The Material Image

Chapter One

Christianity and Naturalism

The Aim of this Book

My aim in *The Material Image* is to show that a naturalistic view of human beings fits well with the Christian faith. Almost everyone, Christian or not, takes it for granted that naturalism is incompatible with Christianity. I challenge this assumption. In fact I hope to show that naturalism coheres *better* with Christianity than the traditional ideas of human nature it is displacing. There is no bare logical consistency but “consonance,” accord or harmony, between naturalism and Christianity.\(^1\) Contemporary science is advancing into previously sacrosanct areas, explaining things about us once considered safely beyond the reach of scientific inquiry, and in so doing changing the human self-image. The Christian faith should welcome this, not fear, resist and deny it. Carl Sagan wrote,

> In some respects, science has far surpassed religion in delivering awe. How is it that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, “This is better than we thought! The universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander, more subtle, more elegant. God must be even greater than we dreamed.”\(^2\)

This is precisely what Christians should exclaim as we look at contemporary science, delighting not only in its portrayal of this vast and ancient cosmos, the paradoxical domain of the quanta, the endlessly variegated forms and microscopic machinery of life, but above all its portrait of the human person, the material image of the creator.

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\(^1\) Ted Peters uses “consonance” to describe the relation of faith to science in his Preface to Ted Peters, ed. *Cosmos and Creation: Theology and Science in Consonance* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989): 13-17. My goal is to extend it to describe the relation of faith to naturalism.

Scientific Naturalism

Naturalism is notoriously difficult to define; some thinkers doubt that it can be defined in a coherent way without making it trivial. I will use the term simply to label a group of interconnected beliefs about the world, the place of human beings in the world, and the role of science in our knowing ourselves and the world. These beliefs constitute the core of what is regarded as naturalism on the contemporary scene. Most, if not all of them are, I believe, shared by most who are willing to describe themselves as naturalists.

The most salient component of naturalism is its claim that human beings are material things. According to this materialist, or physicalist, theory, we are wonderfully intricate physical objects, vastly more complex than other things in nature, endowed with unique capabilities, but made of the same stuff, the same quarks and electrons, atoms and molecules, as everything else in nature. What makes us what we are is not something non-physical, but how the physical parts are assembled, and the arrangement of those parts is due to natural causes and subject to scientific explanation. The human mind is not immaterial, distinct from the body. It remains unclear precisely how to conceive the identity, but it is clear that the mind is the brain, embedded in its body and enmeshed in its social world and natural environment. The embodied mind/brain senses, reasons, wonders, imagines, hopes, dreams, fears and loves, chooses and acts. We differ from other living things because we are rational and conscious, and thus persons, but this does

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not place us beyond nature; our mental lives are the workings of the neural circuitry concentrated in our heads.

When the brain is destroyed, or rendered permanently incapable of consciousness, the human person no longer exists and, in the natural course of events, will not exist again. We are mortal: no part or aspect of a human being is eternal, finally resistant to the decay and dissolution that is the lot of biological organisms. We may draw on traditional language, speaking of the soul to refer to a living, thinking, feeling, human individual, thereby focusing attention on his or her value and uniqueness, but it is a vain hope to suppose there’s something beyond what’s physical, some immortal element of the human person that outlives the body.

Humans are animals, the chimpanzee’s close relative or, arguably, the third species of chimpanzee. Our lineage separated from theirs less than seven, perhaps as recently as four, million years ago. The differences between us and our primate cousins so crucial to human uniqueness are due to a relative handful of our 30,000 genes, most of them apparently regulating the rate at which developmental processes unfold. Genetically we are at least 98% the same as the chimps, closer to them than they are to gorillas, our second closest relatives.

The human species, like millions of other species of living things on the earth, is the product of billions of years of biological evolution, set in motion with the first organic molecules capable of replicating themselves. There is no purpose in nature. Nature did not aim at the human species or anything else. The vast diversity and complexity of life on earth results from the blind mechanisms of Darwinian selection. Biological evolution results from exquisitely subtle mechanical processes; they are causal but not
deterministic. The processes that brought us into existence are inherently chancy. A replay of natural history would not produce humanity a second time. That we exist, and have the characteristics we have, is an enormously contingent matter. We have no reason to invoke supernatural intervention or guidance to account for human origins. Indeed, there is no need to invoke anything but the laws of nature, time and chance to account for everything that transpired in this world from its beginning in the Big Bang 13.6 billion years ago to the arrival of the first human beings at most a few hundred thousand years ago. The biological world is replete with the appearance of intelligent design, but it is appearance only, adequately accounted for by selection mechanisms devoid of foresight.

Our mental capacities make us unique among this planet’s inhabitants, but they are not unique in their origins. They result from the same evolutionary processes that brought forth the other species, each unique in its way. We once conceived ourselves as hybrids of rational immaterial mind and irrational body, but now we know human minds are a product of our evolutionary history no less than our toes or tonsils. The genes that produce our cognitively empowered brains were selected ultimately not because they enabled our ancestors to know and understand the world, but in virtue of their contribution to reproductive success, to our ancestors’ chances of finding food, avoiding being eaten, and impressing prospective mates. It is no surprise that our reasoning abilities fall short of those we’d imagine belonging to an immaterial rational substance designed for rational cogitation. Whatever human rationality consists in, it must be consistent with its being realized in the living wiring of a hominid nervous system and being the product of a highly contingent evolutionary history shaped by the selective
forces of the ancestral environment. The contemporary powers of mind employed in science, mathematics, philosophy, and art, impressive as they may be, are applications of perceptual and cognitive adaptations tuned to navigating the natural and social worlds of the Pleistocene, one or two million years ago. We know nothing about the physical world by reasoning alone, nor do we have compelling reasons to think evolution has supplied us with special capacities for gaining access to realities beyond our senses. Humans are capable of acquiring secure knowledge of themselves and the world, but absolute certainty is not a possibility. The causal mechanisms within us that produce our knowledge are at best reliable, not infallible. There is no place to stand from which we could evaluate our cognitive capacities as a whole. The framework of concepts with which we organize our experience is itself the product of our contingent evolutionary history and not guaranteed to map neatly onto the world as it is, independent of our interests and concerns. Any critical evaluation of our capacity to know must be carried out piecemeal, while we take for granted the general reliability of our perceptual and cognitive apparatus. The ancient challenge of skepticism, rooted in the fact that we cannot get outside ourselves to ascertain whether our minds correctly represent reality, cannot be defeated; we can only dismiss it, acknowledging our trust that our senses deliver reasonably accurate representations of the world beyond our skins and going on, trying to do our best.

Our best way to acquire systematic, secure knowledge of the world and its contents, including ourselves, is science: physics, chemistry, biology and the other natural sciences, as well as the social sciences to the extent that they are integrated into the
overall project of the natural sciences.\textsuperscript{4} Natural science is our best way of knowing in the sense that it is our most reliable way. Science is not merely one way of knowing among others. It rightfully enjoys its cultural authority. Once we ascertain that a hypothesis has been confirmed, i.e. that there is, in scientific terms, adequate evidence for it, then we ought to believe it. Generally, the consensus of the relevant scientific community suffices for the conclusion that a hypothesis has been confirmed, and therefore we should believe what those scientists tell us.\textsuperscript{5} We are thus often justified in believing things for which we have no direct evidence of our own, but only the evidence of being told by scientists that that’s what they accept, e.g. our belief that there are exoplanets orbiting stars other than the Sun because we read about it in \textit{Scientific American} or heard about it on PBS’s “Talk of the Nation.” This appropriate deference to science extends to things we can neither understand nor even imagine, to quantum tunneling, black holes, and gravity waves. It extends beyond mere belief to practice: we rely even in matters of life and death on technologies that can be devised and understood only in light of scientific theories; we send a man to prison on the basis of DNA lab results, even in the face of otherwise credible exonerating eyewitness testimony. And it contrasts drastically with our attitude toward the public pronouncements of others; no one reasonably grants this credence to the assertions of politicians, theologians, economists, generals, philosophers, business leaders or literary critics, irrespective of their competence or honesty.

\textsuperscript{4} Since antiquity, mathematics has been regarded as exemplifying the most secure form of knowledge, categorically superior to anything empirical. The status of mathematical knowledge, and the possibility of integrating it into natural science, is a matter of ongoing debate. Mathematical knowledge obviously represents the strongest kind of justification, but is it simply the most abstract part of natural science, or is it a distinct way of knowing? I address—but do not attempt to resolve—this issue in Chapter Eight.

\textsuperscript{5} The point of the qualification, “generally” instead of “always,” lies in the fact that we might have reasons to doubt whether a hypothesis actually has been confirmed, even if scientists believe it has been. See below, “Faith Shapes Science.”
The reliability of scientific methods in contrast to other ways of knowing constrains what we can know by other means. In the event of conflict, when a scientific theory and some other belief can’t both be true, science trumps its competition. It is unreasonable to accept any belief, however obvious it might appear, however cherished, that contradicts what has been confirmed by scientific inquiry. Other beliefs, no matter how ancient, widely held or deeply entrenched, even those that seem evident to the senses, even beliefs about our own minds grounded in introspection, are subject to revision as a result of scientific investigation. This is not because science is infallible; it is simply less fallible than our other ways of knowing.

A further constraint lies in the fact that, while there are things we know by methods distinctly different than those of science, we reasonably expect science to be able to explain how humans, material beings produced by biological evolution, are capable of acquiring that sort of knowledge. Claims to possess varieties of knowledge that would call for capacities that scientific inquiry indicates we do not have are properly met with skepticism.

This view of the role science plays in the contemporary naturalistic outlook is so significant that we may use the more precise term scientific naturalism to distinguish it from other views, e.g. those of the atomists in the ancient world, that are also plausibly described as naturalistic. However, I will generally employ the simpler term naturalism, unless there is some reason to distinguish naturalism on the contemporary scene from other views.

This high view of the authority of natural science so readily elicits the charge of scientism, the notion that science is the only way of knowing, that it is worth dwelling on
its denial. The conception of science set out here is an essential part of a naturalistic outlook; but naturalism does not imply that it is the only source of knowledge. When, for example, Bertrand Russell in 1935 confidently asserted, ‘Whatever knowledge is attainable, must be attained by scientific methods; and what science cannot discover; mankind cannot know’ he made a claim that is, perhaps, consistent with the collection of views I am here referring to as naturalism, but surely not required by it.6 Science is not merely one way of knowing among others; but it is one way of knowing among others. Most of what is worth knowing can be known only by means independent of science. We know that Vicksburg finally fell to Grant in 1863; that Mozart is better than the Monkees; that it is morally wicked to cause people pain for fun, that Juneau is the capital of Alaska; that the mythological Juno was Jupiter’s wife as well as his sister; that Flannery O’Connor’s stories manifest a Christian perspective on the world; that Citizen Kane influenced film noir; that you shouldn’t eat yellow snow; and that the cafeteria closes early on Sundays. Science has little or nothing to say about vast areas of human knowledge, knowledge without which human life would be neither possible nor worthwhile.

Even when science and other ways of knowing overlap, there is no reason to assume that the most useful, interesting, or important knowledge is what can be acquired scientifically. It might well be true, for instance, that there is more valuable insight to be gained into the workings of the human mind by reading Jerzy Kosinski and Iris Murdoch, or by studying the history of the Chan Dynasty, or by reading Aristotle’s Nichomachean

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6Religion and Science (London: Oxford University Press, 1935): 243. One wonders how seriously Russell might have intended this claim, as opposed to a weaker, but less rhetorically exciting, assertion about science as our best way of acquiring knowledge. Among the difficulties it faces when taken at face value: those of us who are not scientists will know nothing, since even if a scientist knows something, we will not be able to employ scientific methods to know that she knows it.
than one might glean from a scientific psychology whose explanatory theories uncover the causal mechanisms of the mind/brain. One might learn things about the natural world by contemplating the Cezanne’s watercolors, reading the poetry of Denise Levertov, tending a kitchen garden, or by climbing Mt. Katahdin that we cannot acquire from the natural sciences. Admitting the superiority of scientific methods for marshalling evidence for its claims does not commit us to the absurd claim that science can do the cognitive work done by very different ways of apprehending the world and ourselves.

We easily lose sight of how large the intellectual landscape is, forgetting how many different things about the world, and about human beings, there are to know and try to explain. We tend to hear the assertion that natural science can explain many things about us as the different, and surely false, assertion that it can explain most, or even all, of what needs to be explained about us. This is no doubt abetted by the tendency for those engaged in a particular scientific research program to pronounce hopefully—and not always realistically—on its potential while ignoring the many things it has no chance of explaining. There is much to find out about ourselves by means of natural science, but also much we can find out only by other means.

The account offered here of the place of scientific knowledge is itself the fruit of scientific reasoning. We reasonably expect science to explain how there came to be creatures capable of using science to explain the world and their place in it. The circularity is inevitable and benign. What holds for knowledge generally holds for science in particular. We have no place to stand more secure than science itself from which to pass judgment on it as a source of knowledge. This does not mean we should accept the claims of science uncritically, but we rightly take the results of science in
general for granted as we evaluate the practices or products of any part of it. This is not because science embodies some special kind of reasoning remote from our common cognitive practices. We acquire our knowledge of the world by sensing and reasoning about what we sense; scientific reasoning is what we do when we’re doing that to the best of our abilities. The claims of science deserve to be believed not because it involves a special way of knowing discontinuous with our common cognitive practices, but because in science we most squarely face our fallibility as knowers and in so doing come by our most reliable way of finding things out. As Einstein once said, “the whole of science is nothing more than a refinement of everyday thinking.” It is in science as a social institution that candidates for belief are most carefully vetted and their credentials critically tested. Natural science is thus the paradigm of objective knowledge; its institutionalized practices of criticism and self-correction minimize the individual and cultural biases that impose our desires and interests upon our descriptions and explanations. Scientific practice aims, with what appears to be considerable success, to allow nature to speak for itself, letting it be heard over our presuppositions, prejudices, and parochialism. Science is rational and, while not uniformly progressive on all fronts at all times, in the main cumulative. Focus on scientific “revolutions” and other discontinuities should not obscure the fact that we possess a large stock of consolidated and integrated scientific knowledge, a body of interconnected explanatory theories.

Scientific theories describe entities we cannot observe. Reasons to believe a theory are equally reasons to believe in the real existence of the unobserved entities to which it refers. Science explains what we sense as the effect of these unseen causes. The explanations it produces delineate the casual structure of the world, locating objects,

properties and events in the web of natural cause and effect. Nature thus scientifically grasped, is mechanistic, at least in macroscopic domains, insofar as what goes on in it is illuminated as due to its causal mechanisms. This machinery is vastly more intricate, subtle and supple than the machines made by humans. It differs in important respects from the clockwork mechanisms of rigid interacting particles envisioned by early modern science. Causal histories are often chaotic, not submitting to linear analysis. Causal connections are in play on a multiplicity of interacting levels; parts are influenced by, as well as influencing, the wholes they constitute. The laws that describe the causal relations are sometimes framed in stochastic, rather than deterministic, terms. Yet the fundamental idea that we explain something by discerning its place in the causal structure of nature remains. 8

Until the final quarter of the 20th century even those who accepted the basic claim that we are material beings, products of evolution, often assumed that the natural sciences, with their project of finding causal, mechanical explanations of things, had little or no application to what is most distinctively human. The human mind, and the social and cultural worlds it creates and inhabits, was regarded as understandable only by way of strategies essentially different than those employed in the natural sciences. The social, or human, sciences were conceived as differing essentially from the natural sciences in aims and methods. This assumption is now being overturned; the sciences of the human are being naturalized, brought into continuity with, and integrated with, the natural sciences. The project of naturalizing our understanding of what is characteristically human, initiated in principle by Darwin, but getting under way only in the last third of the 20th

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century, takes seriously the fact that human beings are biological organisms, products of evolution, and thus seeks to draw the mind, society and culture into the net of natural scientific explanation. Cognitive, emotional and behavioral characteristics of the human species that once seemed beyond the reach of natural scientific modes of explanation are being approached as evolutionary adaptations of the information processing capacities of the hominid brain. Though in its infancy, this project is advancing on many fronts, in a host of disciplines, subdisciplines, interdisciplinary fields and research programs: in cognitive science, evolutionary biology and the neurosciences; in evolutionary psychology, behavioral genetics, biological psychiatry, primatology, cognitive anthropology, evolutionary anthropology, cognitive ethology, behavioral neuroscience, biological anthropology; in linguistics, artificial intelligence research and neural modeling; in developmental psychology and social psychology. Tools for explaining human thought and action drawn from evolutionary biology and cognitive science, augmented with game theory and decision theory, are being applied to economics, politics, and law, as well as to cultural studies, literary studies and aesthetics. Alongside this scientific work runs a strong naturalizing current in contemporary philosophy that conceives philosophical inquiry into human knowledge, morality, rationality, freedom and action as reliant upon, and continuous with, natural science.

The advance of natural science into the domain of what is most distinctively human challenges the traditional human self-image. As a challenge to ancient ideas of our place in the world it is more profound than that of Copernicus; it calls upon us to rethink what we, not merely where we are. Our conception of ourselves as free, morally responsible agents is a central case. The intrusion of natural science into our self-conception
constrains acceptable accounts of human moral agency. The truth about what’s right and wrong, good and bad, cannot be derived from science; scientific accounts of what we are or how we came to be will not tell us how to live or what to do. Nonetheless, science can explain, by appeal to our evolutionary history, how we come to have the moral emotions, the capacity to make moral judgments, and the disposition to behave in moral ways, making sense of them as adaptations to social life. Such explanations do not necessarily reveal that the objectivity or authority of morality is an illusion, or that our moral convictions are false, but they undercut any idea that these characteristically human sensibilities afford a grasp of a transcendent reality.

Further, by locating the human agent entirely within the natural world, scientific naturalism constrains our idea of ourselves as free. Whatever freedom and responsibility we possess must be of a kind consistent with our being material beings. We reason and reflect about what we want, what we believe, and what we do, but ultimately all this mental activity is enmeshed in nature, governed by the causal laws that govern all physical things. Our choices and actions are not determined, but they are caused. We are not “unmoved movers.” We are intelligent, self-reflective entities within the natural world, capable of acting on the basis of reasons. That makes us in crucial respects different than other things in nature, but it does not make us transcendent beings, standing outside the physical universe.

Current scientific inquiry is undermining the traditional human self-image, a picture of what we are grounded in ordinary experience, ancient Greek philosophy, centuries of Christian theology, and Enlightenment rationalism and humanism. That was a picture of us as utterly different than, even superior to, all other living things, eluding the grasp of
natural scientific explanation because we are rational, free, morally accountable beings; in the natural world but not fully of it. The naturalized human sciences are telling us that human uniqueness freedom, moral responsibility, and rationality cannot be what they have long been taken to be. They call upon us to reconsider what we are.

Responses to Naturalism

The foregoing needs clarification, explanation, qualification, and defense, yet it captures the essence of a point of view we can reasonably call scientific naturalism, the set of ideas that I want to show as in deep accord with the Christian faith. This story of our nature and origins, decisively shaped by contemporary science, elicits a variety of responses. Some of us do not merely accept it as true, but find it deeply satisfying intellectually, beautiful, even inspiring. We recognize that contemporary science calls for an extensive reexamination of the human self-image but welcome the challenge of explaining how there can be rationality, consciousness, personhood, norms, morals, meaning and freedom in the world revealed by natural science. Scientific inquiry is systematically dismantling the traditional human self-image, but we should accept this and get on with the work of freeing our understanding of ourselves from the encumberances of a pre-scientific age and finding the truth about ourselves.

Others accept the naturalistic picture, but only grudgingly, with a sense of loss, regarding it as inevitably undermining the dignity and worth of human beings. Like Tom Wolfe, they hear science saying things like: ‘Sorry, but your soul just died!’

9 They take contemporary science not as compelling us to rethink the dignity and value, the uniqueness, the moral responsibility and rationality of human persons, but as delivering

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the devastating news that they are illusory. For them, our only hope is to slow the inexorable advance of science, to try to keep it in its place, and to resist its corrosive effects on our image of humanity as long as possible.

There are on the other hand many others who simply reject the advance of the natural sciences into the realm of the human. Some accept science as a reliable way to acquire knowledge, but contend that the naturalistic claims made above do not result from legitimate scientific inquiry but are the result of science in thrall to philosophical presuppositions that distort the data. For them, naturalism does not arise out of science properly done; it is a non-scientific prejudice injected into science, rendering its results suspect. Others deny natural science’s claim to be a source of knowledge that is more reliable than non-scientific ways of knowing. Thinkers in this postmodernist vein, including many academics in the humanities impressed by the difficulties involved in devising plausible accounts of scientific rationality, objectivity and progress, insist that science has no privileged epistemological position but is just one of the various social practices that construct forms of discourse useful for one purpose or another. We may well disregard scientific claims that conflict with other beliefs we hold dear and have no need to revise our self-conception to accord with its claims.

Christianity and Naturalism

No doubt, my assertion of the consonance of scientific naturalism and Christianity initially appears idiosyncratic, if not perverse. From the confirmed atheist to the devout Christian, the incompatibility of Christianity and naturalism is regarded as axiomatic.

For some, this amounts to a matter of definition. Naturalism often functions as a synonym for atheism, or at least as the name for a view that immediately implies there is

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10 E.g., Roger Scruton, Bernard Williams
no God. One widely used reference work states that naturalism involves, ‘sympathy with the view that ultimately nothing resists explanation by the methods characteristic of the natural sciences.’ ¹¹ Another offers as a definition, ‘the view that everything is natural, i.e. belongs to the world of nature.’ ¹² A distinguished Christian theologian, Ted Peters, offers naturalism as equivalent to *secular humanism* and as involving the view that there is nothing but the finite reality of nature. ¹³ Kai Nielsen, a well-known proponent of atheism, asserts, ‘naturalism denies that there are any supernatural or spiritual realities.’ ¹⁴ One eminent Christian philosopher, Alvin Plantinga, offers as a definition of naturalism: ‘the belief that there aren’t any supernatural beings — no such person as God, for example.’ ¹⁵ Such definitions, combined with the fact that God is not a physical thing, not part of nature, not subject to scientific explanation, obviously imply that there is no God. ¹⁶

Even when this connection is not asserted explicitly, it is taken for granted. Perhaps the most well known advocate of scientific naturalism in recent years, Carl Sagan, implicitly identified naturalism and atheism when he introduced his popular 1970’s television series *Cosmos* with the words: “The cosmos is all that is, or ever was, or ever will be.”

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¹⁵ “Naturalism Defeated” [cite published version]
Little of importance attaches to matters of definition. Those who want to use the term to denote atheism are of course free to do so. What is objectionable is defining terms in ways that render certain points of view invisible. Treating naturalism as just another word for atheism risks truncating the range of possibilities prior to examining all of them. One possibility is that the atheist is right and the claims set forth the preceding section about human nature, human origins, and the status of natural science are also correct. A second possibility is that the God of Christian theism exists, the account proffered above is largely mistaken, and something much closer to the traditional conception of human beings is correct. However, there is a third possibility: the God of Christian theism exists and the account on offer from contemporary science is essentially correct. The possibility definitions ought not to obscure is that the world as described by contemporary science, including the naturalized human sciences, is the world that God created. Most Christians, together with most atheists, are convinced that this is not the case. They might even be sure that it could not be the case, that God couldn’t have created a world of the sort contemporary science describes. They might all be right; perhaps atheistic naturalism and theistic anti-naturalism exhaust all the real possibilities. But they should not get this result for free. A perfectly good term to express the belief that God does not exist is already available: atheism. Enlisting naturalism for the same purpose leaves us without economical means to express the interconnected family of ideas about human nature, human origins, and the epistemological status of natural science that here I call naturalism.\footnote{Not too long ago the term materialism was used in a manner similar to that in which naturalism is still used, i.e. as a surrogate for atheism. More recently, this practice has subsided; the term has been to some extent neutralized on the issue of God’s existence, thanks to Christian thinkers who have argued for materialism’s coherence with belief in God. Often, they enlist the term physicalism as its equivalent,}
Either side might admit that the incompatibility of the naturalistic account of things and Christianity is not settled by stipulation, but still contend that the incompatibility is assured because a short and simple chain of reasoning leads from naturalistic assumptions to an atheistic conclusion. Such arguments are readily available, but they invariably depend upon philosophical or theological premises that cannot reasonably be taken for granted; they need to be defended. One might, for example, reason that while Christianity presupposes that human beings are free, morally responsible actors, naturalism precludes this, since it implies that all human choices have natural causes. This establishes the inconsistency of naturalism and Christianity only if it is true that free, morally responsible choices cannot have natural causes; but this is a significant, and controversial, philosophical claim. The Christian inclined toward naturalism will not accept it without an argument. Consider a second example: Christianity requires belief that there is life after death, but naturalism implies that human beings do not possess immaterial souls that could continue to exist beyond the body’s death, thus there cannot be life after death. This demonstrates the incompatibility of naturalism and Christianity only if the Christian confession that we will live forever with God after we die really requires that we have immortal souls. Most people, whether or not they believe there is life after death, believe that its possibility depends on there being immaterial souls, but the issue is whether this shared assumption is true. Theologically, is it some version of soul/body dualism that best fits with the Christian doctrine of life after death, or is some other

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hoping that the newer term carries less baggage. See, e.g. the essays in Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Malony, eds. Whatever Happened to the Soul: Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998). These thinkers—in my view mistakenly; see Chapter Four—regard it as crucial that we reject reductionist forms of physicalism.

18 We return to this in Chapter Seven.
approach a better fit, perhaps one consistent with a naturalistic view of what human beings are? The Christian who finds naturalistic views plausible is likely to suspect so and resist assuming otherwise in the absence of a good argument. Further, as a philosophical matter having to do with the identity of persons through time, does the possibility of life after death require some sort disembodied existence, and thus conflict with naturalism, or can it be grounded by other means, perhaps ones consistent with naturalism? Again, Christians attracted to naturalism are likely to be equally attracted to ways of understanding personal identity that allow for the possibility of life after death without dualism. Perhaps no such account works, but this is a matter to be ascertained by argument, not simply assumed.19

I do not want to suggest that naturalists who reject Christianity, or Christians who reject naturalism, never bring forward explicit arguments for the premises of this sort. My point is that there are such assumptions, and they do need to be defended; there is no automatic move from naturalism to the denial of Christianity.

It might be acknowledged that strictly speaking, naturalism—assuming it is not simply defined so as to guarantee this—is not inconsistent with Christianity, but that each, from the perspective of the other, is highly improbable. After all, for the Christian to insist that God not only did not, but could not, create the world naturalism describes, is a very strong claim. Perhaps it can be defended, but it will not be uncontested. Likewise, a naturalist who is also an atheist might assert that the scientific evidence supporting the naturalistic account also proves there is no God, but this too would be difficult to sustain. More likely, when their convictions about what’s obvious are challenged, anti-Christian naturalists and anti-naturalistic

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19 This is one of the matters taken up in Chapter Nine.
Christians will step back from the claim about sheer inconsistency and admit that while it is perhaps possible that both naturalism and Christianity are true, this is wildly implausible.

One might, for instance, accept that while it is possible that God created human beings by means of the somewhat chancy, unguided, mindless, purposeless processes of biological evolution that naturalism invokes, nonetheless it is not at all likely that God would do things this way. We must again not simply assume this is so but ask what reasons there might be to believe it. Here too the arguments will rely upon assumptions that need to be spelled out and defended. Even when it comes to improbabilities, the lack of fit of Christian faith and naturalism is not self-evident. It might seem otherwise, in virtue of deeply entrenched associations between views. For a variety of historical reasons, naturalistic views have become identified in the general imagination with hostility to Christianity. TheCopernican theory of the solar system, the idea of inertia, and the antiquity of the earth were among the scientific findings rejected as implausible in light of Christianity, if not actually inconsistent with it. Today, the natural scientific account of human nature seems at least as improbable from a Christian standpoint. The perspective of history teaches that combinations of views that once seemed unlikely companions ultimately can be held together without intellectual discomfort. I hope to show that we are entitled to hope for a similar outcome with naturalism and Christianity.

A different line of reasoning sees a lack of fit between Christianity and naturalism not as a matter of direct conflict, but as matter of competition. In the past God was invoked to explain many things that are now explained scientifically. Anyone who

20 I contend for the coherence of evolutionary naturalism and Christianity in Chapter Two.
supposes that the theistic explanations with which naturalism dispenses are the only, or the best, reasons to believe that God exists will inevitably conceive of Christianity and naturalism as competitors; they will see reasons to accept one as *ipso facto* reasons to reject the other. Today many scientifically informed persons regard Christianity as unreasonable in virtue of scientific explanations having rendered belief in God superfluous. They believe that since we no longer need to invoke God to explain things that can now be explained scientifically, there is no longer reason to believe there is a God. This point of view is abetted by a great number of Christians, who at least publicly appear to stake their belief in God on what they regard as the failure of widely accepted scientific explanations and the ongoing need to appeal to divine intervention to account for such things as the origins of life, the human species, and the existence of morality. Again, what needs to be made explicit and questioned is the common assumption. Does Christian belief in God depend in any significant way upon the propriety of explicitly theistic explanations of natural phenomena? If it does, then naturalism and Christianity are irreconcilable competitors and no one can reasonably accept both. However, as widespread as the contrary supposition is, we ought not to take it for granted that Christian belief depends upon the success of explicitly theistic explanations of natural phenomena. Nor, as I will argue in Chapter Two, should we even take it as given that such explanations cohere with Christian claims about God's purposes in creating as well as explanations of the sort on offer from contemporary science.

Almost all Christians reject scientific naturalism, and almost everyone who accepts it rejects Christianity; the fact that beliefs are distributed in this way calls for
an explanation, but it should not be decisive when it comes to ascertaining what we ought to believe.

Christianity’s first theologians articulated their faith in a world lacking scientific knowledge in the modern sense. Although their faith challenged some of the most important assumptions of the culture of late antiquity, in many contexts they took for granted beliefs that were eminently reasonable in their day and which were in fact almost universally held until the advent of science. It is not surprising that assumptions that have for centuries been employed in the articulation of Christianity have become so intimately associated with it that to reject them seems like the rejection of Christianity itself. The notion that we have immaterial immortal souls was almost universally accepted in the late ancient world and many early Christians relied on it in articulating Christian belief in life after death. Christianity presupposes that human beings are rational moral agents; it is not surprising that in a world where it was almost universally assumed that only an immaterial being could be free and rational Christianity came to seem committed to dualism. When the common sense idea that complexity cannot arise naturally out of simplicity was incontestable, or when it seemed utterly obvious that life could not arise from lifeless matter, Christians reasonably concluded that only divine intervention in nature could account for the existence of living things. Science today challenges ideas that have for centuries been intimately associated with Christian beliefs, but we need not suppose that there is any necessary connection between Christianity and these ideas, nor even that they were especially well-suited to the articulation of Christian beliefs.
These ancient views were not unique to Christians; almost all reasonable persons held them until late modern times. In advocating that they be abandoned, the scientific naturalist does not call for abandoning beliefs unique to Christianity but only beliefs common to all cultures not informed by modern science. There is no guarantee that the views that constituted the common sense of the early centuries of Christianity’s existence are those that best fit with it.

**The Christian Faith**

It might seem that the only hope of reconciling Christian faith with naturalism is by stepping back from historical Christianity’s supernatural elements. One might dispense with its supernaturalism altogether, interpreting its talk about God not as referring to a transcendent reality, but as a means of expressing certain values, certain attitudes and commitments about human life and its meaning in the universe.\(^\text{21}\) Or one might conceive of faith as entirely private, a matter of our subjective experience of objective reality but not as involving any genuine assertions about the world itself. One might retain a realist understanding of Christianity’s theological language, but move in the direction of deism, giving up its claims about God acting in the physical world. I will not pursue strategies of this type. The Christianity that I claim coheres well with naturalism is the traditional, “orthodox” faith articulated in the historic creeds and interpreted in a realist fashion.

This faith presupposes belief in a transcendent God who is an everlasting community of loving persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This triune God is the Creator: nothing else has to exist; whatever else exists only because God

freely chose to bring it into existence. God is utterly free, yet a rational agent. The
divine wisdom far surpasses human comprehension, yet God’s actions are not
arbitrary or capricious, nor are they completely inscrutable; the reasons for which
God acts can be communicated to us. We can in fact ascertain at least some of the
purposes for which God created. A central Christian claim is that God created this
universe with the aim of bringing into persons to be known and loved by God,
persons God invites into the everlasting, joyful communion of the Trinity.

God can, and on occasion does, miraculously intervene in the created world. It is
not unreasonable to think a personal God might choose to be known to human
persons. God chose to be revealed in the history of the people of Israel; the
Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are an inspired, reliable witness to that
revelation. Christian theology is the attempt to systematize, formalize, and explore the
presuppositions of this revelation. It is not a kind of philosophy, our most general
reflections upon the meaning of life and the world, though it has implications for
what it all means.

God became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth and it is by means of his life, death,
resurrection and ascension that God is bringing about the ultimate reconciliation of
God and creatures. That God had acted in this decisive way, calling everyone to faith
in Jesus Christ, is the Christian gospel. Our most secure and accurate knowledge of
God is our knowledge of the man Jesus, witnessed to by the Christian Church.
Knowledge of God is, principally, as Rowan Williams writes, “not knowing
propositions about an object, but sharing in God’s life.” 22 Christian faith is trust in,

and love for, the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Only in a secondary sense is it the body of belief about God, the creation, and ourselves that faith presupposes. And it is incumbent upon us to inquire into the various relations the beliefs that comprise Christian theology might have to other things we know, and to do so in a way that is at once faithful and intellectually honest.

I thus write from the standpoint of a traditional, biblically grounded Christian faith. What I assume to be true here is that core of essential Christian beliefs expressed in the ancient creeds of the Church and adhered to by Augustine and Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, Karl Barth and Jurgen Moltmann. There are, within the purview of historical Christianity, matters that remain unsettled, e.g. would God have become incarnate if the Fall had not taken place; is God eternal in the sense of being timeless or instead everlasting in time; is every human being ultimately reconciled to God or are only some saved; does God possess exhaustive knowledge of the future? I do not assume that scientific naturalism coheres easily with every combination of answers to questions of this kind; I will sometimes opt for an answer in part because it coheres with the naturalistic picture of creation produced by science; but only in part: in all such cases I regard the theological view I espouse as warranted on biblical, theological or philosophical grounds independent of naturalism. I pursue a “reflective equilibrium” of Christian theology and science: setting out from a broadly Christian starting point we might well have expected to find that God created a world of the sort science describes; finding that this is indeed where the scientific evidence unambiguously points, we reasonably weigh this in refining our theological views.23

I do not assume, and in fact doubt, that what I say about the fit between Christianity and scientific naturalism is true for other varieties of theism, nor do I assume it holds for what we might call “generic theism,” a perspective that often seems implicitly to inform discussions about science and its relation to faith. Neither do I suppose that naturalism can be reconciled with any non-theistic religious perspective. Other religious beliefs might actually be as difficult to reconcilable with the naturalistic account of things as so many take Christianity to be.

Understanding God’s aims for the creation, and the ways God has acted with those aims in view, leads to certain expectations about the universe; we might find that it looks like the sort of universe one reasonably would expect this God to have created. It is also possible to discern ways in which this does not appear to be the sort of universe the God of Christian faith would have brought into being. It is widely assumed that the world as described by contemporary science is patently not the sort of world this God would have made. My aim in The Material Image is to make the case that this widespread belief is mistaken. When we take adequate account of the revealed purposes for which God created it should not be at all surprising that the best evidence we can acquire strongly supports the naturalistic story grounded in natural science.

**Reasons for Writing this Book**

My principal reason for writing The Material Image is to try to convince my fellow Christians that they should welcome the naturalistic picture of the world on offer from contemporary science. The majority of Christians, including most Roman Catholics, and Protestants of most varieties, take it for granted that their faith
commits them to believing they have immaterial souls, an idea that is already untenable and will only become less plausible as scientific understanding of the mind/brain progresses. For millions of conservative evangelical and fundamentalist Christians emphatically rejecting the scientific theories that form the core of the naturalistic view of things figures prominently in the expression of their faith. They regard not only the materiality of the mind, but the evolutionary origins of the human species and even—ironically—the Big Bang theory, as patently false, embraced by the majority of scientists not in virtue of the evidence for these theories, but because they are deluded or dishonest, in the grip of an ideological commitment to “atheistic naturalism” that distorts their scientific.  

For those who, as I do, regard these theories as extremely well grounded in the empirical evidence and in all probability true this is a troubling state of affairs. Large numbers of Christians are deeply alienated from the scientific community and, more generally, from the broader intellectual culture informed by science. The Christian community is at risk of the intellectual dishonesty many Christians believe pervades the secular scientific culture, for there is a strong temptation to dismiss subtle and complex theories without serious regard to the reasons scientists accept them, and even without understanding them. Too many Christians are placing their hopes on the failure of science. If, as I assume is likely, the incoming evidence will only further confirm the naturalistic view of things they reject, the divide between faith and science will continue to widen. Contemporary science presents a picture of

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the world that is awe inspiring in its intricacy and beautiful in its elegance; ancient pictures of the world pale in comparison to it, but most Christians are blocked from seeing in it cause to praise the Creator. For them, it can only occasion fear and rejection, arrogance and evasion.

If I am right in thinking that it is scientific naturalism that best fits with a Christian view of things then adherence to a competing, pre-scientific view has the potential to distort the Christian faith. I fear that contemporary Christianity is loyal to an inflated conception of human nature, one difficult to reconcile with our status as God’s creatures and which makes little sense in light of the good news of Jesus Christ. As we proceed I will point to instances where this appears to be the case and suggest that the transition to a naturalistic view enhances our ability to articulate an authentic Christian account of the world and our place in it.

Many Christians do not, of course, share the antipathy to contemporary science that prevails among evangelicals and fundamentalists. Rejecting Darwinian evolution and the Big Bang are not articles of faith for ‘mainstream’ or ‘liberal’ Christians, nor for most Roman Catholics. These faith communities are much more diffident about impugning the honesty or competence of scientists. Christians in these traditions are not as likely as their conservative Protestant coreligionists to be focused on these matters. Yet here too there is unease with the emerging scientific picture of human beings; they do cast about for ways to head off the apparent implications of what science is teaching us about ourselves. They hope that acknowledging the validity of contemporary science does not commit us to the modifying naturalism’s starkly materialist, mechanistic picture of things. They
endeavor to blunt the full impact of contemporary science on the human self-image by drawing on such possibilities as emergence and top-down causation, quantum mechanical effects in the brain, chaos theory and complexity theory, non-linear dynamics, autopoesis, self-organization, the advent of non-reductive versions of physicalism, or even by embedding the scientific account of what we are in a broader philosophical scheme, such as process philosophy, that grants science its place but denies it the last word on human nature.

According to legend W. C. Fields lay on his deathbed, paging through a Bible. A surprised friend asks the ailing reprobate what he's doing; Fields mutters, ‘looking for loopholes, looking for loopholes.’ Many persons of faith, concerned that the rising tide of scientific inquiry threatens to inundate humanity, sometimes seem as intent on finding loopholes in the book of nature that will make the world safe for traditional conceptions of human nature. My strategy involves no loopholes, no attempts to soften the blow science delivers to longstanding conceptions of human nature by invoking speculative possibilities. Whatever value some of these ideas have in their own right, there is nothing in them to mitigate the news from science.²⁵ I propose the marriage of a robust scientific naturalism and a robust Christian theology, attenuating neither.

I address The Material Image primarily to my fellow Christians, but a secondary aim is to move those who do not share that faith away from the conviction they share with so many Christians that one cannot reasonably be both a Christian and a naturalist. Christianity has become associated in the public mind with the rejection of much of contemporary science. Many scientifically educated persons perceive the

compelling evidence for naturalism and reject the Christian faith, regarding it as so implausible as not to be taken seriously. Christians are regarded as ignorant or irrational and Christianity as no more worthy of serious consideration than faith in Zeus or adherence to Zoroastrianism. However, if there is no reason to regard Christianity as at odds with these scientific theories, this is a sad state of affairs that should be rectified. It is even sadder if, as I believe, these theories are likely in light of Christianity. However, this is not a work of apologetics; its aim is not to convince those who think Christianity is false to believe it is true. The fact that science tells us that this is the sort of world we might have expected the God of Christian faith to create does not count as a reason to accept Christianity.26 I do hope to persuade those who reject Christianity that they must do so on grounds other than its alleged incompatibility with a naturalistic worldview and the deliverances of modern science that underlie it.

We believers sometimes lose sight of the audacity of Christianity’s core claims about God becoming a particular human being whose execution for blasphemy and sedition and resurrection somehow saves the world from evil and death. We believe things whose sheer implausibility to plain common sense should not be underestimated. Defeating the almost universal supposition that Christianity is incompatible with much of contemporary science merely removes a spurious obstacle to faith; plenty of genuine ones remain. Dealing with them lies beyond the scope of this book. Yet I cannot avoid hoping that the case I make for the idea that this, the

26 Not unless it is more likely than on any competing assumption; but it is not obvious that this world being as scientific naturalism says it is less likely on the assumption that there is no God. Strictly speaking, my claim is that scientific naturalism has a high degree of likelihood when Christianity is assumed true, not that Christianity has a high degree of likelihood when naturalism is assumed to be true.
real world that scientific naturalism describes, is just the sort of world we might expect, given the truth of Christianity, will motivate the secular reader to see the Christian faith as worth investigating.

**Faith and Science**

My focus is not on Christianity’s relation to science *per se*, but to the hypotheses and theories it generates, particularly those comprising the naturalistic picture of human nature. A great deal has been written about the general issue of religion and science, some of it of great value, and I will not duplicate that.27 I will, however, set out my presuppositions on these general matters insofar as they bear upon my project of reconciling scientific naturalism and Christian supernaturalism.

**Empirical Content**

One way to ensure that faith coheres with the results of science is to construe faith as making no claim about what the world is like. Stephen J. Gould defended this approach in his book *Rocks of Ages* where, explaining there can be no conflict of religion and science, he writes:

Science tries to document the factual character of the natural world, and to develop theories that coordinate and explain these facts. Religion, on the other hand, operates in the…utterly different realm of human purposes, meanings and values—subjects that the factual domain of science might illuminate, but can never resolve.28


28 *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine Publishing Group,
This approach attracts those who are sympathetic to religion but convinced that as traditionally conceived it commits us to patently false beliefs about the world. However, it is impossible to reconcile this attempt to insulate religious belief from scientific criticism with the traditional Christian faith.

To accept Christianity is not simply to embrace a certain set of values, or to adopt a certain attitude toward life—although it clearly has practical implications of this sort. It makes factual claims about the world. It has “empirical content.” Christian faith “goes out on a limb” epistemologically, committing us to beliefs vulnerable to refutation by empirical experience. Christianity is falsifiable. To acknowledge that a belief is empirically falsifiable is not to say that it will be refuted, or that it is likely to be refuted; it implies noting about the quality of the evidence for it or one’s confidence in its truth. In believing, e.g., that John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963 we believe something falsifiable, but to say this is not to express doubt about it. This belief is as falsifiable as beliefs for which there is much less evidence, such as the belief that Lee Oswald acted alone, that the CIA killed Kennedy, as well as the belief that Kennedy did not die in 1963, but lives to this day with Elvis Presley in Pago Pago. To believe it is to commit oneself to the world being one way rather than any other way that conflicts with Kennedy being murdered in 1963, and thus makes one vulnerable to being wrong. We can conceive evidence that would show this belief to be false, as bizarre and surprising as that would be. Real beliefs about the world bear the risk of falsity, however slight and negligible in practice.
Most obviously, the Christian faith is subject to falsification by historical evidence: the bones of Jesus of Nazareth, unearthed in the environs of Jerusalem, would suffice to show that Christianity is false, at least the traditional Christianity that informs this book.\(^{29}\) It is a matter of ultimate importance that Christian faith is first and last trust in the God manifest in Jesus Christ, not a theory of the universe, but it has implications about how things are, claims vulnerable to being falsified by empirical experience in general and science in particular. Not every conceivable scientific theory of the nature and origins of the universe is compatible with the Christian claim that God is its creator. For instance, if cosmology confirmed the hypothesis that the universe necessarily exists, that it is not a contingent entity but exists as a matter of logical or mathematical necessity, this would profoundly conflict with the Christian assertion that the universe exists in virtue of a free act of divine creation.

*Real Vulnerability*

Most Christians would, on reflection, have little difficulty accepting conflict between their faith and science as a genuine possibility in the abstract. However, what many would find unsettling is the conjunction of this with the idea that we ought not to believe things that conflict with well-confirmed scientific theories. Christianity can conflict with science and if it does we should believe what science says. Many will contend to the contrary that were conflict to occur Christian belief rightly wins out over what the scientific community asserts, no matter how strong the evidence it offers. This means that while conflict is not ruled out \textit{a priori} by emptying the faith

\(^{29}\) Or, more realistically, a competing explanation of the faith of the early Church in Jesus’ resurrection might be substantiated, one that renders otiose any appeal to the supernatural see N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003): 706.
of empirical content, the falsification of our Christian beliefs by an encounter with science not a real possibility. I see no reason to accept this. We should not regard Christian beliefs as more strongly warranted than those of science. In general, we have stronger reasons to accept what science says than we have to accept Christian teaching. There is stronger justification for believing the Big Bang theory than for the conviction that God created the universe. We have better evidence for the belief that the human species came into existence by way of biological evolution than for the belief that human beings are made in the image of God. If we were to discern inconsistency between faith and science it would ultimately be incumbent upon us to believe the scientific results and give up our Christian beliefs. There is of course no guarantee here: science is only reliable, not infallible, the claims it generates can be false, as the history of science clearly shows. Yet, as is obvious when we compare the case that can be made for its assertions with the case that can be made for our theological convictions, science has stronger grounds for belief. Good scientific evidence compels belief in ways that even our best theological arguments do not. Reasonable persons who examine the evidence for scientific theories uniformly come to believe them, while reasonable persons can examine the evidence for Christianity and fail to accept it. This is not to say that the evidence for Christian beliefs is inadequate, just that it is not as good as the evidence for beliefs produced by the methods of science.

Regarding Christian beliefs as less strongly warranted than scientific claims with which they could conflict might seem to belie a defective faith, as though faith properly involves not only having the beliefs, but a further conviction about the
relative strength of one’s reasons for them. I suspect that this rests upon the mistaken assumption that there must be some connection between the importance of a belief and the strength of its justification. A Christian’s theological beliefs are among the most important he has, in the sense that they most matter to him; they are among the ones he is most concerned to understand, the ones whose implications and grounds he is most concerned to discern. They are salient among the beliefs in terms of which he organizes his experience and orders his life. They are among the beliefs whose loss would drastically change his attitude toward life. An encounter with falsifying evidence would be traumatic, placing extreme demands on his intellectual integrity. We might wish the beliefs that are so personally important to us were the more strongly warranted, not vulnerable to being refuted by science, history or anything else. This is not true only of religious beliefs: a man’s conviction that his friends respect him and his wife loves him are much more important to him than his belief that the Earth is spherical, not a disk; but given what he knows of the sad experience of human beings, honesty requires him to admit it is the personally more important beliefs that are more likely to be overturned by experience. We should resist the temptation to try to make our Christian beliefs invulnerable, whether by way of emptying them of empirical content, or by exaggerating the relative strength of the evidence for them.

However, one aspect of being a reasonable human being is a kind of intellectual conservatism; we should not abandon important, deeply entrenched beliefs simply because we encounter a problem we do not know how to solve, or some evidence that appears to overturn them. Every honest, informed person, no matter what his beliefs,
lives with a collection of unresolved difficulties. Honesty and rationality demand that we admit and attend to the difficulties with our beliefs, not that we hastily abandon them. Yet integrity ultimately could require that we acknowledge the obvious and admit that our faith could be decisively shown to be false by the evidence of the senses. Not to do so unmask faith as ideology, a body of beliefs held without serious regard to whether they are true, but for other reasons.

The reality of our situation is that many persons suppose that science has already produced knowledge that refutes essential Christian assertions. I continue to be a Christian, believing that while science could refute Christianity, as a matter of fact it hasn’t. Part of Christian faith is trust in God with one’s mind and part of this is recognizing the vulnerability of our belief in God and living with it, while at the same time being truthful about the quality of the evidence for our beliefs. As persons of faith we do not have at our disposal the most effective means of compelling belief in others or securing our own beliefs. Our faith, like much else that matters to us, is not fully in our control but at the mercy of realities that transcend us.

Science Shapes Faith

Yet, even as we acknowledge the possibility of a fatal encounter between faith and science, we should recognize that in practice the sensitivity of Christian beliefs to scientific discovery is not a simple matter of survival or falsification. Christian belief is neither simple nor monolithic. As with any ancient and complex system of beliefs, as new information comes to light there is a great deal of room for adjustment, for reinterpretation, and for redrawing the line between the essential and inessential. There are relatively few conceivable scientific discoveries that would decisively
refute Christianity, rather than leading to modifications in it. Over the last several centuries the content of Christian belief has changed as a result of its engagement with the emerging sciences. Views long associated with Christianity, or even integrated into its theological articulation, such as vitalism, Aristotelian metaphysics, and Ptolemaic cosmology, were discarded when the advance of science rendered them untenable. Beliefs that could not so easily be left behind could be reinterpreted in ways consistent with science, e.g. the idea of divine providence, which was reinterpreted by Robert Boyle and others in the late 17th century to cohere with the mechanical conception of the universe.  

For some, Christianity has been in ignominious retreat before triumphant science for years. Many non-Christians regard the advance of science as having long since defeated a faith whose adherents are too obtuse to realize it. Many Christians, even while agreeing that in past conflicts science was in the right, and that the Church erred in tying Christian faith so tightly to, e.g. geocentrism, are uncomfortable with the general trend and worry that today we too readily revise our beliefs to make them cohere with science. These worries are exacerbated by the intrusion of science into the once inviolate domain of human nature. In contrast, I believe we should seek and welcome opportunities in which scientific discovery might reshape our theology, including our account of human beings as made in the image of God. We can rightly see the advance of the sciences—along with other factors including advances in the historical, linguistic, and critical study of Scripture—as leading toward an improved, refined and purified Christian theology.

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Acknowledging the power of science to effect the content of Christian theology need not be problematic, even for those who, as I do, regard the principal source of our theological beliefs to be a trustworthy divine revelation, the Bible. How can mere science correct the word of God? It might seem incongruous to accept the Scriptures as revelation from God while letting the theology derived from them be modified as a result of scientific discoveries, but it this entirely reasonable to do so. As Francis Bacon pointed out near the beginning of modern science, along with the Bible God has given us the ‘book of nature,’ and the methods of science with which to read it, thereby enabling us to ascertain some of the truth about God’s world. What is much clearer now than in Galileo’s day is that scientific methods, though not infallible, are reliable means for acquiring truth. Christians who recognize Holy Scripture as God’s reliable word cannot seriously imagine that the interpretive methods we apply to it so as to arrive at theological beliefs are infallible. They are at best reliable ways of ascertaining the truth contained in God’s written word. Crucially, the methods of science are generally more reliable than those of Biblical interpretation. The obvious fact is that while scientific practice seems to converge on truth, the procedures interpreters of the Bible employ produce a host of divergent results. This does not imply that we are never in a position to consider ourselves rationally justified in holding to a particular interpretation of a biblical text, or in arriving at a theological belief. It does imply that when we find our theological beliefs at odds with the firm consensus of the scientific community, we should first suspect that it is our theology, not the science, that is in error, and consider modifying it accordingly. This cannot properly be used as a roundabout way to render Christianity immune from

31 The Advancement of Learning (1605)
falsification. Biblical interpretation, and the theology based on it, is not infinitely flexible. At some point it could become all too clear that what science confirms is contrary to what Scripture teaches. The historical record should not undermine confidence in divine revelation, but it should chasten overconfidence in our powers of interpretation. It is obvious to everyone now that 16th-century Christians should have corrected their ideas about how to read texts like Psalm 93:1—“Yea, the world is established; it shall never be moved”—rather than condemning as heretics the astronomers who said the Earth moves.

My hope is that there will come a time when Christian rejection of the contemporary naturalistic account of human beings will seem as unnecessary as these earlier attempts to deny science in favor of current theological conviction.

**Holistic Plausibility**

So far I have treated the relation of Christian faith to science in an artificially atomistic matter, focusing on the issue of how individual beliefs fare when they come up against science. However, the significant long-term effect of incoming scientific knowledge upon Christian faith probably has less to do with the status of particular theological assertions than with its overall plausibility. Scientific discovery is not likely to be decisive, but it has a bearing on the apparent reasonableness of Christian belief, making it more or less difficult for a well-informed, rational person to believe. The main way in which it is manifest that Christianity possesses empirical content lies in the fact that its plausibility waxes or wanes over the years, as new data comes in, either showing us a universe that looks more—or less—like one created by the God revealed in Jesus Christ. On one hand, for example, the confirmation of the Big
Bang theory has added to the plausibility of Christianity’s claims about the universe being a creation, making it in this respect more plausible than during the centuries in which educated opinion held that the universe has always existed. On the other hand, the related cosmological discovery that the universe is preprogrammed for destruction, either in a “Big Crunch,” or in a “Big Freeze,” lessens the plausibility of Christian beliefs about the universe being the work of a wise and benevolent creator.

The incursion of the natural sciences into the explanation of the existence and nature of human beings that began with Darwin in the mid 19th-century, and continues today with the naturalizing of the human sciences, has for many persons drastically diminished the plausibility of Christian beliefs about God as creator. That the human species is the product of biological evolution, that human thought and feeling is not the activity of an immaterial mind or soul but the information processing activity of the brain, that significant aspects of how we think, feel and act can be accounted for as adaptations to life in the stone age, or that our moral competence and religiosity is an adaptation to social life, are the sorts of thing widely assumed to be so unlikely if God is our creator as to render Christian faith beyond reasonable consideration. The widespread judgment is that it is extremely improbable that these scientific theories would be true if Christianity were; what science has been telling us about ourselves for the last century and a half is seen as “antecedently improbable” relative to Christianity. However, this type of judgment about what’s probable or plausible in light of some assumption is highly sensitive to the precise content of what is being assumed.
Given, e.g., the assumption that Ralph van Gorp is a native of Sioux County, Iowa, prior to the examination of any specific evidence we are entitled to say that it is very unlikely that he is a Rastafarian. The vast majority of Sioux County’s inhabitants who bear Dutch surnames are communicants of one of the Dutch Reformed denominations. Yet the judgment of prior improbability can be reversed when more information becomes available: we learn that van Gorp wears dreadlocks, listens non-stop to reggae, smokes copious amounts of ganja, spends his vacations in Jamaica, and reveres Haille Selassie; it now becomes probable that he is a Rastafarian. What’s appears improbable in light of an assumed state of affairs can be revealed as probable when that state of affairs is more fully specified. An aim of this book is to show that when we take explicit account of the particularities of Christian faith, attending to its specific assertions about God’s revealed nature and character, purposes in creating, and ways of relating to creatures, scientific theories that might initially appear improbable in light of it are revealed as probable, as what we might reasonably expect to be true if Christianity is true.

*Faith Shapes Science*

Scientific theories typically enjoy stronger evidential support than theological beliefs. Yet this does not imply the relation between science and theology can be only one way, so that while scientific discovery can require the modification of our theological beliefs, our theological convictions have no legitimate impact upon science. It does not imply that Christians should simply accept every claim of science at face value, irrespective of its implications for Christian beliefs. Nor does it imply that the scientist who is a Christian is required to leave her faith at the door of
the laboratory, and engage in scientific inquiry as though she had no theological beliefs or as though they were guaranteed to have no relevance to the scientific enterprise. We ought to believe confirmed scientific hypotheses, and usually, we should regard those who do the scientific work as authoritative on whether a hypothesis has actually been confirmed, but not always. We might sometimes reasonably disagree with the scientific practitioners on whether there is good enough evidence to believe a hypothesis.

It is commonly assumed, even by Christians, that if there is a role for faith, it is not in the actual practice of scientific investigation, shaping the reasoning that leads to scientific conclusions, but beforehand, as a source of constraints on the choice of research programs, or as a source of moral constraint on the treatment of experimental subjects, or perhaps afterwards, when it comes to deciding how to apply the newly acquired knowledge. This assumption is false. If I believe that something is true, and it has a bearing on the hypothesis I am considering, it is irrational for me not to bring it into play. There is no obvious answer to the question what is required for the confirmation of a scientific hypothesis. What sort of evidence must accrue, what tests, and how many, must a particular hypothesis be subjected to, before we are entitled to regard it as probably true? There is no algorithm that specifies what is needed for confirmation; evaluating a hypothesis calls for informed judgment that weighs a variety of factors. A mere catalogue of the experimental results, the observational evidence, the empirical data does not tell us whether we ought to believe a hypothesis. Other factors must be given their due: what is the status of competing hypotheses? Is the hypothesis elegant, simple, and beautiful or is it
aesthetically displeasing? What anomalies does it engender and how tractable do they appear to be?

One important consideration in weighing the scientific evidence is that the quantity and quality of evidence required to make it reasonable to believe something depends in part on all the other things we already believe, on our “background assumptions.” Some hypotheses are plausible, having prior probability relative to our other beliefs, scientific and otherwise. It is reasonable to accept them on the basis of relatively less, and less good, evidence. Some hypotheses are implausible, antecedently improbable against the background of our other beliefs. It is reasonable to accept them only on the basis of more, and better, evidence. This maxim applies to all reasoning about what to believe, not only to the evaluation of hypotheses in science. If Max informs us he is from Neptune, New Jersey, we don’t need much evidence; the fact that he makes the assertion is good enough reason to believe it in most contexts. If he claims to hail from the planet Neptune, his saying so falls far short of sufficient reason to believe it. If it is ever reasonable to believe him, it will be only on the basis of much better evidence.

If I believe that something is true, and also that it renders some hypothesis I am considering improbable, it would be irresponsible to ignore this when weighing the evidence. The only beliefs that should be excluded a priori from having this sort of influence are those that lack rational justification, ones we have no reason to think are true. There are of course many members of the scientific community, and many others, who take it for granted that Christian beliefs cannot be rationally justified, particularly if they are construed as making factual claims about the world. If this
were true, it would compel the conclusion that Christian faith should have no influence upon the evaluation of the evidence for hypotheses in science. But Christian belief is rationally defensible, and there is no reason to assume it ought not to have this kind of influence upon the practice of science. If an individual lacks good enough reasons to believe Christianity is true he should not believe it. But if he has what he regards as good enough reasons to think it is true, then he ought to believe it, and he ought to regard any hypothesis that it renders improbable as believable only on the basis of exceptionally good evidence. A reasonable person, having examined the evidence, might reject a scientific theory because of its lack of fit with the Christian faith.

Is it paradoxical to say both that science trumps faith in the event of conflict, and that we might reasonably reject a scientific hypothesis in virtue of its lack of fit with faith? Not at all. Consider the analogous case of our common sense beliefs: it is unreasonable to reject a well-confirmed scientific theory on the grounds that it is at odds with what seems obvious on the basis of our everyday experience. We recognize profound differences between the world as it appears and the way scientific inquiry reveals it to be in reality. Science so long ago established that we live on the surface of a sphere of stone that spins rapidly on its axis and moves through space around the sun, and that solid objects are made of tiny particles in mostly empty space, that we forget how implausible this is from the perspective of our ordinary experience. More recent scientific products, such as the Big Bang theory’s assertion that the entire universe was once smaller than an atom, special relativity’s claims about the relativity of simultaneity, or general relativity’s implication that the shortest
distance between two points is often not a straight line, conflict mightily with what we find intuitively obvious, but this is a reason to conclude that common sense is wrong, not to reject the scientific theories.

Yet the fact that science can defeat common sense does not mean that our common sense beliefs have no effect on scientific practice. It is sometimes right to reject a hypothesis as implausible in light of our other beliefs even when there is evidence in its favor. Given the background assumptions of the day, when in 1912 Alfred Wegener promoted his *Pangea* hypothesis it gained few adherents; it wasn’t until the 1960’s that the evidence for it became so strong as to render it widely believable among geologists, and overcame its counterintuitive claim about the continents being in motion. The Big Bang theory, put forward by Georges Lemaitre in the 1920’s, was strenuously resisted by many who found implausible the idea that the universe is temporally finite and accepted it only when the cosmic background radiation was detected in 1964. Or, to take an example of a hypothesis that outrages common sense and which has not, at least yet, been generally accepted: when Hugh Everett proposed his many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics in the 1950’s it was generally dismissed as a weird curiosity, but more recently a significant number of physicists have accepted it, despite its bizarre implications.

We are right initially to discount hypotheses that our other beliefs render improbable but there is always the possibility that evidence will emerge that makes it unreasonable not to accept it, and require us to modify our other beliefs accordingly. There is no possibility of approaching the evaluation of hypotheses without presuppositions about what we are likely to find. The authority of science does not
extend to the question of the prior probability of a hypothesis in light of a theological, or any other non-scientific, assumption. All that lies in its purview is establishing what the empirical evidence is. Yet scientific inquiry is designed to make it possible for that evidence to subvert expectations and revise our view of the world. Advances in science often involve the discovery of excellent reasons to believe very improbable things. The practice of science is colored by our presuppositions about the world, and it ought to be, but it gives nature the chance to overturn even our deeply entrenched beliefs, theological and otherwise. So long as our faith possesses empirical content we must accept the possibility that science, our most reliable way of acquiring beliefs about the world, will produce compelling reasons to believe things that we were once entitled to dismiss as implausible.

Christians have no reason to try to keep their faith and their science in separate compartments. We are entitled to demand more and better evidence to accept hypotheses that have low prior probability in light of our faith, and at the same time obligated to recognize that we might get it, and thus be required to modify, or even give up, some of our theological beliefs. So it is important that our judgments about what is and isn’t plausible in light of the Christian faith be made carefully, that we not simply take it for granted that a given hypothesis is probable—or improbable—when evaluated from the perspective of Christian faith. I will try to show in subsequent chapters that conflict between Christians and the scientific community, and ultimately Christian hostility to the naturalistic view of human beings, arises out of hasty judgments about these matters.
Strategy

The organizing theme of this book is the biblical idea that human beings are made in the image of God. The term “material image” focuses on the central naturalistic claim that human beings are material things. My aim is to show how knowing ourselves as physical beings helps us make sense of ourselves as made in God’s image and how knowing ourselves as made in God’s image helps us make sense of ourselves as physical beings. Many Christians believe that much of what science tells us about what we are is deeply at odds with our being *imago Dei*. For them, this means we are not material beings, not products of blind evolution, not radically open to scientific investigation. Christians, with many others, have long been concerned to fend off what they perceive as “too low” a view of human nature emanating from science, one that renders us too much like other living things, too much creatures of this material world, too similar to the animals and not enough like God. They think the attempt to make human beings the object of scientific inquiry creates a picture of human beings as less valuable than we actually are and as endowed with less dignity than we have. At times Christians see themselves as holding off the onslaught of a scientifically led onslaught that threatens to dehumanize us. Although often not well grounded in an understanding of the theories and research projects under attack, these fears are not entirely without foundation. It is possible for a scientific understanding of human nature to inspire a picture of what we are that fails to do justice to what is special and valuable about us, one that places us beyond freedom and dignity. Christians, believing that humans are made in God’s image are right to be sensitive to this possibility.
However, this is not the only way our view of what we are can be defective. It is also possible to have ‘too high’ a view of human nature, one that inflates our self-image beyond what we really are. The concern not to make this mistake, not to make more of human beings than we actually are, is also a theme in the Christian tradition. Indeed, the idea that we are not gods but God’s creatures, and that we too often forget this and because of pride need to be put in our place, is a significant motif of Christian theology. I suggest that we are more prone to overestimate than to underestimate our place in the scheme of things. The revisions in the human self-image due to contemporary science should be welcomed by Christians because it offers an account more in keeping with our faith than the anti-naturalistic views Christians so readily embrace.

**Plan of the Book**

Chapter Two, “Creation Without Design,” considers the fact that human beings are the product of biological evolution in light of the widely-held Christian belief that God miraculously intervened in the creation to bring human beings into existence. Evolutionary biology’s explanation of human origins challenges longstanding ways of understanding Christian beliefs about how God created the human species, as well as cherished ideas about human uniqueness and what it means to be created in the image of God. Darwinian evolution precludes God having specifically intended the existence of the human species; it is incompatible with the Creator having *designed* us. Yet it is antecedently plausible when viewed in light of God’s revealed purposes in creating.

In the second chapter I contend that we have no reason to believe God intervened in nature so as to bring the first humans into existence, but I devote the third chapter,
“Miracles and Scientific Explanation,” to showing that nothing in scientific naturalism makes belief in miracles, understood as divine acts that constitute exceptions to natural law. The reasoning that justifies belief in divine intervention is analogous to the reasoning that leads to the belief that an apparent law of nature has been falsified. Belief in the miraculous is compatible with naturalism, so long as we make a principled distinction between God’s action in “nature” and God’s action in “history.” Christian theology includes good reasons to make precisely this distinction, and to believe that God does miraculously intervene in human affairs. In this chapter I also ask whether cosmological “fine tuning” points to an exception to the sufficiency of scientific explanation of natural phenomena and go on to suggest a Christian naturalist response to the “many worlds” hypotheses.

Chapter Four, entitled “Material Minds,” is dedicated to the naturalized understanding of the human mind as the functioning, embodied brain. My aim here is to undermine the dualist conception of human beings still widely associated with Christian faith and show the plausibility of a physicalist theory of the mind. Neither the need to explain rationality nor consciousness supplies good reasons to doubt that we are simply our bodies. Despite its association with the idea that we are “spiritual” beings, the philosophical theory that our minds are immaterial has little to recommend it to Christians. I suggest that attempts to defend belief in immaterial minds or souls draw upon a conception of what it means to be made in the image of God that we should reject on theological grounds. Contemporary physicalist accounts of the mind offer resources that are useful for articulating the Christian confession that we are the material image of the immaterial God. Also considered here are claims, advanced by eminent Christian
thinkers, that a materialist account of human reasoning is self-refuting. The chapter concludes by criticizing the hope, particularly widespread among persons of faith, that some form of emergence and/or non-reductive physicalism can mitigate the impact of physicalism on traditional conceptions of the human person.

Chapter Five, ‘Natural Norms and Material Meanings,” asks how it is possible, on a naturalist approach, for a universe in which there are no meanings or norms to produce human beings, who inhabit a meaningful world replete with them. An important naturalist strategy is to find a basis for normativity in the concept of biological function, defined in evolutionary terms. This approach, and the teleosemantic approach to a naturalized understanding of our capacity for meaningfully thought and language to which it gives rise, enhances our conception of imago Dei. Here I also respond to the worry that a naturalistic account of the mind renders meaning as such epiphenomenal.

The sixth chapter, ‘Material Free Agents,” pursues the implications for human freedom and responsibility of our being material beings, completely embedded in the causal structure of nature. For many, one of the greatest threats posed by contemporary science is its power to debunk traditional ideas of human freedom. The compatibilist approach, which supposes that our choices might be both free and caused, allows us to save a great deal of the traditional human self-image in terms of which we see ourselves as free and responsible agents. However, compatibilism seems incapable of fully reconciling our conception of responsibility with our being material beings. Indeed, no created thing, material or otherwise, could be responsible in the way the traditional notion envisages, for it requires that we be agent causes, something no material thing can be. However, scientific naturalism together with a compatibilist conception of freedom
affords a kind of freedom and responsibility appropriate to creatures insofar as it leaves open the possibility that we are, or can become, “material simulations” of agent causes. This modified conception is, I argue, consonant with core claims of the Christian faith. With the making relative of human moral responsibility the question of the scope of divine responsibility for the creation arises, and with it the issue of theodicy. I conclude by considering what a naturalist perspective might have to offer toward a solution to this most difficult of questions.

Chapter Seven, “Unveiling the Moral Machinery of the Soul,” outlines the attempt to explain our morality as originating in evolutionary adaptations to social life. Again we see scientific naturalism at odds with views long associated with the Christian faith, here challenging the idea that in our moral experience we make contact with a transcendent realm of values, or exercise some sort of pure, disembodied rationality. I consider the question of whether science threatens to “debunk” morality, undermining its objectivity and authority, and contend that while this scientific explanation humbles our conception of ourselves as moral agents, it does not eviscerate it. There are good theological reasons to accept the chastened conception of human morality emerging from contemporary evolutionary psychology. This chapter also addresses the traditional Christian teaching of our fallen human nature, and the correlative idea of original sin, arguing that an understanding of these doctrines consistent with a naturalistic story of human origins is plausible from the point of view of Christian faith. Here too I sketch current evolutionary attempts to explain human religion and suggest that the Christian has good reason to welcome them.
Chapter Eight, “Knowledge Naturalized,” contrasts the naturalistic idea that human knowledge is true belief produced by reliable causal mechanisms that are the products of natural selection with traditional conceptions of knowledge. This naturalized epistemology offers no hope for certainty; the human creature must ultimately rely on cognitive mechanisms whose reliability cannot be proved. Naturalism also leads us to accept the “epistemic impotence of the will,” the fact that we do not choose our beliefs and in important sense cannot be responsible for them. These are results the Christian, who regards the response of trust to be thoroughly appropriate for creatures, should view favorably. This chapter also addresses the general question of the scope of human knowledge and asks what knowledge of a transcendent God, and faith in that God, could be for material beings like us. I argue that the possibilities naturalism affords are more acceptable from the perspective of the Christian faith than traditional natural theology.

Chapter Nine, “Last Things,” enters into eschatological matters, both personal and cosmic. An argument against the physicalist view of the human being, put on hold in Chapter Four, is that the Christian belief in life after death requires that we have immaterial souls that survive the destruction of our bodies. I show that a Christian physicalism offers a compelling account of this hope of an everlasting future with God, and it is theologically preferable to dualism. Also in this context I consider the issue of eternal life for a material creature and the alleged problem of the tedium of immortality. There are good answers to this from the standpoint of Christian faith. Turning to cosmic considerations, I confront the fact that contemporary cosmology describes this universe as always having been programmed to self destruct and ask how this is consistent with its having been created by a God who intends it to be our home forever.
Criticisms, Caveats and Confessions

The project of reconciling scientific naturalism and the Christian faith is open to two fundamental objections. On the one hand, the secular naturalist might feel entitled to accuse me of a kind of special pleading, contending that I am looking at the results of contemporary science, results that decisively refute what Christians have always regarded as crucial to their faith, and now disingenuously pleading, ‘this is what we should have expected all along!’ On the other hand, the Christian might see in my project a craven attempt to accommodate faith to the fashion of the age, and to make it academically respectable. 32

The only feasible response to either charge is to show, for each component of naturalism, that it coheres with Christian theology, not in an ad hoc or superficial way, but in a way that illuminates the relevant theological beliefs. Even when this is accomplished for a particular issue, say for the physicalist conception of human beings, or for our evolutionary origins, one might still suspect that as a whole, naturalism and Christianity remain irreconcilable, that there must be other components of naturalism that cannot be drawn into the Christian view of things. What’s needed is a systematic treatment of naturalism as a whole, one that makes the case for its deep coherence with Christian theology. This calls for an examination of a range of interconnected scientific, philosophical and theological matters, an endeavor that goes beyond any individual’s expertise. My strategy is to select what seems to me to be the most plausible naturalistic

32 See, e.g. Phillip E. Johnson, who chastises Christians who he describes as ‘trying to find a place for theology within the picture of reality defined by scientific naturalists,’ Reason in the Balance: The Case Against Naturalism in Science, Law and Education (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995): 97. What I hope becomes clear is that my goal—like that of the Christian thinkers Johnson criticizes—is precisely the converse, i.e. finding a place for the findings of contemporary science within the framework of Christian faith.
view on an issue, e.g. on the nature of human freedom or, the origins of religion, or the possibility of resurrection, explain it, set out the reasons in its favor, and then show why it is reasonable in light of the Christian faith, in fact more reasonable than the traditional, anti-naturalistic alternative. I do not intend to suggest that Christian belief must be construed so as to render naturalistic views antecedently likely, nor that the way in which I construe them forces on to accept those views; my more modest claim is that there is a reasonable, coherent way of understanding the Christian faith with which naturalistic ideas fit better than their traditional competitors. Behind virtually every issue I take up in the chapters that follow there are any number of problems that need to be solved and criticisms that need to be answered. An adequate defense of every naturalistic theory presented would take us beyond both my abilities and the scope of the book, which is not to show that naturalism is true, but that it is entirely reasonable for a Christian to expect it is, since it is at least plausible in its own right and also plausible in light of the Christian faith. The naturalistic views I put forward will range from those I take to be so securely grounded in the scientific evidence as to be beyond serious dispute, e.g. that human beings are material things, to those that, while having some scientific justification, are currently speculative, but which are at least plausible naturalistic views upon which Christians should look with favor, e.g. many of the claims of evolutionary psychology.

Gifted Christian thinkers have, for generations, put forward arguments against the naturalistic portrait of the world and the place of humans in it. These arguments must, of course, be weighed on their own merits. I will address relatively few of them directly in this book. My principal task is not to take on an endless series of arguments Christians
have put forward against naturalism, but to cast doubt on the idea, so often taken as
axiomatic, that a Christian should automatically be opposed to anything naturalistic.

I do not propose that there are decisive arguments that render it blatantly
unreasonable for Christians to reject the naturalistic implications of today’s science, and
to maintain loyalty to traditional ideas about human nature. What I do hope to show is
that once we bring into focus the fact that God has a choice as to what, and how, to
create, and that naturalistic possibilities are among the alternatives, and go on to ask
ourselves which of those alternatives seem most likely, not in light of a generic theism
that promotes divine power and control, but with specifically Christian, biblical claims
about God’s interest in personally relating to creatures in view, then it is the naturalistic,
rather than the traditional, account that seems most reasonable.

Nothing this interesting and important is settled beyond debate. Particular
scientific claims are “defeasible,” as are judgments about their likelihood on Christian
assumptions. We might find (contrary to much current scientific and philosophical
opinion) that it is impossible to give a scientifically adequate evolutionary explanation of
human cognitive powers. It might turn out to be (as proponents of “Intelligent Design”
suppose is already the case) unreasonable to accept such explanations, even though (as I
argue in Chapter Two) they are antecedently probable from the perspective of Christian
theology. Or we might discover that while a physicalist account of the human person
initially seems more likely from the point of view of Christian faith (as I contend in
Chapter Four), it is impossible to account for the possibility of life after death unless
there is an immaterial soul to survive the body’s death (contrary to my argument in
Chapter Nine). And there is always the possibility of science and Christianity diverging,
so that what the empirical evidence strongly supports is highly unlikely from the point of view of faith, although in my view that is merely a possibility, and is likely to remain so. What we are entitled to say now is that the naturalistic views that are currently well supported scientifically are, at face value, just what persons of Christian faith should expect.

Although merely a matter of personal confession, with no objective weight as a response to the two objections, it is perhaps worthwhile to relate something of my own experience, in which Christianity and a naturalistic orientation have never been apart. My own experience is atypical since I have no existential sense of conflict between my faith and scientific naturalism. I was born into a conservative, evangelical Christian community. The Bible was taken as the one infallible source of God’s revelation. Yet it was a community that included a number of scientists (including my father, an organic chemist); respect for science was taken for granted, as was its coherence with Holy Scripture. A representative instance: it was in my church that as a young boy I first heard about biological evolution when my Sunday School teacher, who happened to be a university biochemist, explained the marvelous—Darwinian—way God had made us. It was years before I found out that many Christians saw evolution as the Devil’s deception. I do not retain the very conservative theological orientation of the community of faith in which I was raised—though, in my own estimation at least they remain traditional, orthodox and broadly evangelical—yet I remain profoundly grateful for its steadfast commitment to both faithfulness to Christ and intellectual honesty. My hope is that something of that spirit lives in this book.