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“The Unintended Reformation: Chapter I – Excluding God”  
A Précis

In the first chapter of his book, *The Unintended Reformation*, which is entitled “Excluding God,” Brad Gregory asserts that the modern “disenchantment” with religion is not a scientific conclusion, but rather the result of a preconceived notion that rejects religion based on scientism, naturalism, and a univocal notion of being that finds its origins in the medieval metaphysics of Duns Scotus.

The article begins by acknowledging the significant difference that the modern sciences have made in the way we see and understand the world around us, and notes Max Weber’s assertion that, as science grows in its understanding of the world, religions claims to truth in the world must necessarily decline until the latter no longer exist. Building on this notion clearly articulated by Weber, John Searle asserts that anyone who maintains a religious outlook is living in a mythological world of the past. The New Atheist movement with varying levels of sophistication and polemics repeats these views. It is undeniable, however, that a theistic worldview is held by many respected and intelligent scientists who cannot be simply assumed to be, as Searle put it, “in the grip of faith.” Rather than address the arguments offered by these scientists and theologians and philosophers who assent to the Classical Christian view of God, the New Atheist movement “exempts [itself] from the intellectual labor needed to understand their writings and remains content to beg the question.” Far from being incompatible, no scientific discovery refutes, nor is any scientific discovery capable of refuting, the traditional Christian view of God.

The world that the modern sciences study and seek to understand is, in the assertion of traditional Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, created by God. This notion of God, properly understood, is not a being who is simply the most powerful in the created order, but rather entirely outside the universe of created things, which was created by him *ex nihilo*. Put another way, one cannot predicate anything of God or place him in any genus along with any portion of the created world. This is even true of being. If one properly understands the radical-otherness of God, it is absurd to conclude that, by studying the created world, one can at any point deny the existence of such a God; to make such a claim would imply that God is a part of the created universe. One of the reasons for this confusion can be found in the limitations of language when talking about God. Whereas the sentences, “the book is on the table” and “God is in heaven” do not predicate the same thing, thinkers since the middle ages have reinforced the interpretation that they do, and this metaphysical error set the stage for the present debate.

It is important to understand that, for traditional Christianity, the claims of faith can never contradict anything that can be discovered by the scientific method. For nearly the first fifteen centuries of Christianity, the two philosophical systems that guided them were first neo-Platonism and then Aristotelianism with the admixing of neo-Platonism. However, it must be understood that the radical-otherness of God makes it impossible for any rational system to fully comprehend Him. Any philosophical system, as well as linguistic and conceptual limitations of a

finite intellect is insufficient to fully comprehend God; instead, these tools are useful to show that Christianity is internally coherent.

For the first 1,300 years of Christianity, God was understood to share nothing in common with creation. This changed with the proposal of John Duns Scotus that God shares one predication with the created world: being. He defended this assertion because if it were not so, then anything predicated of God based on reason would be nonsense. This notion was the “univocal conception of being” that has, in the modern debate, replaced the analogical notion that was held by Thomas Aquinas and the Christian tradition prior to that, and it had far reaching effects. Scotus had opened the door to the present debate; he had taken “the first step toward the eventual domestication of God’s transcendence.” God was no longer *esse*, the pure act of being, but He was an *ens*, a being among other beings, just a superior one. The next step in this process was the nominalism and the principle that came to be known as Occam’s razor of William of Occam. These set the intellectual framework for the present debate, and they represent assumptions that are rarely challenged when the debate is undertaken. To these were added the Renaissance revivals of Platonism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism. Platonism brought about the mathematization of knowledge, the notion that mathematics was the language that would be used to explain the world. Stoicism introduced the modern idea that nature is deterministic and represents an absolute force. Epicureanism suggested efficient cause and left no room for final causes in creation. Alone, none of these aspects would have inextricably led to the present assumption that science and theology are incompatible, but combined, they created the present situation.

The next piece was put in place not from the philosophers and Renaissance humanists, but rather from the Protestant movement. The end point of the endless fighting about doctrinal issues between Catholics and Protestants was that the orthodox Christian view of God was left out of the public debate, and the discussion fell to the rationalists instead of the theologians, and they had already fully accepted as given the univocal notion of being and Occam’s razor, which would lead to the “disenchantment” that Weber expressed at the outset of this discussion. One of the most damaging changes in this period was the loss of an understanding of the sacramentality of the world, that is, the idea that “the transcendent God manifests himself in and through the natural, material world.” Any real presence, under the notion of univocity of being, must be a physical presence. Hence, to use the Eucharist as an example, the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament must either effect a physical change, or it is spiritual and unreal. The end of this debate between God’s immanence and transcendence, coupled with Newton’s internal explanations of activity in the natural world, was to relegate God to a position in which He was no longer present in the world in any meaningful and ongoing manner, but he was simply, at best, a remote creator. No new scientific ideas, including Newton’s, would have likely been wholesale rejected by Christianity in previous eras, but the nature of God’s relationship to creation itself had, by this point, been so called into question that new ideas could not be easily assimilated into the Christian view of the world as they had been previously. This left Christianity ill-equipped to defend itself from and correct these new worldviews. In the end, scientific and empirical investigation had not served to falsify any claims made by Christianity about God, but Christianity was busy defending itself from within, with Protestants and Catholics turned on one another, that the claim was made and stood without sufficient challenge.

Since the Catholics and Protestants of the time were focused on one another rather than the endeavor of better understanding creation, the rationalists sought to understand the world using principles that were not included in “contested Christian doctrines.” These groups not only

had no need for religious claims, but, in some cases, for example the Royal Society, distrusted the overly religious because of the devastation religious wars had brought on Europe over a few generations. The thinkers coming out of this next movement utilized “philosophical ideas, mathematics, empirical observation, and experimentation.” They variously combined these and arrived at different conclusions. Some notable thinkers in various fields included Galileo, Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, Hobbes, and Isaac Newton. Each of these thinkers produced work in his own sphere of study, but each was hampered by the fact that a univocal metaphysics was now a given, and, in this structure, the Christian idea of God cannot be maintained. The end result was that science concluded that, whereas “creatures were finite, imperfect, limited, natural beings, God was an infinite, perfect, unlimited, supernatural being.”

Beyond that basic starting point, however, each imagined God in a different way, and the ideas of God offered by reason were unrecognizable as the same God and entirely incompatible. Even though, as Aquinas had observed centuries earlier, “human reason is greatly deficient in things concerning God,” human reason had attempted to take up the question, and the results were varied instead of secure and consistent as was more the case for natural science. Because of this, Pascal observed that all were engaged in “speculation about ‘the God of the philosophers’ rather than relationship to ‘the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.’” After this, the individual sciences would go on to increasingly become separate unrelated fields of study each in its own well-defined discipline. As each scientific field focused increasingly on its own area, the question of God became unimportant to its inquiry. One important movement that did try to continue to consider God within the realm of scientific inquiry was “physico-theology,” which sought to ascertain the existence and attributes of God based on the physical world. The end result of this movement was Paley’s argument for God in his *Natural Theology*.

However much God remained a part of the discussion in the realm of Natural Theology, he had been made unimportant in the rest of the sciences by a combination of metaphysical univocity and Occam’s razor. Scientists simply no longer had a reason to discuss God.

Modern science generally seeks to understand nature’s workings and utility. This is an important fact for the development of the modern sciences because their purpose was no longer curiosity, but, more often, profit. In short, “inquisitiveness was propelled by acquisitiveness.” It must be understood that, moving into the modern age, science was, in truth, no longer disinterested. Likewise, despite claims to the contrary, science’s claims about God were not objective. These fit together perfectly because “the first...serves human ambitions, and the second clears the way.” Scientific understanding was no longer a quest for knowledge of the world for its own sake; rather, it was a quest to understand the world so that it could be better controlled. To that end, it was expedient to remove and reject God so that the moral precepts a theistic belief would entail would not hinder the profitability of the endeavor.

This approach was codified by David Hume and his wholesale rejection of the possibility of miracles; Hume asserted that any claim of a miracle should be rejected because it does not fit into the generally accepted and observed world. However, Hume started from the assumption that the natural world “was autonomous, independent of God, and without any divine influence or presence. He begged the entire question.” From Hume to the present day, anti-religious claims are filled with an outright rejection of the possibility of miracles, not from, as they claimed, scientific rationality, but rather from a pre-accepted “faith in a skeptical naturalism.” The claim that science can refute the possibility of miracles overstates the possible conclusions of science and requires as a starting point the univocal notion of being that traditional Christianity has never held.

Everything for the debate as it currently stands between science and faith has been present since the seventeenth century. Even the proposals of Charles Darwin provided only a new scientific model, not a new conceptual principle to challenge the truth-claims of traditional Christianity. Neo-Darwinism could challenge those truth claims only if the idea of God being held by the Christians lacks an analogical notion of being and the idea of a sacramental universe. The simple fact that Darwin has been met with significant hostility does not express the challenges he poses to Christianity, but rather the extent to which these two underlying principles of traditional Christianity have already been lost and replaced by late Medieval and Renaissance errors. It is undeniable that scientific understanding of the world from several fields precludes a literalistic reading of Genesis' creation account, but Patristic writers from the third century onward already understood the problem of a literalistic reading of Genesis, albeit without the scientific background. It must be noted that no amount of evolutionary biology can make the leap to "evaluative judgements about the putative lack of meaning order, and purpose in the evolutionary process as a whole or in the universe as such. *That* move requires extrascientific interpretation and atheistic faith commitments." All these discoveries will ever do for a believer with an understanding of analogical being is offer a greater depth of understanding of how the world works. Arguments to the contrary, such as those posed by Daniel Dennett represent personal opinions, not sound conclusions of science.

Interestingly, as science understands more of how the world works in the last century, it finds itself less, not more, able to represent that in a single unified theory. The most prevalent attempt to unify general relativity and quantum mechanics in the modern academy is superstring theory. In this theory, "six or seven additional dimensions of space-time" exist "in which experimentally unverifiable loops vastly smaller than elementary particles are vibrating." Such a theory, it must be noted, does not fulfill the oft-repeated claims of falsifiability and empirical investigation. It must be noted that, the more science learns, the more complicated and elegant it finds creation to be. However, this cannot be said to falsify claims of God.

At the same time, it must be admitted that some religious claims are validly falsified by science. First among these are the creation interpretations of young earth creationists. These are obviously opposed to the truths that science has come to offer, and, since truth cannot contradict truth, they are clearly false. However, the thinkers to whom this discussion directs the Christian and scientific world are not young earth creationists, but rather themselves scientists and theologians. The count of scientists who are also atheists is not indicative of an incompatibility between science and theology. Indeed, such numbers fail to take into account the understanding of metaphysics, theology, or other pertinent fields of individual scientists. Instead, all those numbers can reveal is a count of those who have arbitrarily chosen to accept an atheistic belief.

The claims of science do not and cannot contradict or disprove a proper understanding of God in the traditional Christian sense. Not only has no scientific finding done so, but it is impossible that any potential scientific finding could ever do so since to posit such a possibility would represent a significant category error. This category error is, however, almost ubiquitous in the modern world in both scientific circles and many theological circles. It is the child of several philosophical, not scientific, systems starting in the fourteenth century. These systems include a univocal understanding of being, nominalism, and Occam's razor. These problems were exacerbated by Christian infighting during the dawn of the Protestant movement that lead the premier Christian thinkers to focus on each other and leave the rationalists to their own devices. Rather than disprove God, science, properly understood in its sphere, serves only to provide a deeper understanding of His creation.