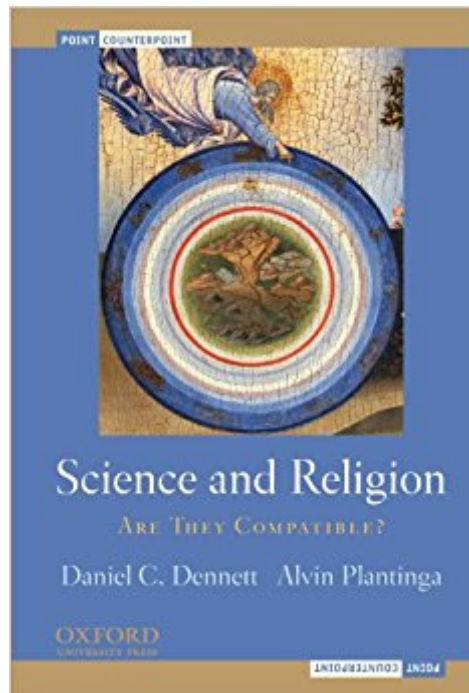




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# Science And Religion: Are They Compatible? (Point/Counterpoint)



## Synopsis

One of today's most controversial and heated issues is whether or not the conflict between science and religion can be reconciled. In *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?*, renowned philosophers Daniel C. Dennett and Alvin Plantinga expand upon the arguments that they presented in an exciting live debate held at the 2009 American Philosophical Association Central Division conference. An enlightening discussion that will motivate students to think critically, *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* opens with Plantinga's assertion that Christianity is compatible with evolutionary theory because Christians believe that God created the living world, and it is entirely possible that God did so by using a process of evolution. Dennett vigorously rejects this argument, provoking a reply from Plantinga, another response from Dennett, and final statements from both sides. As philosophers, the authors possess expert skills in critical analysis; their arguments provide a model of dialogue between those who strongly disagree. Ideal for courses in philosophy of religion, science and religion, and philosophy of science, *Science and Religion* is also captivating reading for general readers.

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## Customer Reviews

"Given the stature of its two protagonists, this book will become something of an instant classic, occupying a unique and special place in the literature on this topic, and enjoying wide and long-lasting readership and usefulness as a supplementary text."--Gary Rosenkrantz, University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
"This engaging little book treats key issues of chance and design in the science-religion dialogue. It would be appropriate for courses in the philosophy of religion,

religion and culture, and science and religion. I would be highly likely to adopt the book in my philosophy of science course because it is brief, clear, and to the point."--Michael L. Peterson, Asbury College

Daniel C. Dennett is the Co-Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies, University Professor, and Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy at Tufts University. He is the author of *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006) and *Freedom Evolves* (2003). Alvin Plantinga is John A. O'Brien Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. He is the author of *Essays in the Metaphysics of Modality* (OUP, 2003) and *Warranted Christian Belief* (OUP, 2000).

The original debate (at an American Philosophical Association meeting) was meant to be on whether science and religion are compatible. Plantinga begins by narrowing the debate to "Are contemporary evolutionary theory and the God of traditional Christian belief compatible?" and argues that they are. But, surprisingly, Dennett agrees, so there is no debate on the original subject. Instead, the real debate centers on Plantinga's "Evolutionary argument against naturalism" and on questions about the likelihood of theism being true. My impression is that Plantinga's logic is on the whole more rigorous than Dennett's. However, Plantinga makes a tactical mistake in taking on board unnecessarily the ID arguments of Michael Behe's book *The Edge of Evolution*, bringing the debate into an area where Dennett has most scientists on his side. I enjoyed reading this debate between two top-level philosophers. The book has an excellent index.

Both allow that science and religion are compatible, if each may define his terms. Plantinga opens the discussion by narrowing it to the topic of evolution, and throws "young earth creationists" under the bus. Evolution-Darwinism is compatible with Christianity (if not with literal language of the Bible). The narrow topic of disagreement is whether evolution is "unguided, unplanned and unintended" (4). If you conclude it requires a "designer" that would not give you the God of the Bible or Christianity, so the topic is almost trivial. A fine summary in 77 pages of an argument that consumes thousands of pages in books and articles. I think Dennett wins -- the burden of proof is on the one who asserts a superhuman intelligent designer -- but it's not a knockout, and probably one's evaluation of the debate depends on one's prepossessions, however much one can learn from this intelligent discussion.

I was excited to see this book, simply because the weight of the scholars debating this issue. Daniel

Dennett and Alvin Plantinga are both very good philosophers. This little point/counterpoint book is exactly what we would expect from these passionate, very intelligent men debating an issue that draws public attention from university discussions to presidential races. Plantinga begins by arguing science and Christianity are compatible, but there is in fact a disagreement between science and religion. Using his Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism (EAAN), Plantinga classifies evolution as the science that naturalism (a religion) is incompatible with. Of course, Plantinga maintains we should abandon naturalism, pointing out theism is much more compatible with evolution. Dennett strikes back, likening theistic belief to a belief in Supermanism or something equally absurd. Trying to outmaneuver Plantinga's EAAN, Dennett attacks the idea that the probability of having reliable cognitive faculties through evolution given naturalism is low. In the replies to one another that follow these initial statements, the debate is very lively and interesting. It's a fine read, especially for the philosophically minded.

This book offers a debate between Christian philosopher David Plantinga and a representative of what I would call scientific naturalism. Even though Dennett gets to rebut and re-rebut, I give the debate to Plantinga. In order to make his point, Dennett has wandered outside the parameters of science into the field of philosophy and metaphysics, drawing conclusions that cannot be inferred from the data base of science alone. This was Plantinga's point.

As a philosopher myself, and particularly one who is interested in the philosophy of religion, I am always delighted to read top-level philosophers engaged in the topic. In the book *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* Daniel C. Dennett, a philosopher and cognitive scientist at Tufts University, represented the atheistic side and the view that science and religion were not compatible. Alvin Plantinga, professor emeritus at the University of Notre Dame, represented the theistic side. The book itself is a reprinting of a debate that Dennett and Plantinga had at a philosophy conference years ago, but it has been updated with a few things they have said since then. Usually, when there are debates about this topic, there is a lot of sarcasm and snark from both sides. I am happy to report that both sides are polite and respectful of one another, even if they disagree and tease each other a little at certain points. While both of these men are imminent in their field, one thing this book shows from cover to cover is how specialized philosophy has become. It used to be that philosophers were well schooled in all areas of philosophy but specialized in one area. This is no longer the case and it shows. Dennett, being a philosopher of science, knew science very well, but he did not seem to understand the classical arguments for the existence of God or the

metaphysics that undergird religion. Plantinga on the other hand seemed to get his scientific ideas from the Discovery Institute, since all he did was quote Michael Behe when making scientific statements. But, he did know the classical arguments and metaphysics of religion quite well. Plantinga starts the conversation off by saying that science and religion are not incompatible because Christians (he uses the term Christian rather than theist throughout the debate) believe that God has created the natural world and it is very possible that God did so using the evolutionary process. Plantinga goes on to say that the real problem is not between science and religion; it is between science and naturalism. Plantinga defines naturalism as belief that there is no God or anything like God (which would be atheism, not naturalism), and says that if naturalism is true there is no reason to believe that our cognitive faculties cannot be trustworthy because evolution cares about keeping traits that contribute to survival rather than truth. Dennett you would think would disagree being on the other side of the debate. But, he opens up by stating that there is no inherent conflict between religion and science, and that one can believe in both and be logically consistent. Where Dennett disagrees is that there is any reason to think that there is a God or that religion works just because it is logically compatible with science. He uses Superman as an example and gives him the traits usually associated with God in classical theism (omniscience, omnipotence, and so on) and says that "Supermanism" is also compatible with evolution, but he sees no reason to believe in either. Plantinga responded by repeating his argument about naturalism and evolution both being true being a low possibility; Dennett struck back by saying that just because Plantinga could not imagine something did not mean that something wasn't true. This is ultimately where the debate stopped because in the end both sides agreed: Science and Religion do not have an inherent conflict. I found it odd that two people would write a book about something where they were in agreement. The book itself is only 77 pages, so it can be read in one sitting, and it is not overly technical; both the trained philosopher and the novice can enjoy and learn from it. Also, Dennett and Plantinga are colorful people, so you will laugh at times (or you should at least). While the book is a match between two heavyweights in the field of philosophy, do not expect Muhammad Ali vs. George Foreman here. There is more agreement than disagreement, but overall it is still enjoyable. 3 out of 5 stars.

As always, Dennett is clear and convincing. Is there a better writer among philosophers? I don't think so.

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