

So the celebrated astrophysicist Stephen Hawking has outed himself as an atheist. It is an eccentric intellectual position to take since the predominant part of the western philosophical tradition has usually begun with the idea of God: this is true of the Greeks, the Romans and the Israelites of the Old Testament. Remember the words of the Psalmist: *The fool hath said in his heart there is no God*. But if Professor Hawking's atheism is eccentric, his reasons for becoming an atheist are even stranger. He says that the creator God is not needed because the laws of physics themselves were sufficient to make the universe. It's a bit like saying that the bylaws about the use of deck chairs in Clacton-on-Sea were firmly in operation before Clacton-on-Sea existed. Hawking's is a very odd view of what sorts of things the so called laws of physics are. *Nihil ex nihilo fit*. Nothing comes out of nothing

The laws of physics should not be confused with laws in practical legislation, the common law or the criminal law. The so called laws of physics are presuppositions. And the most important thing to notice about them is that they change all the time. It is popularly assumed that scientific knowledge is firm and steady, while morality is always in flux. This is not so. The general laws about right and wrong as expressed in the Ten Commandments do not change, but scientific laws do. For example, the physics of Stephen Hawking is quite different from the physics of Isaac Newton. And Newton operated in a world which accepted as a fundamental truth that every event has a cause. In the world pictured by quantum mechanics – our world – no event has a cause.

The biggest issue in public debate today is the relationship between science and religion. It is a difficult subject made treacherous by opponents of the Christian faith who spread lies about both Christianity and science with the deliberate aim of destroying our faith. Here, then, I want to nail some of these lies and make some corrections.

The first big lie is that the scientific revolution of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment banished the gloom and superstition of the Dark Ages and the Medieval period. In fact the so-called Dark Ages were not dark at all: they were a period of astonishing technological progress. For example, the Battle of Tours in AD 732 was the first occasion when knights fought in full armour. They could do so because of the invention of stirrups and the Norman saddle. The ancient Romans had neither stirrups nor an effective saddle, so a knight trying to wield his lance would only fall off.

Developments on the battlefield showed European farming technologists how to invent the horse collar. This allowed the farmers throughout the continent to switch from using oxen to horses for ploughing with the result that there was an immense increase in food production. Also the ancient Romans had shod their horses in sandals – Nero had some made in silver - which slipped off and caused the horses to go lame. The Dark Ages invented iron shoes by which horses could travel over hard ground and cover much more territory without injury.

Other inventions which preceded the Renaissance by centuries were waterwheels, mills, camshafts, mechanical clocks and the compass.

The next big lie is that it was not until the voyages of Columbus and Magellan that we learnt the world is not flat but round. This is nonsense. Among the scholars of the Dark Ages who taught that the world is round were Venerable Bede – his dates 673-735; Bishop Virgilius of Salzburg – 8th century; Hildegard of Bingen – 1098-1179 and St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1275).

Copernicus is usually credited in the book of lies with overturning the silly flat earth view of the superstitious medieval church. Actually, Copernicus was taught the heliocentric theory by his medieval theological professors. Nicole d'Oresme (1325-1382) wrote: *The earth turns, rather than the heavens*. Oresme was the most outstanding of all the medieval scientists and he saw no conflict between science and religion. You may be interested to know that after teaching science as Rector of the University of Paris, he became Bishop of Lisieux. And the universities themselves were not the product of the Renaissance: they were invented by the Medieval church.

Then there is the lie that the Renaissance began with the contributions of Islamic philosophers or Byzantine survivors from the fall of Constantinople who had *rediscovered* classical Greek learning. This is not true either. The reason Greek learning had not been fully assimilated was that the language of the Dark Ages was Latin. The Renaissance was actually the creation of the church whose scholars for the first time between 1125 and 1200 translated most of the Greek manuscripts into Latin and made them generally available.

Another big lie is that medical science was held back because the church wouldn't allow the dissection of corpses. But it was Medieval churchmen who permitted dissection and improved their knowledge of anatomy and pathology as a direct result. The Greeks, the Romans and the Muslims all forbade dissection because the dignity of the human body would not permit it. The church was not so hindered, because of course the church possessed the liberating doctrine of the immortal soul – what St Paul called the *σωμαπνευματικον* - the spiritual body. You want proof of all this? The Christian scholastic Mondino de' Luzzi (1270-1326) wrote a textbook on the dissection of corpses.

Ah but what about the Galileo affair? Everybody knows the church persecuted Galileo. Well, he was disciplined but this was rather for the way he arrogantly presented his ideas than for the ideas themselves. When Galileo published his book *Assayer* in 1623 he dedicated it to his friend Cardinal Barberini who went on to become Pope Urban VIII. Barberini enjoyed it because of the many skits Galileo had included in it about the Jesuits. As William Shea said, *Galileo had no doubts about God. Had he been less devout, he could have refused the summons to Rome – Venice offered him asylum, but he turned it down*. What about Galileo himself then, always presented as a rebel against the church? What were his core beliefs? Fortunately, we have Galileo's written record and this is what he wrote: *The book of nature is a book written by the hand of God in the language of mathematics*.

Now I'm not about to sign up to Bible-belt literalism. I think some theory of the gradual development of life on earth is still the best hypothesis available. But Darwinism does not even begin to explain how inanimate matter could have turned into life and how primitive and microscopic life forms could turn into creatures with the mind and consciousness of Bach and Einstein.

There is no conflict between science and Christianity. The conflict is between Christianity and ideological atheists such as Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot and T.H. Huxley, right down to those prince bigots of our own time, such as Richard Dawkins, Matthew Parris, the “philosopher” A.C. Grayling, Polly Toynbee and Joan Bakewell. These people lie about the history of science as a way of attacking Christian faith. But what is even more dispiriting is to observe in these directors of public opinion their vast ignorance when it comes to the normal processes of human reasoning. Any first year philosophy undergraduate who could not comprehensively refute their malevolent sorties against Christianity – and against elementary logic – should be expelled from his course.

It is not only that there is no conflict between Christianity and science: without Christianity, there would *be* no science. No other civilisation or culture, ancient or modern has invented science – only the Christianity of the Dark Ages and the Medieval period. This is because Christianity has declared since the opening verse of St John’s Gospel that God is reasonable. And this reasonable God made the world in his own reasonable image: to be discovered and understood by the rationality he has implanted in us by his Spirit.

Specifically, as R.G. Collingwood pointed out in his *An Essay on Metaphysics*, it is the doctrine of the Trinity, as set out in The Athanasian Creed, which provides the paradigm that makes science possible:

“By believing in the Father, the doctors of the church meant (always with reference solely to the procedure of natural science) absolutely presupposing that there is a world of nature which is always and indivisibly one world. By believing in the Son they meant absolutely presupposing that this one natural world is nevertheless a multiplicity of natural realms. By believing in the Holy Ghost they mean absolutely presupposing that the world of nature, throughout its entire fabric, is a world not merely of things but of events or movements.

“These presuppositions must be made, they said, by anyone who wished to be ‘saved’; saved, that is to say, from the moral and intellectual bankruptcy, the collapse of science and civilisation, which was overtaking the pagan world.”

Never mind Christian apologists, here’s one of the most outstanding scientists of the last century: A.N. Whitehead, co-author with Bertrand Russell of *Principia Mathematica* wrote:

There is but one source for science: It must come from the Medieval insistence on the rationality of God