

---

# Pro Rege

---

---

Volume 30 | Number 4

Article 2

---

June 2002

## Spiritual Warfare and Modern Science

Calvin Jongsma

Dordt College, [calvin.jongsma@dordt.edu](mailto:calvin.jongsma@dordt.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege)



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Jongsma, Calvin (2002) "Spiritual Warfare and Modern Science," *Pro Rege*:

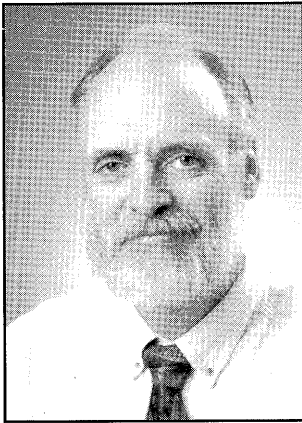
Vol. 30: No. 4, 12 - 14.

Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol30/iss4/2](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol30/iss4/2)

This Response or Comment is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).

RESPONSE TO NANCY PEARCEY

## Spiritual Warfare and Modern Science



by Calvin Jongsma

Nancy Pearcey has given us a fascinating glimpse of some recent work in the history of science, and she has drawn some provocative implications for us concerning the century-old stereotype that pits scientific thought and religious faith against one another. This is a theme she has addressed in some detail in her writing; many of us know her 1994 book, *The Soul of Science*, which sounds a similar note. This is also a matter to which contemporary historians have given increased attention, as she acknowledges in her talk. Ever since the 1981 conference that

---

*Dr. Calvin Jongsma is Professor of Mathematics at Dordt College.*

produced the seminal volume of essays *God and Nature*, edited by Lindberg and Numbers, historians of science have taken pains to avoid simplistically casting science and religion as opponents locked in mortal combat with one another. In our current post-modern climate, taking a more balanced approach has become somewhat easier.

Nevertheless, the warfare stereotype continues to flourish in some influential quarters and seems to require repeated floggings. I very much appreciate Pearcey's persistent dedication in undertaking this task, as well as her passion and boldness in challenging the flawed thesis in the public arena. Christian academics can talk a good line in the classroom and may on occasion publish a scholarly piece touching on the problem, but this work rarely gains wide notice or has much of a cultural impact. The Christian scientific community needs popular writers like Pearcey who can give intelligent expression to such matters on their behalf. Science is not a purely technical matter devoid of worldview connections, nor is it a field intrinsically tilted in favor of naturalistic philosophy. Christian belief is a powerful incentive, not a formidable barrier, to doing scientific work. These are points that bear telling.

I also appreciate Pearcey's approaching this issue from a Reformed Christian perspective, drawing upon the resources of Kuyper, Dooyeweerd, Shaeffer, and others. The theme of Creation, Fall, and Redemption is prominent in her writing, as are other biblical themes, such as the sovereignty of God and the cultural mandate. I applaud her vision that the practice of science is a

calling by which one can glorify God and serve humanity. Likewise, I agree with her that science and mathematics can be bent to evil purposes and that for some it has been allied with supreme human arrogance. Christians are thus called upon to reclaim science in humble service to God; part of this task is to challenge false motives and affirm the value of the Christian faith for engaging in scientific work. All these emphases I find myself in wholehearted agreement with.

However, Pearcey's presentation does prompt a few questions and suggestions from me that I would like to offer in the spirit of further honing our communal ability to address the issue of science and faith in historical perspective. In the few minutes allotted me, I want to focus briefly on three things in an integral manner: the formulation of the problematics, the appropriate strategy in dealing with the issue, and the sorts of conclusions one can or should draw from the history of science. Since I am most at home in the history and philosophy of mathematics, I will use that field to illustrate my remarks. You shouldn't misconstrue this focus as special interest pleading on my part, though, for as Pearcey correctly notes in her book on history of science, "One of the most distinctive aspects of modern science is its use of mathematics—the conviction not only that nature is lawful but also that those laws can be stated in precise mathematical formulas" (*Soul of Science* 270). Mathematics supplies the engine that powers the Scientific Revolution.

First, then, the matter of formulating the problem in a cogent and fruitful manner: Pearcey notes that the common metaphor of science being at war with religion is misguided. I agree, as do historians of science generally. So, what is the real relationship? Well, an answer depends on how you conceptualize the realities involved. If science is defined too narrowly, purely in terms of its content or methodology, this definition may fail to take seriously the context in which the enterprise is practiced, and then it will be easier to dismiss religious matters as irrelevant. The same can be said of religion: restricting it to theology or biblical doctrines or devotional practices already compartmentalizes faith in a way that constricts its ability to connect with science. We need a concept of science that holistically recognizes all aspects of its

practice, and we need to view religion in terms of a commitment to and fundamental stance on what things are ultimate in reality. This foundation will allow us to maintain that while science is not at war with religion, it has nevertheless been a spiritual battleground for different religiously-based worldviews and has been variously shaped by them in the process.

It should be clear, then, that the linkage between religion and science cannot simply be the way in which theological concepts or biblical themes tie in to modern science. This approach may be how most historians of science want to formulate the problem, but as Reformed thinkers we ought to seek deeper connections between worldviews, philosophy, and scientific practice. Thus, while scientists may be classified as Christian in terms of their theology or cultural milieu, their philosophical perspective may move them toward a more secular understanding of nature. It is possible for a culture to retain Christian morals and theological beliefs even while its scientists pursue intellectual goals at odds with a Christian view of reality. I think this is the case for most early modern scientists: Bacon, Kepler, Galileo, Descartes, Newton, and Leibniz all come to mind.

Here, then, I find myself in partial disagreement with Pearcey, who may be relying too heavily on Shaeffer. The narrative theme of Creation-Fall-Redemption plays out for Pearcey within the history of science in a way that I find unconvincing. Initially, modern science was good, she says, drawing its sustenance from the Christian matrix that gave it birth, but during the late nineteenth century it fell from grace as many of its practitioners denied any role for God and adopted philosophical naturalism, so now we must work to redeem science, restoring it to its initial state by criticizing scientism and reaffirming Christian motives for studying nature.

There are several problems with this scenario, in my opinion. In the first place, I think it places the Fall far too late—surely much Enlightenment thinking of the mid to late eighteenth century has already weaned itself of whatever Christian origins it had, even if the process of secularization has not yet evolved to its final stage. I find it hard to accept Pearcey's claim, therefore, that "Until roughly the late nineteenth century . . . most philo-

sophical and scientific discussions were carried on within a framework shaped by theological concepts.” I wonder whether Pearcey’s pinning the blame on the late nineteenth century has more to do with this being the time of Darwin and the rise of naturalistic evolutionary thinking about origins. Why this should be taken as a watershed for the physical sciences or mathematics or even philosophy of science is unclear to me.

Secondly, and closely related to my first point, I think Pearcey’s approach assesses early modern developments far more benignly and optimistically than the evidence warrants. I certainly don’t want to deny the importance of a Christian view of creation for the pursuit of natural philosophy, and I recognize the impact that the Reformation had on the thinking of this period, but the central intellectual tendencies of early modern science seem to me to come as much or more from a recovery of pagan Greek thought than from a biblical understanding of the world. Galileo’s book of nature, for example, is essentially mathematical in character: the primary determinative qualities of things are number, size, shape, and speed. In order to understand anything at all about the natural world, he says, one must be well versed in mathematics. Kepler waxes even more rhapsodic about the value of mathematics; geometry, being eternally present in the divine mind, provided God with the models for creating the universe. Descartes and Leibniz likewise find mathematics the exemplar of necessary and absolutely certain truth and use it to pursue their programs of philosophy. The early modern period, it seems to me, is thus responsible for

promulgating a mathematically reductionistic view of reality that owes its existence more to the triumph of neo-Pythagorean and neo-Platonic thinking than to any genuine biblical influence. Western civilization has certainly benefited from the modern mathematization of science (reality does have quantitative features nearly everywhere you look), but it has simultaneously suffered from the operational belief that if you can’t measure something it doesn’t exist. The idea that God is a rational being who imbued the world with a rational structure and that humans created in His image thus have the ability to think God’s thoughts after Him as they investigate nature with their reason is at best an uneven accommodation of Christian ideas to pagan Greek philosophy. This perspective cannot be derived from the Bible’s outlook on nature, and in its elevation of deductive quantitative reasoning, it typically fails to recognize the creaturely status of logical and mathematical thought.

To be fair, in her 1994 book Pearcey recognizes significant Greek influences on modern science, but even there they don’t seem to sufficiently impact her assessment of the worldview roots of science. And in the paper we just heard, this counterbalance is missing. Perhaps this is because her aim here is rather narrowly apologetic and any admission of other strong influences would weaken the position she wants to argue. Or perhaps it is because she thinks the Dordt community leans too far the other way and needs to hear her side of the story. At any rate, I think there is an important issue here for us to talk about further.