeth, nor is he diffused through the play like a gas... The only way he will know something about Shakespeare is if Shakespeare writes something about himself into*

*the play.”*

*\* This article contains references to material from Professor John Lennox*