

The Material Image

Précis

Chapter One: *Christianity and Naturalism*

Naturalism is here conceived as the conviction that the sciences are our most reliable way of knowing, that human beings are merely material things, and that we are the product of unguided Darwinian evolution. The common habit of defining naturalism as involving atheism, e.g., as the view that only nature exists, hides the possibility that the God of Christian faith created the world contemporary science portrays. This book's goal is to show that with Christianity's central assertions about God's creative aims in view this is more than a possibility: it becomes plausible. Since the advent of modern science, Christian thinkers have been concerned to ward off "too low" a view of human beings, one that portrays us as too much like other creatures and not enough like God. This motivates most Christians to reject naturalism as patently at odds with their faith. Yet the concern that human pride leads us to "too high" a self-image, and to envisage ourselves as godlike, transcendent beings, has deeper biblical roots. Reconciling the Christian faith and science requires neither that we attenuate the supernatural claims of Christian theology nor that we seek "loopholes" in the broadly reductionist, mechanistic account of the world and human beings on offer from modern science. We can trust God with our minds without denying or evading the results of scientific inquiry. We are not forced to choose between intellectual faithfulness and intellectual honesty. We can be both naturalists and supernaturalists.

Chapter Two: *Knowledge*

The first principle of naturalism is the primacy of science as a way of knowing. It is not our only way of knowing—*scientism* is false—but it is never reasonable to believe what conflicts with well-confirmed scientific theories. Nor is it reasonable to invoke sources of knowledge science shows that creatures like us do not possess. Christian faith makes claims about the world that science could falsify. Christians ought to weigh the evidence for scientific theories in light of their theological beliefs, but ultimately Christian belief cannot be made invulnerable to falsification at the hands of science. However, the belief that Christian faith and science conflict typically arises from mistaken judgments about what is, and what is not, *antecedently probable*

from the perspective of faith. Paying heed to the revealed purposes for which God creates the world reverses these judgments and reveals the strong compatibility of Christian faith and naturalism. Ultimately, Christianity's theological claims must be interpreted in ways that cohere with scientific knowledge, and Christian claims to know a transcendent reality must cohere with what science tells us about ourselves and our cognitive powers: we are not transcendent beings. The knowledge human beings can achieve is true belief produced by the reliable cognitive mechanisms crafted by the unknowing mechanisms of biological evolution. Our beliefs are the effects of causes; we do not choose what to believe. The reliability of the mechanisms that cause our beliefs cannot be proved. Trust, not certainty, is appropriate for human knowers.

Chapter Three: *Miracles*

Christian faith requires miracles and naturalism allows for their possibility. Christianity depends essentially on the claim that God intervenes in human history. God acts by way of *secondary causes* but also acts directly upon the world, making happen what would not happen in the natural course of events. The well-confirmed theories of science trump all competing explanations, but it might be reasonable to believe that some occurrence was an exception to natural law, something that in the natural course of events would not have happened. So long as this claim is limited to particular exceptions to natural law, and we do not offer miracles as competing with systematic scientific explanation, belief in divine intervention does not conflict with naturalism. Reasonable belief in the miraculous depends on a principled distinction between intervention in "nature" and in "history." We have no reason to believe that God intervened to make the first living things, or to create species, even the human species. So far as we know, God has no reason to intervene until natural processes bring persons of some sort into existence. Some Christian thinkers reject the miraculous, particularly when it is conceived as intervention in the creation. Yet God's revealed aim in creating is fellowship with created persons, and this *requires* divine intervention in human affairs. God interacts with creatures only by acting upon them, and this means making happen what would not have happened in the natural course of events.

Chapter Four: *Origins*

The revealed purpose for which the world exists is to bring into being created persons who will share in the everlasting life of the triune God. Despite the almost universal assumption that Christian faith commits us to God having *designed* the human species, it is likely that God would choose to create by means that preclude design, such as the indeterministic mechanisms of evolution by natural selection. Proponents of “intelligent design” correctly point out the implausibility of thinking God relied on such mechanisms to design us, but we should reject the assumption that God designed us. We have theological reasons to suppose that the Creator left to inherently unpredictable natural processes which kinds of persons were to come into existence. What is most likely from the perspective of Christian belief in creation is that God did not miraculously intervene to bring humans into existence. Some Christians contend that evolutionary naturalism is self-defeating, on the ground that we have no reason to think minds made by natural selection would reliably arrive at true beliefs. This argument relies on assumptions no naturalist is willing to accept.

Chapter Five: *Mind*

The scientific evidence is compelling that the human mind is no more than the human brain, and that the immaterial mind or soul simply does not exist. Human beings are created *imago Dei*—in the image of God. This implies that we are *persons*, but there are no good biblical, theological, or philosophical reasons to think this means we have immaterial minds or souls. The biblical doctrine of the *special creation* of the human species should be recast in terms of humans being called to serve as God’s image in the creation, not as a license to draw conclusions about our exalted metaphysical status. Contrary to a well-known argument devised by C. S. Lewis, the belief that we are material things is not self-defeating. Further, persons of faith have no particular reason to seek in *irreducibility* or *emergence* escape from the stark materialist implications of science. Indeed, the Christian faith supplies reasons to welcome scientific findings that support materialism and thereby deflate human pretensions to transcend the natural world. The mind’s irreducibility implies that we are “ontologically shallow,” not fundamental constituents of the created world but creatures who come about when chancy evolutionary processes assemble impersonal components in an appropriate way. Human persons are the material image of the immaterial Creator.

Chapter Six: *Freedom*

Humans are free, responsible agents, but our freedom and responsibility is of a kind consistent with our being material things, completely immersed in a physical world governed by causal law. The *compatibilist* view that our actions can be both free and caused preserves much of what matters in our idea of ourselves as free and responsible. However, science does not leave the traditional human self-image unscathed. We must acknowledge that we are not the ultimate originators of our actions. We are not *agent causes*. Appeals to *quantum indeterminacy* or *downward causation* do nothing to mitigate this conclusion. We lack the “ultimate” responsibility that only God has, but we have an accountability in keeping with our status as creatures. God has structured the creation so as to make it possible for us to share responsibility with our Creator but, as demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God assumes final responsibility for creation. The fact that the fundamental laws of nature are indeterministic cannot save libertarian free will but, on the assumption that God creates with the aim of interacting with creatures who are genuine persons, not mere extensions of their Creator, it is what we should expect.

Chapter Seven: *Morality*

Human morality is an evolutionary adaptation to social life. This does not “debunk” morality, i.e., explain our moral beliefs in a way that shows we have no reason to have them, but it undermines the idea that our moral experience involves a grasp of a transcendent reality, or knowledge of a special kind of fact ultimately independent of the human species and its evolutionary history. It leads us to acknowledge that while the moral truth is not relative to the individual or to society, it is not as objective as many Christians suppose it must be. Nonetheless, this account of morality should be welcome from the perspective of the Christian faith. By putting morality in its place, science frees us to understand the Christian life in terms of the Christian gospel, rather than in moralistic ways. God condescends to human morality, enlisting it for God’s purposes, but ultimately bringing it under divine judgment for the sake of the creatures God loves. This “desacralizing” of morality also makes possible an understanding of *the fall* and *original sin* that preserves the essentials of traditional theology without committing us to an account of human origins science tells us is not literally true.

Chapter Eight: *Religion*

It appears that human religiosity, like human morality, can be explained in evolutionary terms, but with a crucial difference. The almost universal readiness to believe in invisible agents who concern themselves with human behavior seems to be an accidental byproduct of the cognitive architecture of our brains, rather than an adaptation. We possess innate mental mechanisms for religious belief, but they are not reliable sources of truth. Although this hypothesis is currently somewhat speculative, science may eventually confirm this debunking explanation of religious belief. Christians can reasonably embrace this general conclusion about religion without being guilty of special pleading, but to do so requires that we view our innate religiosity as in important ways analogous to our innate morality.

Chapter Nine: *Last Things*

When humans die, we cease to exist. No immortal soul survives the body's demise. Yet there is life after death: we can reasonably trust the God who resurrected Christ to resurrect us. Challenges to the possibility of life after death for purely material persons, such as the worry that an apparently resurrected human might be a mere copy of the person who died, arise from a conception of personal identity ultimately inappropriate for "ontologically shallow" beings. Turning finally to cosmic eschatological matters, the fact that this universe appears to be programmed to self-destruct challenges the Christian confession that God created it for the sake of everlasting communion with the personal creatures who would come to exist in it. The book concludes with a response which draws on the idea of the *imago Dei* as the created co-creator.

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