

The Catholic Faith, Modern Science, and the Rise of Unbelief

My name is Chris Baglow and I am from New Orleans, Louisiana, the beautiful city where I, my wife and my children were all born and which, up until this summer, was our home. I would certainly be there right now and would not be here today, nor for that matter, living in Northern Indiana, had it not been for a natural disaster which changed the course of my life and career 13 years ago, the calamity of Hurricane Katrina. As I would only discover later a less dramatic, but more profound calamity, had been unfolding right at the same time in public perceptions of science and religion.

In the hot summer months before Katrina raged across the Gulf of Mexico and crashed into our community, a widely televised public debate had been raging across the United States. A court case in Dover, Pennsylvania that questioned the appropriateness of teaching Intelligent Design Theory alongside evolution in public school curriculum was all over the headlines and the news. I was unsettled by the rancor and abusiveness of the rhetoric, but wanted to understand better. And with a new job as the department chair of an undergraduate theology program, and with a happy, busy family life with my wife and two young children, time was a resource that I did not have.

But on August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina saw to it that I had nothing but time. The flooding of New Orleans shut down the Fall 2005

semester just as it began. Our own house flooded, and once we found shelter, I had nothing to do but watch the news and fret as the water poured in and just kept rising.

It was less than a week after the hurricane when I received a phone call from Fr. Bry Shields, the President of McGill-Toolen Catholic High School in Mobile, Alabama. He proposed an intriguing possibility: the development of a religion course on faith and science for his school. Faced with rumors that the college where I was teaching would close its doors, I did not hesitate to accept.

That began a two-year process of research and writing that would profoundly alter the trajectory of my life and career, and also give me an aerial view of the other tragedy, let's call it Hurricane Dawkins. This whole period was characterized by the joy of discovering an exciting new way of thinking about the Catholic Faith, which was really not so new, but was to me. But it was also marked by the sadness of the rising floodwaters of atheist propaganda in the broader culture, of blind ideology masquerading as science.

I began writing the curriculum for McGill-Toolen in October 2005, and completed the draft in May 2007. A cursory search on Amazon.com reveals that over this calendar period, the Four Horseman of the God Eclipse were riding high on best seller lists at exactly the same time. Sam Harris would produce his *The End of Faith* in 2005 and *Letter to a Christian*

Nation in 2006; also in 2006, Richard Dawkins would produce *The God Delusion* and Daniel Dennett would produce *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. Finally, in 2007 Christopher Hitchens would produce *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Four of these books are among the top-selling works promoting atheism in human history, and all produced in that two year window.

To put this in perspective, my oldest child and only daughter Margaret was in kindergarten and 1st grade while I was writing. She is now 19, a freshman in college, and is a new member of the current young adult Catholic population. According to the data, 70% of her peers see science and religion in inherent conflict, and say that the discoveries of modern science have not strengthened their faith (thankfully she is adamantly part of the minority 30%!!). Young Catholics have in large part simply embraced the ideas that Dawkins and his ilk are peddling. In the past, ideas gained influence and changed minds only over generations. But as the data from CARA, from the Pew Research and from Christian Smith at the University of Notre Dame have revealed, it only takes a decade in our fast-paced media-saturated anti-culture. We are now reaping the intellectual tares whose seeds were scattered a decade ago.

Why are our young Catholics listening to these guys? It is because the New Atheists are engaging the discoveries of modern science, and we aren't. I have in my hand a rock from my backyard. Why did the rock fall to the

floor? GRAVITY – and whose theory of gravity do you have in mind? Newton's. Now what if I said that the rock did not fall downward because of gravity, but because we find rocks in the earth beneath us, and therefore it falls because all things tend toward their natural places? That might seem like a strange answer, but recall that a short 6 centuries ago that would've been the answer any educated audience would have given to my question. Fire goes up towards the heavens because that's its natural place, rocks go in the opposite direction to their own. Newton showed us a better way, and now Newton's way of understanding the motion of objects has become so intellectually habituated that it has become integral to the way we see the world, describe the world, and engage the world.

Now in regard to our Catholic Faith, this can help us understand why young people who now see the world through the lenses of cosmic and biological evolution, of neuroscience, etc. are walking away. It is because our proclamation of the faith, and our associated catechesis, is on the whole unresponsive to the new lenses through which they see the world. The more that scientific ways of knowing and discoveries become part of our worldview, the more their relation to the faith becomes essential to our ability to be compelled by the vision of the world provided by the Faith. These are kids who, like my own, grew up watching *Animal Planet*, the Discovery Channel and Nova. 3 weeks ago my youngest son, 6 years old, came home from Catholic school and said, "Dad, Mrs. S said today that we

are mammals.” But the next day he came home and said, “Dad, if we are mammals, did we come from other mammals?” William is not the best student, in fact, he has some significant developmental delays. But you don’t have to be at the top of your class to see the world in a scientific way. In fact, it is inescapable, and as the Church founded by the Word through whom this universe was made we should be the very first to celebrate it.

I don’t want to go too far into the weeds, but anyone with a basic literacy in Church history knows what I am saying. When it has been at its best, theological reflection and its expression in catechesis has always been responsive, and profoundly enriched by, engaging the insights and worldview in which the Faith is proclaimed. Why did St. Anselm feel the need to explain the Incarnation of Our Lord in regard to God’s honor insulted by sin, what we call the theology of satisfaction? Because he lived in a culture where honor was the very framework of society and the way people saw the world and themselves. That culture was also one that often engaged in barbarous violence to address insults to honor, a very bloody age where the Truce of God had to be called on feast days to keep people from butchering each other. But the association of honor with such sinful practices did not deter Anselm from offering a theological work in which satisfaction of an insult to honor is the central theme, a work that remains perennial for every age precisely by answering to the way his contemporaries saw the world.

Our beloved St. John Paul II knew this, and on the 300th anniversary of the publication of Sir Isaac Newton's epochal work on gravity, he said as much in his 1988 letter to Fr. George Coyne, at that time the Director of the Vatican Observatory. Here he is addressing the question of why dialogue between science and religion is valuable, and the answer he gives shows that its value is primarily for religion, not science. As you listen to this quote, imagine a young undergraduate studying genetics or biology or physics, who grew up loving her faith, living the life of the Church but whose catechesis never engaged science in any thoroughgoing way, or worse who was subjected to attempts to use science to prove the existence of God, or who was served up pseudo-science in support of creationism and biblical fundamentalism. *"Christians will inevitably assimilate the prevailing ideas about the world, and today these are deeply shaped by science. The only question is whether they will do this critically or unreflectively, with depth and nuance or with a shallowness that debases the Gospel and leaves us ashamed before history."* With this in mind, no wonder that in a culture where science is the cutting edge of human knowledge, young people who do not hear the truth of the Catholic Faith in relation to it simply discard their religious instruction. Because we didn't show the rich harmony between the way they see the world and the truth God has given us in Christ, the Faith never reached the fertile soil in the first place.

In summary, the kids are listening to the New Atheists because the New Atheists are marshalling scientific ideas, and seriously (although perversely) interpreting the world as understood through science. We aren't.

The same year I finished writing my curriculum for high school, 2007, this body produced a desperately-needed practical framework for producing catechetical materials for high-school catechesis, inspired by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. As someone who began his career as a high school religion teacher in 1990 and spent a decade as such, I got to experience firsthand the transformative potential of the *Catechism* for secondary catechesis, what it was like to teach religion before and after it. I spent the entire summer of 1994 reading it from cover-to-cover, often with tears of gratitude running down my face. In my own archdiocese we were forbidden to use the *Catechism* as a textbook; after the *editio typica* was produced we were allowed to have a classroom set. At the time I was teaching morality to high-school Juniors, and they saw me use it so often that the more motivated students bought copies just so they could have the master source for the course. They knew that reading the vacuous, bland and ambiguous textbook I was mandated to use by the school would not be the best resource to prepare for the test.

In short, I am a great fan of the *goals* of the Framework in regard to the *Catechism*, but I also have come to see its serious shortcomings. I love that it is directly responsive to the need for orthodox catechesis, and its priorities, its

Christo-centricity and its ecclesio-centricity above all, are essential to all catechesis. But going back to my gravity example, it is not responsive to the questions that occupy the minds of young people today, nor does it pay sufficient attention to the way they see the world, despite its sincere intention, expressed in the “Introduction,” “to help... young people develop the necessary skills to answer or address the real questions that they face in life and in their Catholic faith.” It does not contend seriously enough with the fact that we live in a culture that has been deeply damaged by the myth of conflict between faith and science and also that has achieved a scientific way of understanding the universe we live in. The apologetic component in the “Challenges” section seems more influenced by the motive of keeping kids from becoming Evangelicals or dissenters than positively engaging the way they see the world, of bringing faith and science together.

Finally, the approved electives seem to have been chosen with the assumption that by junior and senior year, all students are squarely on board and ready to move on to seriously considering a call to priesthood or religious life, to professional theology or to some kind of charitable work. But at no point does it respond to the burgeoning STEM-education movement and the rising trend in Catholic schools toward ever more enhanced and well-developed science education programs that prepare students to move into STEM-related professions.

Let's go back to St. John Paul II's Letter to Fr. Coyne to see more clearly the opportunity we are missing when we fail to bring science and religion into what he calls a "relational unity": *"Unity involves the drive of the human mind towards understanding and the desire of the human spirit for love. When human beings seek to understand the multiplicities that surround them, when they seek to make sense of experience, they do so by bringing many factors into a common vision. Understanding is achieved when many data are unified by a common structure. The one illuminates the many; it makes sense of the whole."* A common vision, in which a NextGen Biology course is irradiated by the light of the Gospel through an attentive and responsive catechesis given in religion class. A common vision, in which faith and science are brought into dialogue across the curriculum.

To conclude, Bishop Barron asked if I would identify five science and religion questions most bother people, the ones I get asked the most often. The more I thought and prayed in preparation for this talk, the more I felt my mind drawn more forcefully to the questions people NEVER ask me but I wish that they would. These non-questions reveal more about the blindness of our culture, the deeply entrenched assumptions, that are the real problem, that show how deeply rooted the conflict mentality is even in the minds of believers. Any effective catechesis has to get at these, and help uproot them.

For example, nobody ever asks me about the difference between science and faith as ways of knowing, if they even identify faith as a matter of

knowing and not just blind irrationality. But they are not even about the same kinds of questions. I often quote Rabbi Jonathan Sacks who said, “Science takes things apart to show us how they work; religion puts things together to show us what they mean.” Their very methodology is different. As Joseph Ratzinger has noted, both kinds of knowledge can be described as “thinking with assent.” That is, both are the use of reason by which one reaches a conclusion about reality – “thinking.” And both of them involve an assent to truth, a response of “yes, this is true.” What makes them different from each other is the order in which thinking and assent occur. In science, thinking occurs first and makes assent possible and even necessary. But in faith, assent and thinking, will and intellect, walk hand in hand; they balance each other. Understanding this difference is crucial.

I never get asked what I mean when I call God CREATOR. Both skeptics and believers all assume that for God to create is half about infinite power, half about some kind of occult engineering. This is why so many believers get excited about God of the Gaps arguments like Intelligent Design Theory, making God a “how” explanation for natural phenomena that they think science can’t explain. They conceive of God as something of a hybrid who is part magician, part mechanic, and part micromanager of complex processes. The idea that a better analogy for God would be a playwright, a poet, and that love is the driving force behind the universe, both in terms of its reason for being as well as its meaning, never enters their

minds. This means that they have two ideas about God in their minds, the God they encounter in Jesus Christ and the God who creates the universe as a kind of feat. To show them the true Christian doctrine of creation is to show them that, just as God causes us to come to life in Christ through mercy, causing goodness in us precisely where we have carved holes of nothingness into our lives through sin, that the doctrine of creation out of nothing means that every moment is an overwhelming display of the same kind of love. Creation itself is an act of mercy, of God causing goodness where it has no claim, where it is absent. The freedom that we find in the natural development of the universe is something we should expect if we see it in the light of Christ.

Another closely-related assumption that produces all kinds of non-questions is that to be a believer means to simply relinquish any sense of the integrity of nature, to give oneself over to a naïve supernaturalism in which God is constantly tinkering with the universe like an inventor with his gadget. The great thinkers of the Catholic tradition show us over and over that God is not one cause among many; he is the cause of all causes; the more a creature can do, the more it shows forth the power of God. Creationism incorrectly squeezes God into the picture of nature; Catholicism gives the whole picture to Him. People are almost disbelieving when I introduce them to the fact that St. Augustine interpreted the days of Genesis as symbolic, not in a literalistic sense, and taught that all living things, human beings

included, naturally existed in the universe from its first moment, not as actual organisms but as rational seeds existing in “the very texture of the elements... [requiring only] the right occasion actually to emerge into being.”

People never ask me when science and religion began to conflict. They assume that it has always been the case. They do not know that the conflict model is a piece of propaganda that can be traced to two American men in the late 19th century, one who used it as a vehicle for his rabid anti-Catholicism, the other as a way of justifying the secularization of higher education. They don't realize that the word “scientist” only came into existence in 1833 and that, up to that time, the words “science” and “philosophy” were interchangeable. “The idea that scientific and religious camps have historically been separate and antagonistic is rejected by all modern historians of science.”

I wish I had time for more examples, but I need to conclude and open time for your questions. Before I do so, I will return to my earlier point about how important this is for catechesis by letting St. John Paul II have the final word. Near the conclusion of his letter to Fr. Coyne, he captures the urgency of this task in a few sentences: “Science can purify religion from error and superstition; religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes. Each can draw the other into a wider world, a world in which both can flourish... Our knowledge of each other can lead us to be more authentically ourselves. No one can read the history of the past century and

not realize that crisis is upon us both. The uses of science have on more than one occasion proven massively destructive, and the reflections on religion have too often been sterile. We need each other to be what we must be, what we are called to be.” Thank you.