DEFENDING THE FAITH TODAY (6)

F. G. Oosterhoff

Scott Hoezee, *Proclaim the Wonder: Engaging Science on Sunday* (Baker, 2003), 238 pages.

The present series deals with two books by Reformed pastor Scott Hoezee on the gift of creation. The first one, which I reviewed last time, urges Christians to celebrate the beauty and grandeur of creation and to remember that they are mandated to care for it. I now turn to the second book. Herein the author still gives attention to nature and the environment, but his focus is primarily on the attitude of Christians toward the scientific study of creation.

That attitude tends to be ambivalent. Like their unbelieving contemporaries, Christians make a grateful use of the many gifts we receive in science-based technology, from MRI's to digital pace-makers, from microwaves to computers to CD players to wireless telephones – the list is endless. But while appreciating the tangible fruits of the scientific study of nature, believers fear its negative effects on religion and therefore often consider science itself with deep distrust. This is an uncomfortable position. It could even be qualified as a dishonest one. After all, does it really make sense to accept the very substantial benefits of science and at the same time hold that science itself cannot be trusted as a reliable description of the world? Hoezee wants to explain how this has come about and to explore the possibilities of Christians coming to a more balanced view of modern science.

Scientific naturalism

One major cause of conflict, he points out, is the naturalistic mindset of many scientists and their popularizers. With the term naturalism I refer to the idea that (1) the world that we see is all there is, (2) the scientific method, and that method alone, yields objective truth, and (3) what science can't observe or explain doesn't exist. In this sense, it implies philosophical materialism and practical atheism. What we have to keep in mind, however, is that these naturalistic beliefs are not *scientific* conclusions; they are no more than assumptions, opinions. Hoezee uses as an example the *scientific work* on an electron and the *non-scientific, naturalistic conclusion* that God does not exist because the electron whirs around without any outside help. It brings to mind the Soviet cosmonaut who said he could prove God does not exist because he had not met him in space. The same type of faulty logic is frequently used in connection with other sciences – in evolutionary biology, astronomy, geology, and also in neurobiology and brain research. A naturalistic conclusion drawn from brain research, for example, is that because scientists can now "map" the brain and locate the physical seat of memory, will, emotions, and so on, all mental states and all beliefs, including religious belief, have an exclusively material base. According to this theory humans possess no soul; religious faith is a "natural phenomenon" and belief in the supernatural the effect of a "God gene." An urgent task for Christians, Hoezee observes, is to learn to separate the corn of genuine scientific discovery from the chaff of the scientific and philosophical naturalism in which some scientists clothe their work.

The power of science

Although they are mere assumptions, naturalistic ideologies have become powerful forces in our culture and strongly influence our society's worldview. Christians, including Christian students, are by no means immune to them. Their persuasiveness is based on the success of science proper. That

success is evident. I already mentioned science-based technology, which constitutes very visible proof that science "works." True, scientific conclusions are tentative and always open to revision, and in the course of history many a scientific theory has been adapted or replaced altogether. It is therefore unwise to build one's faith on any such theory, Darwinism included.

But there is more to be said. It is also true that there is steady progress in science. Herein it differs from other disciplines, and the difference is largely due to the fact that science has techniques of prediction, proof, and verification that the other disciplines lack. It is largely self-correcting. This means that science, tentative though its conclusions are, must be taken seriously and receive its "epistemic due." History shows that it "can and frequently does get things right," and that scientific conclusions which seem disturbing are not necessarily erroneous. Hoezee refers in this connection to the well-known case of Galileo, whose promotion of a sun-centred world was initially rejected by many Christians as opposed to the Bible.

All this is not to suggest that science is necessarily a disinterested search for truth. As Hoezee remarks, many a scientist is exploitative, motivated by the desire to gain mastery over nature. Some are anti-humanist, attempting "to demote humanity's perceived place in the universe by suggesting that in the larger scheme of things we human beings are a mere blip, a trifle. . . ." Furthermore, any scientist who explains the world as the result of material causes and not as the work of God worships the creature rather than the Creator. Idolatry is not absent from the world of science. Nor are we to forget the evil uses that can be and in fact are being made of science and science-based technology. Today there are means – especially in genetics but also in other sciences – that, if used, can affect the very nature of humanity. All too often the scientific credo is that whatever can be done should be done, regardless of the consequences.

The "book of nature"

But if science can lead to idolatry, it is also undeniable that many scientific discoveries are to be recognized as God-honouring in that they show the Creator's majesty and power. Hoezee reminds his readers of the ancient Christian teaching (found also in Article 2 of the Belgic Confession) that God makes himself known to us by two means, the first of which is the "creation, preservation, and government of the universe," the so-called book of nature. Here, he comments, is a most compelling reason why Christians may not ignore the work of science; for where else do they find an equally careful study of nature? Hoezee quotes the well-known astronomer (and fervent believer in the existence of space aliens) Carl Sagan (d. 1996). This man was an agnostic who had little good to say about Christianity or any other established religion but who made, at least by implication, a justified criticism of religious attitudes toward science when he "wondered why hardly any major religions or religious thinkers had ever looked upon the wonders science has revealed about this universe and then responded, 'Why, this is better than we thought! The universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander, more subtle, and more elegant.'"

When speaking of the wonders of science Sagan was no doubt thinking of the great astronomical advances of the past century in which he himself had been involved and which have so clearly shown the marvelous order and unimaginable greatness of the universe. He could also have referred to twentieth-century discoveries that demonstrate the uniqueness of planet earth and show that the earth, the solar system, and indeed the entire cosmos appear to have been *designed* for complex life, rather than being the accidental result of a mindless evolutionary process. Yet another striking

scientific contribution of recent times is the discovery of the DNA structure and subsequent DNA research. In practically every area science gives us an unsurpassed vision of the intricacy, order, lawfulness, purposefulness, and richness of the creation we have been given to tend and enjoy. It should therefore inspire not only amazement but also thanksgiving. Indeed, knowledge of science must lead to gratitude, praise, and adoration.

Because of the gift of modern science, we know far more about the universe than did our ancestors. This is an undoubted benefit. But is it at the same time a serious drawback, since science can seem to go against revelation? Would we be better off to ignore science altogether (assuming that we could do so)? By way of answer, Hoezee asks a number of rhetorical questions: "Does our increased knowledge of outer space, the composition of stars, and the nature of their hydrogen-helium fission make Psalm 19 meaningless? Do believers today, armed with tremendous amounts of astronomical knowledge, look into the night sky and conclude, 'Well, I guess God wasn't involved in all that after all, seeing as we understand it so well now'"? To ask the questions is to answer them.

When faith and science clash

Science has not disproved God's existence, nor can it ever do so. Science deals with the material universe, with what can be observed, weighed, measured, expressed in mathematical formulas. The supernatural, the invisible, the world of the spirit are outside its boundaries and competence. (Christians, incidentally, should keep this in mind and not attempt on their part to demonstrate scientifically that God exists and created the world. This is a matter of faith, not of scientific proof.)

Our primary battle is with scientific naturalism and atheism, rather than with science proper. Yet clashes between faith and science are possible, and when they occur they demand an unambiguous response. If a scientist should claim, for example, that he can prove that Jesus never lived, "then Christians may politely beg to differ on the basis of their faith and on the valid way they receive knowledge of God through God's Word." No matter what naturalists claim, scientific knowledge does not trump revealed knowledge. At the same time, Hoezee adds, admitting such occasional disagreement is "quite different from a wholesale impugning of all science" and does not prove "that Christians are better off *never* taking science seriously."

In connection with the apparent clashes between faith and science, Hoezee upholds throughout the book the rationality and validity of the knowledge of faith – such in opposition to the widely-held opinion that religious knowledge and illumination by the Holy Spirit do not constitute a way to truth. He quotes the work of Reformed philosopher Alvin Plantinga who teaches that according to a believer "a sense of God's presence and 'voice' simply wells up in a person because God, through the Spirit, is real and so causes this belief in us. . . ." As Blaise Pascal wrote in connection with his battle against rationalism and religious skepticism centuries before Plantinga, "The heart has its reasons, of which reason does not know." And as C. S. Lewis confessed, in the believer's walk of faith God becomes for him the "increasingly *knowable* God." This topic of the validity and certainty of the knowledge of faith deserves more attention than it often receives among us. It's an important aspect of any apologetics.

To be scientifically informed

The sub-title of Hoezee's book is, *Engaging Science on Sunday*. He suggests that preachers, when the occasion arises and when it can be done "naturally," pay some attention to scientific insights and discoveries in their sermons and so help their hearers come to a more realistic and more positive evaluation of science. He even gives some examples of this type of sermon. Although the examples are interesting, I am not sure that we should follow the advice. For one thing, most people would want to get their scientific information from experts, and for another, engaging science on our pulpits may well be risky so long as we routinely label the opinions we disagree with, also those held by fellow-believers, as heresy.

I do agree with the author, however, when he urges preachers and others to increase their awareness of science, to become scientifically informed; and also when he observes that a preacher's apparent lack of awareness of and respect for the accomplishments of science tends to leave the impression that what scientific studies show has little to do with what the Lord says. That type of situation can only alienate Christian scientists among us, as well as Christian young people, who often know a good deal about science, its claims, and its accomplishments. The guidance they receive must be *informed* guidance. Hoezee therefore recommends the reading of books on contemporary science and on the relationship between theology and science, and suggests several titles. I heartily agree with that advice as well and use the opportunity to draw the attention of pastors, teachers, and other interested readers to the Annotated Bibliography on this website.