

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 22 | Issue 4

Article 11

---

10-1-2005

## C. John Collins, SCIENCE & FAITH: FRIENDS OR FOES?

W. Brian Shelton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Shelton, W. Brian (2005) "C. John Collins, SCIENCE & FAITH: FRIENDS OR FOES?," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 4 , Article 11.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil200522461

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol22/iss4/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

might take. In sum, the value of this book is twofold: it would be an excellent text for a graduate level philosophy of religion course, but it is also a salient reminder of an important aspect of religious life that has until now largely eluded the attention of philosophers.

*Science & Faith: Friends or Foes?*, by C. John Collins. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003. Pp. 448. \$25 (paper).

W. BRIAN SHELTON, Toccoa Falls College

Christians should not fear the sciences, even if chemistry frightens us or if Carl Sagan intimidates us. Instead, science should complement our Christian faith as a parallel revelation to be understood through sound critical thinking. C. John Collins is professor of Old Testament at Covenant Theological Seminary and an MIT graduate who insightfully explores the ins and outs of faith and science issues. The book targets those who have no specialized training in theology, philosophy, or the sciences without "dumbing down" the material. In fact, any reader quickly realizes the erudition and interdisciplinary insights of the author.

Science and faith confront one another on these pages as Collins reconciles them through exegesis and common sense, while marshalling and foiling material from philosophy, theology, cosmology, geology, biology, literature, physics, and even popular science fiction. His goal is to construct a "proper hold on Christian belief" (12) in four different sections. Part I proceeds with philosophy and method of science, insisting that good science and good faith both need sound critical thinking. Part II focuses on theology, where the author considers how the biblical data impacts our view of science in the cosmos, origins, created man, effect of sin, providence, miracles, revelation, and dominion. Part III wedds faith and science in the areas of cosmology and biology that climaxes in an apologetic for intelligent design, and expands even into the social sciences. Part IV applies all this to education, the public square, and a Christian world and life view. An appendix critiques Thomas Kuhn's theory of paradigm construction and its role in scientific methodology.

Collins first establishes ground rules for approaching the biblical record, always with a goal to find an interpretation that accounts for all the features of the text. He devotes two chapters to demonstrating fundamental principles of critical thinking and the drawing of sound conclusions. Sound thinking (any argument) involves data, premises, terms, logic, scope, and a gradation of confidence. The author does not advance his own agenda here, but frames his forthcoming study with sound scientific method. He defines and illustrates fallacies, truth claims, and the role of reason in doing good science of any sort. Science and faith each have a relationship to knowledge, the author says, and the supernatural and natural can overlap and need not be at odds. Defining science only through naturalistic explanation finds no warrant in the history of science or from the rules of reason (54); a scientific system with God behind it is a more

biblical worldview. Collins is indeed correct, but the question of where the natural ends and supernatural begins slips beyond determination. Nature exhibits regular behavior (177), so one might underestimate the degree of the supernatural behind a miraculous occurrence, on the one hand, and overestimate divine involvement behind a natural occurrence on the other. Furthermore, the Bible presents God's providence as an indirect and thus unrecognizable phenomenon at times (common grace), blurring the lines between the natural and supernatural.

As expected, Genesis 1-2 receives considerable attention. For Collins, this passage is not a "scientific account" but it is "historical," and it bears on science as a biblical foundation for understanding nature (133, 265). His exploration of Genesis 1-2 is both exegetical and Sabbath-based, and he presents his argument from Scriptural texts in an impressively coherent way. "When we interpret the days, we have no obligation to read Moses as claiming that God began his creative work of the first day at the very beginning of the universe—or even at the very beginning of the earth. This tells us that some lengths of time don't matter to the story" (83). This line of reasoning lays the groundwork for an old earth view of origins, which will serve Collins as a model for a friendlier science/faith relationship in which natural revelation (scientific old earth evidence) can complement special revelation (biblical analogical days).

He supports his analogical day premise through a treatment of *yom* "day" on a literary level and through tackling individual arguments that favor a literal six-day creation. (A caveat to those who would dismiss Collins' Hebrew skills as uninformed: the author was the OT Chairman for the Translation Oversight Committee of the new English Standard Version of Scripture.) He further buttresses his analogical days with the observation that the seventh day is not a twenty-four hour period because it lacks the formula "evening and morning the nth day." For the author, this ought to indicate to us that the other six days do not have to be ordinary (85). He concludes that the Bible does not speak scientifically of the creation period, but testifies truthfully to the way God established the creation *ex nihilo*, made all the earth and its creatures good, and personally formed man in his image. This, in turn, lays the groundwork for God's special call and covenant with Abraham. Collins admits that he does not always speak for every conservative Christian (147), as when he holds to an old-earth view, but all interested in origins can profit from his observations.

More than just another age of the earth project, the book expands the science versus faith dilemma into anthropology and the effect of sin, and Collins' interpretations are noteworthy. His doctrine of sin allows death before the fall to be natural and good. There is no biblical emphasis on any moral corruption of plants and animals, but the curse is on man alone: "Genesis does not suggest that the properties of the ground or plants have changed as a result of man's fall" (151). Psalm 104 advances the goodness of the lion seeking prey, while Romans 8 anticipates nature's freedom from an abusive mankind. In fact, the "death" that comes to Adam is primarily spiritual separation and estrangement from God and not physical death, yet Collins concedes that sin eventually causes their bodies to die (143). Unfortunately, his treatment does not address the logistics of an innocent

Adam capable of dying. As expected, the curse of the serpent has nothing to do with snakes but is humiliation metaphor (149).

His treatment of miracles is noteworthy: Naturalism alone falls short as “good science does not work against a real supernatural event; it only brings the miracle into sharper relief” (178). The author absolutely disqualifies anything that threatens or compromises the biblical God, or that eliminates the supernatural in creation or in providence, including the “modern scientific outlook” popular today. He insists that science and faith—natural and special revelation—can complement each other without denying the Scriptures, the supernatural, or the mind. This is the main thesis that Collins advances from the historical creation through the Fall to the project of science today. Denial of the natural world and the use of the scientific method to understand it is an injustice to the rationality of the image of God. Collins allows for plenty of technical errors by scientists, but concerning their scientific methodology: “I have no reason to disbelieve the standard theories of the geologists, including their estimate for the age of the earth. They may be wrong, for all I know; but if they are wrong, it’s not because they have improperly smuggled philosophical assumptions into their work” (250). All the while, the author is closing in on an intelligent design model in which the created order testifies to the biblical God without creating a dichotomy between science and faith.

There is much to be commended about this book. The most impressive feature is the author’s breadth of knowledge: Collins is better read and more cross-disciplinary than most science/faith writers. Quotations and references extend from antiquity to the modern era in several disciplines, yet there are clearly some favorite figures: C.S. Lewis, Franz Delitzsch, and Gresham Machen, plus regular interaction with Darwin, Paley, and popular contemporary old and new earth figures. Collins is a very careful and precise writer who represents his opponents fairly and who is friendly to the young earth creationist position that he questions. Thus, this book is still ideal for a parent wanting to be informed, regardless of their “stripe.” This work could profit from a set of specific guidelines to be applied to faith and science “conflicts.” Investment into such a paradigm with “solving” principles would particularly benefit the lay-scientists that his book targets. He defines terms according to national educational associations and plainly interacts on a level applicable for the average concerned Christian. This text is also beneficial for the teacher, professor, or scholar who feels inadequate on the topic, and wants to see science integrated with Scripture’s explanation of creation and providence. Science and faith need not be at odds, but the author shows how a Christian worldview makes the best account of science and the natural processes.