

Study Guides for Faith & Science Integration

Summer 2017

Are There Philosophical Conflicts Between Science & Religion? (Leader's Guide)

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A Leader's Guide to

Are there Philosophical Conflicts Between Science & Religion?

*A Study of Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion,
& Naturalism*

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How to Use This Material?

This study of evolutionary psychology using Alvin Plantinga's *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, & Naturalism* consists of 4 modules. Each module contains two sections. The first section presents a set of Reading and Reflection questions that are to be completed before each meeting and are meant to help the participant wrestle with the concepts introduced in that week's chapters. The second section consists of two (or more) Discussion questions, which will be written by the participants and the leader as they read. Both sets of questions are meant to foster discussion, but your group should by no means limit itself to the questions contained in these sections.

This study is intended for **informal, small group** discussion, such as that of a Bible study or small group. The themes presented in each submodule may be unpacked on its own, but it is the hope of the authors that the entire study may be useful to the interested reader (leader and participant alike). The study is also aimed toward **high school students, college students, and post-college adults** with an interest in how science and the Christian faith interact.

As you read, it is our hope that you will come across (and come up with) questions which challenge you, both in understanding your personal faith and in understanding science. In these questions, you will have the opportunity to grow through asking and answering these questions: Why has the church historically believed in *this* answer or *that* answer? How might you be challenged to defend your answer?

Planning and Preparing for a Session

The material assumes that each session will last for about 30-45 minutes. It also assumes that each participant will have read the assigned chapter(s) and considered the Reading and Reflection questions ahead of time.

It must also be noted that the provided discussion questions are intended as a guide for your discussion, but you should by no means restrict your discussion to these questions. Try to keep your group's discussion relevant to the general themes addressed in the module, but be flexible.

Equipped for Service

This "Leader's Guide" is meant to **equip leaders** of these small group discussions, and thus the following pages are far more detailed and expansive than the average participant may judge necessary for complex discussion. We offer information from other references and suggested answers to questions posed in the text. This has been done in the hope that you, as the leader, may more easily facilitate and moderate discussion amongst your peers in the small group. Your small group may be made up of the generation that initiates change in how the common Christian comes to understand these questions and answer – in the service of your peers, do not underestimate your own significance as a leader or co-leader.

Who Wrote *Where the Conflict Really Lies*?

Alvin Plantinga is an analytical philosopher (hence the fairly analytically philosophical writing in *Where the Conflict Really Lies*) who is most known for his work in epistemology, metaphysics, Christian apologetics, and the philosophy of religion. Plantinga attended Calvin College and Harvard University as an undergraduate, and received his Ph.D. from Yale University in 1958. He is an emeritus philosophy professor at the University of Notre Dame. In 2017 Plantinga was given the Templeton Prize, an annual award from the Templeton Foundation that recognizes individuals who have made “exceptional contributions to affirming life’s spiritual dimension, whether through insight, discovery, or practical works.”

Where the Conflict Really Lies is a philosophical book, but it is accessible to people with no background in philosophy. Plantinga has conveniently put the more intensely analytical philosophy parts of his book in smaller font, so readers may choose to skip over those parts if they would like. That said, this book is probably not for people who are not open to philosophical conversations.

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Module 1: Alleged Conflict

Chapters covered: "Preface," "Evolution and Christian Belief (1)," "Evolution and Christian Belief (2)," "Divine Action in the World: The Old Picture," "The New Picture"

Reading and Reflection

"Preface"

1. What relationship do you perceive between science and faith? Why? What has influenced your perception?

Suggested Answer: Perspectives on science and faith are often greatly influenced by one's social group. This includes one's home church, family, peers, and schools. Is there a diversity of opinion in the perspectives different parts of one's social group hold? For example, does your church teach one thing and your friends believe something else? How would your relationship with your social group be impacted if your perspective on science and faith changed?

2. What do you know of naturalism? Can you think of anyone who could be considered an adherent of naturalism?

"Evolution and Christian Belief (1)"

1. What do you think of Plantinga's suggestion that knowing and understanding are a way in which we resemble God (or bear His image) (4)? Does doing science play a role in helping us resemble God better? Why or why not?
2. What is your view of the theory of evolution? Why?

“Evolution and Christian Belief (2)”

1. Have you read anything by Dawkins or Dennett? What do you think of them? Do Plantinga’s critiques of their arguments make sense to you?
2. How do Dennett’s view of the world and your view of the world differ? What assumptions does Dennett make in his arguments? Why might he make those assumptions?

Suggested Answer: Dennett has a strong faith in the reliability of science (which is not necessarily bad), which prompts him to conclude that the theory of evolution is undeniably true. He believes that the theory of evolution is fact, and denying it is deplorable. Some participants may believe that the theory of evolution is foolish heresy, some may believe that it is probably accurate. At any rate, Dennett’s esteem of the theory of evolution surpasses what is warranted in the field of science. Science functions with a high degree of skepticism, and condemning people who disagree is bad form (though condemning bad science is less objectionable). Dennett is committed to a world without a Creator God (which he believes is validated by scientific study). He has adopted scientism as his religion, and that taints his interpretation of science and the world.

“Divine Action in the World: The Old Picture”

1. How do miracles fit into your understanding of natural law and “divine action”?
2. Do Plantinga’s proofs (pages 80-81) make sense to you? What is he trying to communicate with them?

Suggested Answer: Plantinga's parenthesized letters may be daunting to some participants. Basically, Plantinga is saying that if the universe is closed to special divine interventions (i.e. miracles), then there is a future that must necessarily result from past events. Even more basically: determinism means things are in a set course.

"The New Picture"

1. What is the Divine Action Project? What do you think of it?

Suggested Answer: The Divine Action Project (DAP) seeks to "find an account of divine action in the world" (97). They're trying to reconcile ideas of divine intervention with their understanding of how natural and physical laws work.

2. What three problems with divine intervention do the authors who contributed to DAP see? What do you think of Plantinga's answers to these problems? Are they satisfactory?

Suggested Answer: First, how does God decide when to intervene? (In other words, why does He refrain from intervening in the midst of terrible evils?) Plantinga points Ellis (and us) to Job, saying that it is not for humans to know why God chooses to do what He does. (Is this a cop-out answer? Or is it a valid response?) Second, if God interfered with natural law regularly, how would humans be able to exercise free will and act independently? Intelligent free action requires regularity and predictability, and Plantinga says that these two qualities could still be present in a world in which God intervened if He performed miracles in a predictable way (103). Plantinga argues that

“reasonable confidence in substantial regularity” is sufficient for making intelligent decisions. Third, divine intervention seems to contradict notions of divine self-consistency (104). Plantinga says that speaking of God breaking” natural laws through divine intervention is misguided (given what we know about the wonders of quantum mechanics). This third objection rather puts God in a box. (Again, who are we to presume to know how and why God acts?) As Plantinga says, this is a theological question rather than a scientific one, but its implications for the study of science are worth considering. Is doing science a foolhardy pursuit because it depends on some level of predictability and many levels of understanding natural law?

Discussion Questions

In addition to answering the Reading and Reflection questions, please write two of your own questions about the readings for today.

1.

2.

Module 2: Superficial Conflict

Chapters covered: “Evolutionary Psychology and Scripture Scholarship” and “Defeaters?”

Reading and Reflection

“Evolutionary Psychology and Scripture Scholarship”

1. What do you think of the field of evolutionary psychology? Do you think that it is reasonable to suggest that certain human behaviours can be accounted for by evolutionary processes? If a behaviour could be described by evolutionary biology, would that make it less significant or special?
2. Is a worldview of naturalism required for the field of evolutionary psychology?
3. The evolutionary psychology description of religion Plantinga cites on page 133 is perhaps not the most widely accepted in the evolutionary psychology community. Evolutionary psychologists often describe religion as an adaptation that allowed for an improved sense of community. Religion strengthened the common identity of a prehistoric tribe, and this improved the tribe’s chance of survival and cohesion. Is it heretical to suppose that religion might be an evolutionary adaptation? Could God have given humankind the capacity for religion via evolutionary biological processes?

Suggested Answer: The notion that religion might be a product of biological processes may seem to undermine the validity of religion. Arguably, if God chose to give us an understanding of the divine through biological processes, our inclination towards religion would still be a gift from God.

“Defeaters?”

1. What do you think of methodological naturalism? Is it valid to refrain from “invoking supernatural causation” in the name of proper science? Can you not invoke supernatural causation while avoiding a worldview of naturalism (in which all phenomena have a natural explanation)?

Suggested Answer: It is true that scientists are advised to not appeal to “supernatural causation” when trying to describe natural phenomena. In Christian circles, saying “we see this phenomenon because God made it that way, and we cannot find a natural description or explanation for it” is considered an appeal to a God-of-the-gaps approach, which is generally acknowledged as dangerous. (If we eventually do find a plausible natural explanation, our previous understanding of how God works or doesn’t work is threatened.) Methodological naturalism makes it easier for scientists of all stripes (e.g. Christian, Muslim, Hindu, atheist, Jewish) to work together. The scientific method is a fairly arbitrary human development that is used to help us obtain accurate, empirical descriptions of the way the natural world works. (Do you agree with this assessment?) Because humans have set the parameters for science, is it valid for humans to choose to refrain from invoking supernatural causation when doing science? In response to the last question, Christian scientists who refrain from invoking supernatural causation can avoid naturalism by reasoning that God seems to work through physical, biological means to create, so by studying the natural world we can learn truths about the way God has created the world.

Discussion Questions

In addition to answering the Reading and Reflection questions, please write two of your own questions about the readings for today.

1.

2.

Module 3: Concord

Chapters covered: “Fine-Tuning,” “Design Discourse,” and “Deep Concord: Christian Theism and the Deep Roots of Science”

Reading and Reflection

“Fine-Tuning”

1. Is the “fine-tuning” argument scientific? Is it philosophical? Support your answer.

Suggested Answer: The premise of the argument—that the world seems especially well suited to sustaining life and that if things were just slightly different life wouldn’t exist—is scientific. The conclusions drawn from these scientific assessments (e.g. fine-tuning points toward a personal Creator God) are philosophical because they are not observable or falsifiable.

2. Is it that we were the end goal, so these physical conditions were met? Or is it that these physical conditions were met, so we became a possible outcome?

“Design Discourse”

1. Have you heard of the “irreducible complexity” argument before? Do you believe it is a valid and helpful argument?

Suggested Answer: The irreducible complexity argument highlights the spectacularly complex nature of living things and the power evolution would need to exhibit to be a useful description of how life and diversity came about. However, it is not especially good science. Saying that some things are irreducibly complex is a bit of a God-of-the-gaps cop-out, and it is not well validated scientifically. What happens to the argument

of irreducible complexity if/when reasonable descriptions of these biological systems are identified?

2. Watch “Irreducible complexity cut down to size” (which can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=W96AJ0ChboU) and “Rebuttals: Irreducible Complexity” (which can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=As1HlmYeh7Q) to gain an alternative perspective on irreducible complexity. Clearly, the video creator has a bias. Do his critiques of irreducible complexity make sense?

“Deep Concord: Christian Theism and the Deep Roots of Science”

1. On page 266, Plantinga says “Modern Western empirical science originated and flourished in the bosom of Christian theism and originated nowhere else.” What do you think of this statement? Do you think it is accurate?

2. What are the implications of this statement for non-Christian scientists?

Discussion Questions

In addition to answering the Reading and Reflection questions, please write two of your own questions about the readings for today.

1.

2.

Module 4: Deep Conflict

Chapter covered: The Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism”

Reading and Reflection

“The Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism”

1. Do you agree that theism is more rightly the “scientific worldview” (309)? How might adherents to naturalism respond to this claim?
2. Do you find Plantinga’s description of the self-inconsistency of naturalism’s confidence in the reliability of certain beliefs (such as the theory of evolution or science in general, page 314) to be persuasive?
3. Would you be able to summarize Plantinga’s thesis and support for his thesis for an audience of adherents to naturalism? Do you agree with his thesis? Has this book impacted the way you view the philosophy of science or the conflict (perceived or legitimate) between science and religion?

Discussion Questions

In addition to answering the Reading and Reflection questions, please write two of your own questions about the readings for today.

1.

2.

Bibliography

Plantinga, A. (2011). *Where the Conflict Really Lies*. New York: Oxford University Press.