

Myth No.3: Religion Is Opposed to Science

Fr. Williams Responds

One of the most common objections to religious belief today is its supposed incompatibility with scientific knowledge.

The age of science was supposed to replace the age of religion -- or so the story goes -- since it provided a better explanation of the natural world that we live in. We no longer "need" God, since science has explained how things really are.

Religion is "an enemy of science and inquiry," writes atheist Christopher Hitchens (God Is Not Great). The logic behind this accusation runs like this: Religion hates science, because religion is about power. Once people learn how nature really works, they won't need God anymore and they won't need churches or church leaders to tell them what to do. Church leaders will lose their influence and power, so they cannot let that happen. Therefore, church leaders will always try to thwart science.

Thus atheist Richard Dawkins writes: "Mystics exult in mystery and want it to stay mysterious. ... One of the truly bad effects of religion is that it teaches us that it is a virtue to be satisfied with not understanding" (The God Delusion).

Both Dawkins and Hitchens declare that religion is inimical to science. Science and religion cannot peacefully coexist -- they say -- since they offer contrary explanations of reality. Since only one can survive, one must go, and the two are in a struggle to the death.

The example to be trotted out is always, of course, the case of Galileo Galilei. Though the Galileo affair was hardly a molehill, it wasn't nearly the mountain it has been made out to be.



Louis Pasteur 1822-1895

Real errors were made -- scientific, theological and moral -- and injustices committed, and no one disagrees with this.

Still, one historical case (Isn't it interesting how Galileo is the only example ever cited by the atheists?) hardly negates the enthusiastic support that the Church has given to the natural sciences over the course of two millennia.

Religion's supposed hostility to the natural sciences extends to other related disciplines, as well.

Christopher Hitchens writes: "The attitude of religion to medicine, like the attitude of religion to science, is always problematic and very often necessarily hostile." He adds that medical research only began to flourish once "the priests had been elbowed aside."

Oddly, in the very next line he fondly quotes Louis Pasteur as an example of this enlightened research, without acknowledging that Pasteur was a pious Catholic!

A closer look at the facts reveals a much different reality than that painted by the atheists.

History shows that the natural sciences grew out of Christian culture. As the sociologist Rodney Stark has so convincingly shown (See especially *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery*), science was "still-born" in the great civilizations of the ancient world, except in Christian civilization.

Why is it that empirical science and the scientific method did not develop in China (with its sophisticated society), in India (with