

Science, faith once seen as 'intimately connected'

Chris Mulherin interviews eminent Australian historian and philosopher Professor Peter Harrison



By Chris Mulherin

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Eminent Australian historian and philosopher Professor Peter Harrison, a global expert on the history of science, recently spoke to Chris Mulherin on the history of the relationship between science and religion in the West. Contrary to popular belief, he says, science and religion historically had a strong dependent relationship.

Peter Harrison says we've been duped into believing in the myth of a perennial conflict between science and Christianity. No, Harrison doesn't use the word 'duped', because he is quiet-spoken, choosing his words with care, and wary of overstating his case.

Harrison returned home to the University of Queensland a number of years ago after spending time at Yale University and then as Idreos Professor of Science and Religion at Oxford University, where he also headed the Ian Ramsay Centre for Science and Religion. His most recent book, *The Territories of Science and Religion*, is based on the prestigious Gifford Lectures he gave at the University of Edinburgh in 2011.

Harrison is now an Australian Laureate Fellow and Director of the Institute

for Advanced Studies in the Humanities. He is also a fellow of ISCAST—Christians in Science, and he was in Melbourne recently to give the annual ISCAST Allan Day memorial lecture at Ridley College. He also presented a public lecture at the University of Melbourne, and a staff and postgraduate seminar at the University of Divinity.

Our conversation ranged from Galileo, Darwin's dogs (a bulldog and a Rottweiler), the Western roots of science (but what about China?), to the question of whether science, come of age, makes religion redundant.

The Conflict Myth

We started talking about the so-called conflict between science and faith, with Harrison affirming that conflict is the way the relationship is most commonly understood – both outside the Church, and also from anti-evolution, 'creation-science' movements within the Christian Church. In Islamic societies too science is often seen in conflict with religion.

Historically, however, the relationship has been a mixed one, sometimes positive, sometimes not so. But overall, Harrison says, "the relations have been much more positive on balance than negative". In fact, historians of science, including those who have no interest in being apologists for religion, are clear that the conflict story is a mistaken view of the past: "if you look at what historians of the science-religion relationship have said, probably over the past fifty years, it's a puzzlement about the persistence of this myth."

The Galileo Affair

The so-called Galileo affair is, perhaps, the most celebrated example of acrimonious relations between faith and science. The myth pits the truth-seeking 'scientist' of the early 17th century against the anti-science Roman Catholic Church. However, the truth is more complex: on the one hand "the scientific consensus at the time was firmly against the view that Galileo was proposing" and, on the other hand, the response of the Church was "in no way typical of the Catholic attitude to science". Added to that is a background of personality clashes and political intrigue in Rome.

For the Catholic Church, as a long-time supporter of science, there were good scientific reasons that Galileo's hypothesis of a moving earth (as opposed to the stationary earth of the long-accepted Aristotelian view of the universe) was deeply problematic. Harrison says, "the Church did a lot of work to try to get the science right, and to that extent they were essentially supporting what they believed to be the correct scientific consensus. And what that suggests is that there are a number of difficulties with the scientific claims that Galileo was making."

As well as the scientific difficulties of Galileo's position, Catholic support of

science needs to be recognised: “no other institution from the late Middle Ages had supported astronomical research to the extent that the Catholic Church did.” As well, Harrison cites the medieval universities, started by the Church and the sites where science was conducted: “They were huge supporters of knowledge and learning,” he says.

So, despite the fact that Galileo, a member of the clergy, remained a faithful Catholic to the end of his life, the myth of ‘Science v. Church’ in the 17th century prevails.

In England too, says Harrison, “from the 17th century to the late 19th century there is a very strong consensus that brings theology and science together... The Church of England is very much behind science, key scientific figures are religious figures, and theology is the medium for the popularisation of science. So, that’s why people are interested in science: because it has theological pay-off.”

However, in the 19th century the conflict hypothesis takes its shape.

Evolution and Darwin’s Bulldog

In 1859 Charles Darwin published his *Origin of Species* challenging some understandings of human uniqueness. Thomas Henry Huxley vigorously promoted a conflict between science and the Church and was known as ‘Darwin’s bulldog’ (so, today, new atheist Richard Dawkins is ‘Darwin’s Rottweiler’). According to Harrison, “Huxley came from a working-class background, wasn’t educated at Cambridge or Oxford, and resented the fact that the Anglican establishment had control over scientific positions in Europe. So, he wanted to liberate science from ecclesiastical control.”

In this period, a prerequisite for taking degrees at Oxford or Cambridge was signing on to the Anglican articles of faith. “So,” says Harrison, “the control of the Church of England extended to the control of university positions. Huxley wanted to break that monopoly and thought that science was the way to do it. And he explicitly wanted to use evolutionary theory as a way of undermining the authority of the Church and setting up a conflict between science and religion.”

The Construction of the Conflict Hypothesis

The conflict hypothesis took formal shape in the work of two authors and hence is often known as the Draper-White hypothesis. John William Draper was an English-American chemist who wrote *The History of the Conflict Between Science and Religion* in 1874, and, for the first time, says Harrison, “we get the quite explicit articulation of the idea that there’s a long-standing conflict between science and religion historically”. Andrew Dickson White was President of Cornell University in the US and “concerned that some of the clergymen where Cornell was based were

wanting to resist his attempts to make the university a place where secular science could get up and running.” In 1896 White published *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*. Harrison continues:

From that time on this idea of a conflict between science and religion became a kind of key theme. There are good stories there about the lone scientific hero battling the forces of religious dogmatism – Galileo the lone scientist, persecuted by the Inquisition... These things are like hooks; they get into people’s minds and then they’re reinforced by contemporary instances of science-religion conflicts such as religious-motivated anti-evolutionism; it all seems to fit together in a coherent view of our history.

Science and faith interdependence?

So, if the conflict story isn’t historically right, how does Harrison see the relationship? “If you look at the historical origins of science,” he says, “you see a very strong, dependent relationship.” Firstly, many of the key figures of the scientific revolution were motivated by understanding science as the study of God’s handiwork.

Secondly, early scientists had religious presuppositions for pursuing science (for example, that the natural world is governed by laws of nature which are in effect divine edicts). As well, says Harrison, the experimental approach to the natural world is based on a particular theological understanding of human nature. And finally, early science needs something to give it legitimacy, and religion was a means of providing that context: science was seen as religiously safe, religiously useful, and, for some at least, actually an intrinsically religious activity.

Johannes Kepler, who gave us the laws of planetary motion, wanted to study theology but had a change of mind, saying his work in astronomy – studying God’s creation – was just as theological. Robert Boyle (of ‘Boyle’s gas law’ fame) was a key figure in the foundation of the Royal Society who saw science as ‘rational worship of God’. And Isaac Newton, author of perhaps the most famous scientific work ever, wrote that when he composed his *Principia Mathematica*, he had in mind providing reasons for people to look at nature and think about God as a consequence.

In short, science and religion were intimately connected in these formative phases, says Harrison, making it possible for science to “become one of the key going concerns in Western culture... we don’t see that at any other time or anywhere else.”

Science: Uniquely Western?

But what about science in other places, I wonder? Wasn’t China well ahead in the science game? Harrison agrees that China was technologically sophisticated, but says that part of the distinctiveness of the Western rise of

science has to do with religious convictions about the universe as an orderly creation of God: “the understanding of how laws of nature operate is a very distinctive Western conception that we see emerging in the 17th century, and China has nothing like that.”

As well, “for China there were always other priorities. They understood the importance of technology but to some extent it’s clear that they were more interested in human relations: the things that we would associate with humanities rather than sciences. So, they prioritised something that they regarded as more important, and it’s quite distinctive of the West that we put so much emphasis on science and what it can deliver.”

Has science made religion redundant?

But times have changed; surely science the world over has left behind whatever theological roots it might have had? So, I pose the question on the lips of many secularists today: hasn’t science made religion redundant? Harrison’s response is enlightening, teasing out the ongoing need of science to work within a bigger frame:

For science to make religion redundant, what would be required is that science do the job that religion once did. We often hear this argument – Richard Dawkins is a famous proponent – that science and religion attempt to offer competing explanations for the same thing. But this involves a huge misunderstanding of what religion is about. Religion is about the ultimate questions: the questions of purpose and the questions to do with the origin of intelligibility – the very things that make science possible. Science cannot itself answer these questions; science assumes a degree of intelligibility; for science to work, the world must have an underlying structure, something we can see and make sense of.

The most fundamental question of all is: Why there is a world at all? That’s not a scientific question, that’s a philosophical or religious question. And once we have the world, why does the world have the particular features that it does? Why does it have an order that we can come to understand? And then, crucially, how is it that our minds, which presumably are the end products of a long process of evolution, can understand the rational structure of the universe?

These questions, I think, are genuinely puzzling unless you’re going to engage in some significant philosophical and theological arguments. They’re not answers that science can give us... So, the idea that science could actually displace either philosophy or religion seems to me a complete nonsense.

The Revd Dr Chris Mulherin is an Anglican minister and Executive Director of ISCAST – Christians in Science and Technology. The full audio and transcript of the interview with

Professor Harrison can be found on the ISCAST website at:
http://ISCAST.org/interview/Harrison_interview_2017