



LECTURE SERIES

# SCIENCE AND THE GOD QUESTION

---

ALISTER McGRATH & JOHN LENNOX

# **SCIENCE AND THE GOD QUESTION**

## **STUDY GUIDE**



FIXED POINT FOUNDATION

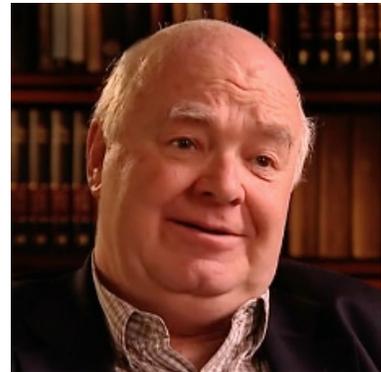
## THE PARTICIPANTS

---

**ALISTER MCGRATH** is a historian, biochemist, and Christian theologian born in Belfast, Northern Ireland. A longtime professor at Oxford University, he now holds the chair in theology, ministry, and education at the University of London. He is the author of several books on theology and history, including *Christianity's Dangerous Idea*, *In the Beginning*, and *The Twilight of Atheism*. He lives in Oxford, England, and lectures regularly in the United States.



**JOHN LENNOX** is a Reader in Mathematics at the University of Oxford and Fellow in Mathematics and Philosophy of Science at Green-Templeton College, University of Oxford. He holds doctorates from Oxford (D. Phil.), Cambridge (Ph.D.), and the University of Wales (D.Sc.) and an MA in Bioethics from the University of Surrey. A prominent voice in the science vs. religion controversy and a leading Christian apologist, Prof. Lennox is the author of *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (2007) and *Seven Days that Divide the World* (2011).



**LARRY A. TAUNTON** is founder and Executive Director of Fixed Point Foundation and Latimer House. Like Fixed Point itself, Larry specializes in addressing issues of faith and culture. He is Executive Producer of the films “The God Delusion Debate” (2007), “Has Science Buried God?” (2008), and “Is God Great?” (2009), among others. Larry formerly taught European and Russian history. He holds academic degrees from Samford University and the University of Alabama, and is the author of *The Grace Effect: How the Power of One Life Can Reverse the Corruption of Unbelief* (2011).



## INTRODUCTION

---

Most people tend to view science and religion, faith and reason, as inherently in conflict. It seems so obvious to them: science deals with facts, with material things we can touch, taste, hear, see, or smell. Religion and faith deal with things outside of the reach of things we interact with on a daily basis. The entire approach to religion is totally different, they say, than the approach to science. A second perception most people have is that whereas religion has become less relevant over time, science has become increasingly more important.

These common perceptions are so frequently reinforced in education and the mass media that they are rarely questioned. In this documentary Larry Taunton interviews John Lennox and Alister McGrath in order to discover whether science and religion are truly at odds. It turns out that it is too simplistic to think these categories never overlap. Lennox and McGrath give thoughtful and clear explanations of this convergence and how to think rightly about the interaction between science and religion.

## STUCTURE

---

The film is organized topically into the following five sections:

1. NOMA: Non-overlapping Magisteria
2. The Phony War
3. In the Beginning: Genesis and Evolution
4. Science and Theology: The Great Schism
5. Scientists Finding God in the Universe

It is probably best to read each topic's introduction first and then watch the documentary segment that corresponds to it. Following an introduction to each segment is a series of questions for further discussion. These are intended for group discussion. At the conclusion of all the segments there is a recommended reading section on the topics discussed.

## **PART ONE: NON-OVERLAPPING MAGISTERIA** (4:00 - 21:47)

---

The growing tension between some in the scientific and religious communities is obvious even to the casual observer. Science, it seems, rolls back the frontiers of faith with each new discovery. So much so, it is mockingly asserted that God can only be found these days in the gaps that science has not yet closed. Meanwhile, a new gap has developed between these two disciplines. Some think efforts to bridge this gap are misguided because, they say, science is based on evidence while faith flourishes only where there is a lack of evidence.

And that's part of the problem: the way the discussion is often framed is science vs. faith. We may reasonably translate that as "fact vs. fiction" or "the rational vs. the irrational." In accepting this model, Christians have enabled their detractors to cast belief in God in the same light as belief in Bertrand Russell's "celestial teapot" or Richard Dawkins' much loved "flying spaghetti monster."

If Christians accept the notion that their faith is in no way relevant to academic endeavors, what other spheres of life will follow? The Arts? Politics? Education? It is easy to see how such a view can have far reaching and, in the long run, catastrophic consequences.

### **QUESTIONS**

---

1. Much of this segment deals with Stephen J. Gould's claim that science and religion are "non-overlapping magisteria." Prof. Lennox, in response, claims that the two are not "non-overlapping" but "partially-overlapping." What questions can one field answer that the other cannot? Similarly, if Lennox is right, where do the two fields find common ground?
2. Lennox states, in no uncertain terms, that the Bible is not a scientific textbook. What does he mean by this? Do you agree?
3. The so-called "limits of science" are spoken of frequently by both Profs. McGrath and Lennox. Are these limits due to the methodology and purpose of science, or are they simply due to a lack of information and advancement in the field? In other words, do you think these limits will always be present?
4. In speaking of the ethical questions raised by science, Lennox cites Dostoevsky's famous statement in *The Brothers Karamazov*: "If there is no immortality, there can be no virtue, and all things are permissible." Without a law-giver, says Lennox, efforts to find a basis for morality are extremely difficult. Can there be a moral base without God? If so, what can science offer to it?

## **PART TWO: THE PHONY WAR** (21:47 - 34:56)

---

Are science and Christianity at war? The science-religion debate is, unquestionably, a dangerous intersection. That there is a war of sorts there can be no doubt. But is it a war between science and Christianity, or has science become a weapon in a larger cultural battle?

“God is dead” — or so some in the scientific community would have us believe. And it seems that many Christians, for all practical purposes, have conceded the point. Fearing science and thinking that their faith cannot withstand the harsh light of scrutiny, they have privatized faith, and in so doing, have assigned to it a place of irrelevance.

But not all are ready to surrender the field. They maintain that the Christian faith has more than spiritual and moral power: it has, they say, an intellectual power that is neither at war nor inconsistent with authentic scientific inquiry.

### **QUESTIONS**

---

1. At the beginning of this section, Larry Taunton cites a study conducted by psychologist J. Luba in 1916. The results of that study, he claims, were not substantially different from those of a similar study conducted in 1997: that 40% of scientists believed in God. The fact that this percentage did not decrease in the course of 80 years was deemed remarkable by some. Do these findings seem remarkable to you? Why or why not?
2. According to Lennox, the supposed conflict between science and Christianity is really a conflict between two worldviews: a religious worldview and a materialistic worldview. While there are scientists on both sides of the conflict, the discipline of science, he claims, best fits with the former. Do you find his argument compelling? Why or why not?
3. The historical conflicts between the church and figures like Copernicus and Galileo illustrate an important point: that the pursuit of truth can sometimes be hindered by an insistence on thinking only one way. Where, if anywhere, do we see this same problem today? In scientific communities? In the church?
4. Lennox claims that all of us, whether Christian or otherwise, are biased. Do you agree? If so, how do our different biases affect the study of science? If not, how do we escape from bias?

## PART THREE: GENESIS AND EVOLUTION (34:56 - 47:05)

---

That the question of origins matters is evidenced by the just how hotly the issue is contested. In America, one need look no further than two famous cases which highlight the controversy: the trial of John Scopes for teaching evolution in a public school and the more recent case in Dover, Pennsylvania that saw 'Intelligent Design' banned from public schools.

The Bible, from the opening verse, is no less emphatic on the point. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." With that statement a line was drawn in the sand.

The discussion here turns to Genesis, evolution, and the cultural power associated with the creation story.

### QUESTIONS

---

1. Lennox identifies three types of evolution in the scientific world. What are these three and why do the distinctions between them matter?
2. Many Christians claim that macro-evolution and the Genesis creation account cannot be reconciled. Do you agree with this position? Why or why not? Furthermore, why does it matter?
3. Within the church, one of the most contentious elements of the Biblical creation story is the age of the earth. Commenting on this, Lennox says that "the *fact* of creation far outweighs the *timing* of creation." Why do you think this issue is so contentious?
4. Science, claims Lennox, should inform our reading of scripture. Do you consider this a dangerous position to take? Why or why not?

## PART FOUR: SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY (47:05 - 59:25)

---

1. Much of this section deals with the proverbial “God of the gaps” approach to belief in God. For Lennox, though, the evidence for God’s existence lies in what we *do* know, not in what we cannot explain. What are some examples of this evidence, and do you think they really do point to the existence of a divine intelligence?
2. Science itself, claim both Lennox and McGrath, cannot explain *why* it explains. It must be founded on the *belief* that the universe is rationally intelligible. Christianity, on the other hand, provides an explanation of this belief: that the same intelligence who created the universe also created the human mind. Can there be any other, non-religious explanation for the “rational intelligibility of the universe”? If so, what?
3. Larry Taunton claims that physicists are often more open to theism (or the existence of divine intelligence) than biologists. Do you agree with this assessment? If so, why do you think this is the case?

## PART FIVE: SCIENTISTS FINDING GOD IN THE UNIVERSE (59:25 - 1:10:00)

---

Christians today have largely accepted the notion that their faith has no intellectual teeth. Christ's dying words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" seem to express the feelings of many: complete abandonment. But Christianity is as relevant today as it was 2,000 years ago. God is not dead. It seems we are witnessing a dramatic philosophical shift in the Western mind. As postmodernism and relativism reach the end of themselves, the pendulum is swinging back in the direction of belief in the absolute. This affords Christians a renewed opportunity. But for that opportunity to yield results we must reengage and make public the faith we have so readily privatized.

### QUESTIONS

---

1. McGrath calls atheism a "faith." Do you agree with this characterization? Why or why not?
2. Most Christians, claims McGrath, are ready to tell others *what* they believe but not *why* they believe it. "Faith," he goes on to say, "is at its best when it's in action - when it has to defend itself." Do you think that it is important to be able to defend *all* of what you believe? Why or why not?
3. Using the Christian analogy of salt and light, McGrath argues that Christians are called to "get noticed." Do you agree? If so, what are some innovative ways of doing so?

## RECOMENDED READING

---

The following recommendations for further reading are intended for those who want to acquaint themselves with the details of the recent debates about God's existence. A debate of this kind ventures into science, history, philosophy, and biblical scholarship. For that reason, it is helpful to get the perspectives of authorities in different areas and so the recommendations are organized according to this criterion. Books marked with an asterisk (\*) are written by Christian authors.

### BOOKS BY SCIENTISTS

---

Berlinski, David (2009). *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions*. New York: Basic Books.

\*Lennox, John (2009). *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* London: Lion UK.

Dawkins, Richard (2006). *The God Delusion*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

### BOOKS BY HISTORIANS

---

Hitchens, Christopher (2007). *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. New York: Twelve.

\*Hart, David Bentley (2009). *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*. New Haven: Yale UP.

### BOOKS BY PHILOSOPHERS

---

Singer, Peter (1993). *Practical Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Dennett, Daniel (2006). *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. New York: Peguin.

\*Craig, William Lane (1984, 2008). *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*. Wheaton: Crossway Books.

\*Plantinga, Alvin (2000). *Warranted Christian Belief*. New York: Oxford UP.

### BOOKS BY BIBLICAL SCHOLARS

---

Ehrman, Bart (2009). *Jesus Interrupted*. New York: Harper Collins.

\*Roberts, Mark (2007). *Can We Trust the Gospels?* Wheaton: Crossway Books.

\*Blomberg, Craig (1987). *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*. Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press.