

Science and Religion: A Very Short Introduction
By Thomas Dixon

The debate between science and religion is never out of the news: emotions run high, fuelled by polemical bestsellers like *The God Delusion* and, at the other end of the spectrum, high-profile campaigns to teach 'Intelligent Design' in schools.

Yet there is much more to the debate than the clash of these extremes. As Thomas Dixon shows in this balanced introduction, many have seen harmony rather than conflict between faith and science. He explores not only the key philosophical questions that underlie the debate, but also the social, political, and ethical contexts that have made 'science and religion' such a fraught and interesting topic in the modern world, offering perspectives from non-Christian religions and examples from across the physical, biological, and social sciences.

Questions for thought and discussion

- Is it possible to define the terms 'science' and 'religion'? If so, what do they mean?
- It is conventional to think of science and religion as very different enterprises, but in what ways are they similar?
- Do they both, for instance, try to give us access to unseen realities through the use of observable phenomena? And do they both rely on testimony?
- If you think that scientific and religious forms of knowledge are fundamentally different, can you define the essence of that difference?
- How can historical perspectives help us understand modern engagements between science and religion?
- Why has Richard Dawkins's brand of scientific atheism proved so compelling to millions of people in the twenty-first century?
- What do you think of his arguments, as put forward in *The God Delusion* and elsewhere? Do you agree, for instance, that whatever explains a complex entity must itself be more complex and more improbable than that entity?
- Can miracles happen? And how can science help us answer that question?
- If you think that it is possible to combine science with religious faith then what do you think is most difficult about that combination? Are there any scientific findings that could or should give a religious believer pause for thought?
- Why do biology and psychology seem to have provided more of a threat to religious belief than have the mathematical and physical sciences?
- Is the history of science a history of the continuous and inexorable secularization of knowledge?
- What, if anything, is the difference between 'Intelligent Design' as proposed recently by Michael Behe and other anti-Darwinians, and the more general and ancient idea that the universe shows evidence of divine design?
- Is 'Intelligent Design' a scientific theory? If not, why not?
- Are 'Intelligent Design' and other forms of scientific creationism characteristically American phenomena? How does that suggestion help us understand modern confrontations between science and religion?
- Do you think that there is a single 'relationship between science and religion'? What generalizations, if any, can be made?

- How have different religious traditions engaged in different ways with modern science?
- Are the intellectual issues that arise in this context just the visible tips of much larger social and political structures?
- Would the world be a better place if there were no creationists?
- What connection is there between ethical and religious criticisms of modern science?
- Having read *Science and Religion: A Very Short Introduction*, what did you find most surprising? How, if at all, have your answers to this list of questions, been changed?

Other Books by Thomas Dixon

Thomas Dixon, Geoffrey Cantor, and Stephen Pumfrey (eds), *Science and Religion: New Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

Further Reading

John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion*, New Edition (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

Ronald L. Numbers (ed.), *Galileo Goes to Jail, and Other Myths About Science and Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

Samir Okasha, *Philosophy of Science: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).