

Chapter 4: Can Science Get Along with Abba?

Both God and subjects have been excluded from the modern world. This chapter explores why this has occurred, and how these exclusions may be reintroduced in order to reconcile science and religion.

1. Since the 17th century there has been two primary ways to understand nature: one is the functional understanding and the other is the mechanistic one. Those who favored a functional understanding believe that nature drives toward some purpose. This group accepts what Aristotle calls “final causation,” which means that life moves toward some goal. The mechanistic view eliminates purposeful elements in nature and argues that only “efficient causation” is valid. Efficient causation means that everything can be explained by causes occurring in the past that form the present moment. Genuine novelty is an illusion. While there are still some who argued for a more functional understanding of nature, the mechanistic one has become dominant. Animals and humans are thought to be machines driven by the physical and chemical forces working within their bodies.

The same division between functional and mechanistic views occurs in shaping university curriculums. The influence of Berlin University, which became a center for research, is imitated around the world. The success in advancing human knowledge by research institutions became its own justification for existing. The notion that the liberal arts and humanities could provide an overall vision for the university became anachronistic. The universities no longer claim there is some truth or some values that all departments share in common. The university is “value free,” that is it does not profess that one area, or combination of areas, demonstrate any inherent value in the universe. Cobb’s exposure to neo-naturalism at Chicago University provided him with the means to challenge the mechanistic view of the universe and the assumptions of value free universities.

2. The greatest challenge to the mechanistic view of the universe came with the splitting of the atom and the development of the quantum theory. The notion that the world is made up of things, or bits of matter, gave way to the idea that reality is a series of experiences or events. One moment occurs and gives way to another. [This view is similar to the Buddhist notion that reality is in constant change.] Events operate more like subjects than objects, because events are influenced by previous events, yet also aim toward future developments. Cobb believes that a reality in process re-introduces subjects and purposes into the universe.

3. Neo-Darwinism, which is the dominant theory in biology, argues that evolution proceeds from three causes: genetics, mutation and chance. While Cobb agrees that these factors do shape evolution, he believes that other factors contribute as well. These factors imply that some form of intelligence is at work. New developments in biology show that communication and

cooperation among cells, rather than simply randomness, influences evolutionary development. For Cobb, it is false metaphysical assumptions that prevent many scientists from accepting purpose in the evolutionary process not the evidence in science itself. What their theories do not accept, he claims, they ignore.

4. If it can be shown that subjects influence the evolutionary process, then God as a subject can be introduced into the discussion. Our own experience gives sufficient reason to claim that feelings and purposes are part of nature. Unlike those who think that mind is simply a matter of the physical brain in action, Cobb believes that mind or consciousness can have an effect on bodily actions. The brain influences the mind and the mind influences the brain. If subjectivity does influence life forces, then the mechanistic notion of reality dominant in the sciences must be reformed.

5. Psychic phenomena or parapsychology demonstrate that communication can occur between humans, between animals and humans, and between animals and animals without the use of any physical apparatus. Plants respond to prayers and curses, pets sense when their owners are coming home, and these verifiable types of experience reveal the bankruptcy of a deterministic, mechanistic view of the universe.

6. If the claim that all living things aim to live, to live well, and to live better is true, then the call forward that we experience in our lives may have cosmic implications. The claim that subjects are involved in the evolutionary process opens the door to the presence of God throughout the process. The call forward that lures us into the realization of intrinsic, subjective values is God's continual persuasive action found throughout the universe. God's call is always a call to increase as much value as possible. A valueless universe would be contrary to the cosmic activity of God.

7. There are two choices in understanding the origin of the universe: one is to say the Big Bang occurred an indefinite number of times until a universe came into being that was capable of life. The creator is sheer chance. The other is to reason from human experience. If the call forward leads us to see that some presence lures us toward greater value, then the universe's structure that makes it amenable to life is also part of that call forward. The cosmic call forward is the work of Abba. Neither creation by chance or by the influence of Abba can be proved. The choice is to decide which one is the most likely.

8. Can science and religion be reconciled? Cobb, following Whitehead, believes they can. But he requires a change in the orthodox view of God who is thought to be omnipotent and who occasionally interferes in the natural course of events. Cobb rejects this view. Instead he argues for God whose subjectivity pervades the universe and calls forward intrinsic value by persuasion not coercion. The past still has great power to shape the present

moment, but it does not completely determine it. Novelty, freedom, purpose and responsibility are all aspects of each new moment. Neither science nor God knows what will happen for sure. The future is still to be decided by God and all the entities that make up the universe. God is not the sole creator. There is no reason to assume that both theists and scientists cannot work together if science gives up deterministic materialism and Christianity advocates a naturalistic understanding of God.