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The Believing Scientist: Essays on Science and Religion

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Stephen M. Barr. *The Believing Scientist:
Essays on Science and Religion.*

Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2016.

Reviewed by Hyrum Lewis

Since the rise of the New Atheist movement two decades ago, a number of religious apologists have come forward to defend belief in God. Many of them have been journalists (e.g., Lee Strobel), clergymen (e.g., Timothy Keller), philosophers (e.g., David Bentley Hart), theologians (e.g., William Lane Craig), mathematicians (e.g., David Berlinski), and even historians (I suppose my own book *There Is a God* would qualify as a historian's contribution to the genre). But since atheists claim the mantle and authority of science when dismissing religion, perhaps the best defenders of belief are scientists themselves.

The great value of Stephen M. Barr's book *The Believing Scientist* is that Barr has all the key scientific credentials—PhD in physics from Princeton, professor at the University of Delaware, member of the American Physical Society, author of numerous peer-reviewed articles on cosmology—and is also a practicing Catholic. Unlike those in other fields, he has the authority and expertise to make a case for religion that engages science at the highest level.

The book has a broad scope and will delight any reader interested in the science-religion question. It comprises twenty-six essays, divided into eight sections. Most of the essays are book reviews the author has previously published, covering topics such as the mind-body question, the virtues and vices of the intelligent design movement, the implications of quantum theory for religious belief, the religious conversion of Francis Collins (the head of the Human Genome Project), the problems with Stephen Hawking's cosmology, the errors in materialist "reductionism," and the tendency of many scientists to turn their discipline into a substitute faith. Perhaps the book's greatest virtue is the sheer number of theoretical and practical issues it engages.

Although such a collection of essays tends to be uneven and repetitive and lack a sustained thesis, a number of arguments pop up repeatedly in *The Believing Scientist* and constitute Barr's main contributions to apologetics. Among them is the idea that the "war" between science and religion is unnecessary and largely contrived by ignorant atheists with a scant understanding of religion or by ignorant believers with a scant understanding of science. Barr's tone is generally evenhanded, but he does not hide his irritation when discussing those responsible for playing up this imaginary "conflict." The New Atheists try to destroy religion, but many fundamentalists (perhaps unwittingly) try to destroy science, and both sides mistakenly believe that religious truths are contingent upon the validity of a biological theory. For Barr, a victory by either side in this unholy war would be a tragedy.

Barr is well positioned to both defend science and recognize its limits. He has no problem calling out scientists who claim something is a scientific fact when it is not scientific at all. He correctly notes, for instance, that materialism (the doctrine that nothing exists except matter) is not a scientific point of view but a philosophical one (and an easily refuted one at that). Much of the contention between religion and science arises because too many people confuse science and materialism.

He also reminds us that science cannot yield morality. Science can tell us what *is* but not what *ought to be*, and atheists who say otherwise are falling prey to the "naturalistic fallacy." This was hammered home to me recently when I watched two prominent atheists in a panel discussion angrily insist that we don't need "gods, fairies, or spirits" to tell us what's morally right; we only need reason. Yet the irony was that one of these atheists was an objectivist whose reason led him to an ethic of selfishness while the other was a utilitarian whose reason led him to an ethic of altruism. Their shared claim refuted itself since reason had led them to opposite moral conclusions.

Not only does Barr make an excellent case for the harmony of religion and science, but he does so in a way that doesn't lose the average reader. Many physicists can communicate effectively with equations and scientific jargon, but only a few, such as Barr, can communicate effectively with plain words and metaphors—and it's in metaphor that Barr is perhaps most profound. He uses, for instance, the relationship between an author and character in fiction to illustrate the relationship between the divine and the natural in creation. Can human life be caused by both God and evolution? Yes, it can in the same way that

Polonius's death was caused by both Shakespeare and Hamlet. *Random*, he reminds us, is a statistical term, not a metaphysical one, and we should avoid the temptation, to which both Darwinists and anti-Darwinists succumb, to use *random* as synonymous with *unplanned*.

So why aren't there more scientists like Barr out there defending religion? The pat answer most atheists give is that there are so few religious scientists left. Because religion retreats a little further with each step forward for science, atheists say, most people who study science will naturally lose their faith. This explanation, although comforting to an atheist, has little basis in reality. Barr notes that the number of scientists who believe in a personal God is (depending on how one phrases the question) around 50 percent, and that number has not changed significantly since the late nineteenth century (25). Given the major scientific advances of the last hundred years, this is hardly what we would expect to find if the "religion retreats" thesis were true.

In fact, one of the most interesting claims Barr makes is that the scientific discoveries of the last century have made religious belief *more* plausible rather than less plausible. The discovery of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle has dealt a serious blow to materialist determinism, the discovery of the big bang has given greater credence to the idea of Creation, and the discovery of the numerous precise physical constants necessary for the universe to generate life has given new reasons to believe in cosmic design. Darwin, according to Richard Dawkins, made it possible to be an "intellectually fulfilled" atheist by throwing out the idea that nature has a designer,¹ yet the cosmological discoveries that reveal a fine-tuning of the universe bring that designer right back. If there is no creator, then why is our universe so perfectly tailored to bring forth life?

In the face of this evidence, most materialists turn to the multiverse hypothesis, which says that there is an infinite number of universes; because there are so many, it makes sense that at least one would have the life-friendly properties of our universe. Barr gives this idea the respect it deserves but rightly points out that it's not a scientific explanation, but a conjectural, metaphysical one (136). After all, something only falls within the realm of science if it is observable and falsifiable—the multiverse hypothesis is neither.

1. Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), as cited in Barr, *Believing Scientist*, 6.

Yet the question remains: why aren't more scientists like Barr writing apologetics? If the answer doesn't lie in the findings of science itself, I believe it may lie in the sociology of the scientific community. Conformity and groupthink can afflict even the smartest among us, and just as social scientists who disagree with the political dogmas of their peers generally remain quiet about their "heretical" conservative beliefs, natural scientists who disagree with the materialist dogmas of their peers may remain quiet about their "heretical" spiritual beliefs. This is unfortunate since religious scientists like Barr add greatly to our understanding of these important issues and refute the common misperception that science and religion are incompatible.

Hyrum Lewis is Professor of History at BYU–Idaho and has held visiting positions at Stanford University and Skidmore College. His most recent book, *There Is a God: How to Respond to Atheism in the Last Days*, was published by Cedar Fort in 2017.