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# WHEN EVANGELISM MEETS SCIENTISM

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Apologetics is the ministry of defending and commending the Christian faith, in hopes of persuading people of its truthfulness, goodness, and beauty. Admittedly, such persuasion is much more than an intellectual endeavor, but it should certainly not be less. The Bible commands Jesus' followers to always be prepared to make a defense to those who ask us for the reason for our hope (1 Peter 3:15). We reason with people about the gospel so that ultimately they might come to saving faith in Jesus. As Joshua Chatraw and Mark Allen write in their text, *Apologetics at the Cross*, "Apologetics is not the

same thing as the gospel, nor does it hold the same status; rather, apologetics should function as the gospel's servant."

While seeing unbelievers find salvation in Christ is apologetics' ultimate aim, one of the most helpful things we can do when interacting with non-Christians is help them better understand what it is they actually believe. This is necessary because many people don't take time to pause and reflect on the assumptions and beliefs that lead them to dismiss the plausibility of Christianity being true. In the West, a number of assumptions about the nature of science and knowledge stand in the way of people giving Christianity a fair hearing, making it necessary for Christians to understand how to recognize and challenge them.

In his book *Science Set Free*, Rupert Sheldrake, a cell biologist and researcher, explains how the philosophy of materialism (the belief that reality consists solely of matter and material processes) has become so linked to science that to question its truthfulness is regarded as being unscientific.

Commenting on the pervasiveness of this assumption, he writes: "Since the nineteenth century, a belief in materialism has indeed been propagated with remarkable success: millions of people have been converted to this 'scientific' view, even though they know very little about science itself. They are, as it were, devotees of the Church of Science, or of scientism, of which scientists are the priests." Scientism refers to the belief that science is the sole means of knowing what is true or real.

Most people aren't familiar with the technical terminology so the odds of your meeting anyone who will identify him or herself as an adherent to scientism are pretty slim. So, how do you recognize them? Listen for statements about what can or can't be known as factual. Someone saying something like "You can't say that you know that to be true because it hasn't been proven," is a good sign. Now, if what they're talking about is something about the natural world, that's one thing. But people will often extend this to all sorts of claims that are not in themselves scientific. If you think that's the case, it's helpful to ask a clarifying question like, "Would you say that science is the only means of determining what's true or real?" If they answer affirmatively, you're dealing with some form of scientism, and you can then proceed to try to help them see some of the problems with such a view.

Perhaps the greatest flaw with scientism is the fact that it's self-refuting. Another way of saying that is that it falsifies itself by failing to meet the standard it proposes as necessary for an item to qualify as factual or true knowledge. Anyone who asserts "Science is the only means of knowing what is true or real" is claiming that that statement is true. However, for the sake of consistency, the only way that that sentence could be known to be true is by means of some kind of scientific verification. But there is no way to scientifically prove that the proposition is true. No experiment could be performed to verify the claim. That's because the claim is not one of science but philosophy. It's a claim about the conditions under which we're justified in claiming to know something to be true. But that's not the jurisdiction of science.

Yet another problem with adopting scientism is its high cost. Restricting knowledge only to those claims that have been scientifically verified will require giving up much that we take for granted that we know. For example, I know that I had oatmeal with raisins and brown sugar for breakfast this morning, but my confidence is not based on any scientific experiment but on my memory.

Embracing scientism necessitates that we abandon historical and moral claims as well. When I encounter someone who holds to scientism, I usually ask questions like "Is it true that torturing people for pleasure is wrong?" or "Are there such things as basic human rights?" Most almost immediately answer affirmatively (which is good). My next question is how either of those truths can be arrived at by means of science. They can't. Therefore, one must either give up their belief that such claims are true, or they have to seriously reconsider whether science is the only possible means of knowing what's real or true.

Finally, another difficulty for scientism is that if true, it makes the foundations upon which science rests less sure than its conclusions. Scientific inquiry assumes a number of things such as the existence of an orderly world outside our minds, the existence and validity of laws of logic, the general reliability of our senses, and the existence of moral norms (e.g., scientists should honestly report the results of their experiments). Because such beliefs are foundational to the doing of science, they are not the products of science in which case, if scientism were true, we could not legitimately claim to know that they are true since they were not arrived at scientifically.

None of the above is intended to disparage or reject science but to recognize its limits. Apologetics should be about more than giving answers. It should also be about asking strategic questions designed to make people consider the soundness (or lack thereof) of their objections to Christianity. Helping those who adhere to scientism see its flaws, may, by the grace of God, be the first step toward their listening more attentively to the claims of Christ.

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