

Sermon Trinity XIV Christianity and Science

*Richard Dawkins is so odd;
He says that the Almighty God
Might be above the world so high,
Like a tea-tray in the sky....*

No, I'm not joking. Dawkins really does say that if there is a God, then we ought to be able to observe him as we would observe any other object in the universe – through a telescope, perhaps, or a microscope. This is really idiotic and shows that Dawkins knows no theology. No Christian has ever suggested that God is just one more object in the universe – bigger and more powerful but an object just the same. Dawkins is merely pig-headed and ignorant. How would he react if I suggested that the sum total of all biology is to be found in the little book, *Janet and John Look at Frogs?*

In the old days God had worthy opponents. David Hume's *Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding* gave theologians something to think about. Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* was frankly atheistic, but in an intelligent and amusing style. Nietzsche hated God – but at least he hated with real panache. But the gang of fifth-raters presently sneering at Christianity – Dawkins, Hitchens and Polly Toynbee – are massively ignorant not only of theology but of the basic procedures of rational thought. They say that Christianity is irrational. But they don't know the first thing about how rationality works. They know as much about philosophy as *Hello!* Magazine.

These uncultured despisers of our faith say that believers are merely superstitious and unscientific. Thus they set Christianity in opposition to science. In today's sermon I will show that, so far from being in opposition to science, Christianity is what made modern science possible. Without the work of the Christian Fathers – Ambrose, Athanasius and Augustine – there would have been no philosophical basis for science at all.

The first great age of rationality was that of the ancient Greeks. They were so brilliant in so many ways: in philosophy, sculpture and the drama they excelled. So ask yourself – why did such an intelligent and developed culture never get round to inventing science in the modern sense? Partly, this was because they had no sense of the oneness of the natural world. Consequently, each aspect of the natural world was perceived differently. This was symbolised by the many Greek gods. The Greek thinkers never imagined that these gods actually lived up there on Mount Olympus. Rather the various gods symbolised and represented the different aspects of the natural world.

This is the difference between the Greeks and us today. As R.G. Collingwood puts it: *It is an axiom for us that in any realm of nature there are certain laws which hold good not only there but in all other natural realms without exception.* Christianity abolished the many pagan gods and, by claiming that there is only one true God, laid the philosophical basis for a universal science – that is science in the modern sense.

But there is more to it than this. While there is one set of scientific laws, there are departments of science: physics, biology, chemistry and so on. The Greeks had a

problem for five hundred years trying to sort out the relationships among the various areas of nature. Specifically, this was known as the problem of the *pan* and the *hen* – because *pan* is Greek for *all* and *hen* was their word for *one*. So they had this problem of the one and the many. Collingwood explains it:

Since metaphysics is inseparable, as regards success or failure, from ordinary thinking, this breakdown of Greek metaphysics implied a breakdown of Greek science.

The Christian Fathers solved this problem by declaring that God is one but that there are many modes of God's activity. Collingwood says again: *The solution to this problem in terms of religion is not to be found in a polytheism which asserts a diversity of departmental gods; it can only be found in a monotheism which regards the one activity of the one God as a self-differentiating activity*

In other words, Christian philosophers of the 4th century corrected the philosophical error which finally killed of classical civilisation. And this correction was the doctrine of the Trinity. Of course the Trinity is an eternal mystery delivered to mankind by God's revelation. But it also has these practical implications for natural science: By believing in God the Father, they believed that the world is one. By believing in the Son, they meant that the one world is also a multiplicity of natural realms. By believing in the Holy Ghost, they meant that the world is a world not just of things but of movement.

This is the meaning of *The Athanasian Creed* which we say here from time to time: *Whosoever will be saved it is necessary above all things that he believe the Catholic Faith. And the Catholic Faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity.* It is necessary, said the Fathers, that a man believes this if he will be saved. And this means not only the salvation of his soul through all eternity, but the salvation of his sanity and his intellectual integrity in the here and now.

This is not fanciful. It is the philosophical basis which makes modern science possible and which, by implication, governs all the ordinary practicalities and benefits of living in a modern scientific age. But there is something else which the Fathers knew that Dawkins and his gang don't understand at all. Scientists such as Dawkins (and his supporters in the British Humanist Association and the so-called Rationalist Press) talk as though we learn that the world is one, and that the same laws operate throughout, simply by *observing the world*.

But this too is a mistake. We could never conclude that the world is one simply by observing it – for it might be that one of our observations one day contradicts this. For example, scientists believe that the rules of mathematics apply universally. But this is not something proved by observation. How would you set about doing such a thing? No: the belief that the world is one and that mathematics is universally valid is a *presupposition*. More than that, it is an *absolute presupposition*.

Scientists absolutely presuppose the oneness of nature and the universal validity of mathematics – *and it is those presuppositions which make their science possible*. So whether you call yourself a scientist or a Christian – or both – you rely on absolute presuppositions. St Augustine and *The Athanasian Creed* did not use the phrase

absolute presuppositions. They used the word *faith*. But they meant the same thing. St Augustine said:

Faith is to believe what you do not see. The reward of faith is to see what you believe.

And again:

Seek not to understand that you may believe, but believe that you may understand.

In modern terms, we must start off with the correct presuppositions if we are to have any hope of arriving at true knowledge. You cannot just start of reasoning as it were in thin air. You have to start with something, and what you start with determines how far you'll get. Do you remember when you began geometry at school and you were given some basic axioms? You were told at the same time that you could never prove the axioms, but if you accepted them as true, then lots of priceless true knowledge would follow from them. And it did.

Collingwood demonstrates beyond the shadow of a doubt the facile and stupid thinking of the likes of Dawkins and his gang:

Being the declared friends of natural science such people would never dream of making a fuss about anything which natural scientists find it necessary to take for granted – such as mathematics. So they drop heavily upon the proposition 'God exists' because they think that nobody believes in God except poor, miserable parsons. If they knew a little more about the history of science, they would know that the belief in the possibility of science – which is applied mathematics – is only one part of the belief in God.