



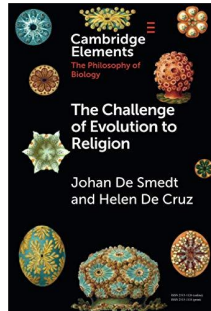
# Incompatible, or Driven Apart?

Joshua March

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I am a developmental psychologist who studies social learning, cognitive development and self-referencing effects. During my first lecturing post, I started to look into the cognitive science of religion (CSR). At the time I was quite nervous. As a Christian, I'd been unsettled about looking into work that, according to news headlines and confident internet pundits, proved that my faith was 'simply' an illusion caused by various biases, to be explained away. It turns out though that CSR is a helpful field that works to understand how various evolutionary, social and cognitive processes have shaped our religious beliefs, experiences and practices. For some, this might be enough to undercut all religious beliefs by showing that their causal history makes them invalid or irrational. But the challenge of CSR to the validity (or warrant) of moral/religious beliefs is an epistemological question, from which spring good and bad arguments. This itself is a fruitful sub-field for philosophers (see de Smedt & de Cruz, 2020, for an in-depth review). CSR as a whole can, and often does, remain agnostic as to the validity of the beliefs it studies, because it is a scientific enterprise and not a metaphysical one. I'll be honest: through studying CSR I have had to abandon beliefs I used to hold, such as the assumed link between morality and religiosity, the literal inerrancy of Christian Scripture, and the claim to value-laden uniqueness about humans and their religious beliefs. But simultaneously my faith has benefited from being challenged in this way, and I see nothing in CSR that should discourage mainstream Christians from studying it. The problem, it turns out, was with me - I had built up a picture of unbridled conflict between faith and CSR, which meant I kept one at arm's length for far longer than I should have.



This leads me to the main point of this article - psychologically speaking, framing a debate in its most antagonistic terms is likely to only create entrenched camps, not engaged collaborators. My assumptions about CSR precluded me from engaging with the field, cutting me off from learning the information that would have corrected me. I'm not downplaying my culpability in this - more nerve and honesty on my part would have gotten me to look into CSR sooner. But showing the psychological mechanisms involved will hopefully shed some light on how other people can avoid my mistake. I'll discuss how perceived threats to our identity can push us to prejudice and conflict, and then I'll suggest how we can overcome these reactions.

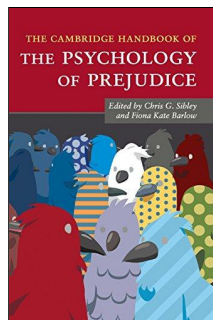
The tendency to perceive a conflict between religion and science is both widespread, and often unchallenged. In some cases though, it is by assuming that such a conflict exists that we unwittingly create it. Elsdon-Baker, an atheist anthropologist at Oxford, has argued (2015) that in public polls about the relationship between evolution and religion held across the UK and Africa, the way questions were framed impacted the likelihood of people self-identifying as 'creationists'. In particular, when questions presented 'accepting evolution' and 'believing God played a part in creating the world' as opposing ends of a spectrum, people had no middle ground for accommodationist positions. This led to inconsistencies in the numbers of people advocating the teaching of evolution and those accepting creationism across the survey, indicating that people who identified as 'creationist' were not as opposed to evolution as the label typically implies. Elsdon-Baker asks:

"Are we ourselves creating 'creationists' in the way that we chose to frame the issue? [...] We are in effect making an ideological decision to classify acceptance of evolution as acceptance of atheism, and this forces me to ask, by what authority and how productive is this for science communication across diverse cultures?"

The article suggests that poorly-designed surveys can give inaccurate data about people's beliefs. If the questions assume a conflict between religion and science, people may feel they can only pick one or the other. Whilst this argument seems reasonable, it would be good if there were some evidence to support it. Well, it turns out there is. Psychologists McPhetres, Jong and Zuckerman (2020) conducted several large-scale, pre-registered analyses of the relationship between religiosity and science attitudes across more than 60 countries. The results are stark: the only country in which there was a consistently negative relationship/correlation between religiosity and pro-science attitudes was the United States. The authors argue that this suggests a unique relationship between religiosity and science in this country - given the high-profile events on teaching creationism vs evolution in schools, I would suggest that part of this relationship is a strong conflict narrative. A significant current of American religiosity combines beliefs in fundamentalist Christian views, biblical inerrancy and young earth creationism. As this version of Christianity is both inflexible and strongly opposed to evolutionary science, the end result is that people who identify with this religion keep science at arms' length. By assuming there is conflict, we create division and separation where little existed previously.<sup>1</sup>

1. I am struck by the similarities to the fascinating history of the development of the 'flat Earth theory' related on this website by Derrick Petersen - flat-earthers were stoked into existence by the creation of conflict where none had existed.

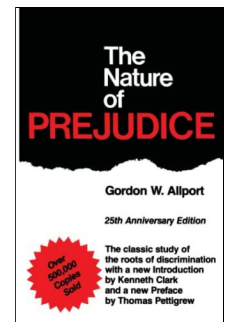
Finally, and possibly worst of all, believing oneself to be under fire increases prejudice. To understand more about how conflict narratives can worsen intergroup relations, we can look at work surrounding intergroup threat theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2016). When people identify very strongly with a group, they are more likely to show biased evaluations of information that threatens the group's beliefs, even in online environments (e.g. Nauroth, Gollwitzer, Bender & Rothmund, 2015). High ingroup identifications and rigid belief systems, combined with a belief in a dangerous world, pre-dispose people to see threats to their identity, and to act with hostility towards these threats (in the form of greater outgroup prejudice and discrimination). Perceiving a conflict to our identity pushes us to lash out, either directly (such as attempting to refute the evidence) or indirectly (such as wanting to remove the people we perceive as a threat). This is not just academic: these types of reactions can have significant real-world consequences. Psychologists Al-Kire, Pasek, Tsang and Rowatt (2021) argue that in recent years, there has been a resurgence of Christian nationalism in the US, which is 'an evangelical form of civil religion, which idealizes and advocates for Christianity's role in American civic life.' This cultural movement draws upon the inflexibility of American religiosity specifically. Crucially, the authors identify a central role of *threat* in endorsement of these attitudes: threat narratives created around issues seen as 'Christian' bolster support for Christian nationalist causes, leading to higher prejudice towards outgroups, e.g. immigrants. Whilst this may primarily be an American phenomenon for now, I'm sad to say I can see similar attitudes amongst conservative Scottish Christians, who deplore what they view as 'attacks' on Christianity. I worry that this will lead to a stronger rejection of evolutionary science, and perhaps science as a whole, in groups where science is presented as antithetical to faith.



To summarize my argument – by framing the relationship between religion and science as one of conflict, we force those as yet undecided to choose between one or the other. It does not seem unreasonable to paraphrase Elsdon-Baker and say that in some cases, creationists have been created by those who have told them that they cannot be believers if they love science, and that they cannot be scientists if they have religious beliefs. When such marginal groups develop a strong ingroup identity and rigid beliefs (such as in the rise of Christian nationalism), conflict is perceived as an example of imminent threat, entrenching them in inter-group prejudice and hostility. Perceptions of conflict, and subsequent threat, therefore have the potential to not only make us ignore beneficial information from others, but can create hostile attitudes and actual conflict where less or none existed.

It's a bleak picture, and as a Christian, very humbling. So, what can we do?

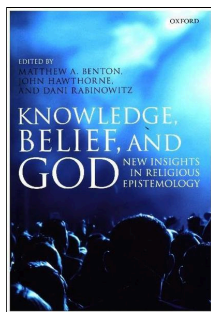
Well, just as psychology helps us to understand the mechanisms of intergroup conflict, it can also help us promote intergroup harmony. The first step, unremarkably, is to actually talk to other people. The intergroup contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) suggests that by talking to outgroup members, you get a clearer picture of what they believe, instead of relying on stereotypical assumptions which would lead you to disparage them. There's some evidence that this works: having political discussions with members of the opposing political party can lead to more positive evaluations of these outgroup members (Bond, Shulman & Gilbert, 2018). However contact by itself is not enough. My old colleague at the University of Dundee, Fabio Sani, has shown that *feelings of identification* with groups is more predictive of group identification than *mere contact time* (Sani, Herrera, Boroch & Gulyas, 2012). Not only do we need to spend time with people who disagree with us, but we need to feel a connection with them. Finding *shared knowledge, beliefs and principles* we can agree on will provide a means for us to identify with each other across other partisan boundaries. Instead of viewing one's beliefs and identity as under threat, this common ground can be the basis for discovering what we agree on, instead of focussing on what divides us. Here at Peaceful Science, this is made explicit in that we have our shared values that we can focus on as our common ground.



Additionally, we may need to review our own understanding of what it means to be religious, and what it means to do science. Our own perceptions of the conflict can lead us to disparage those who attempt to bridge the divide, or can help us accept them. Mackey, Rios and Cheng (2022) have recently shown that reducing the perceived conflict between Christianity and science lessened nonreligious participants' negative stereotypes of Christians' scientific ability. I take this as a hopeful sign that by changing our expectations of what science and religion entail, we can create the necessary respect required for fruitful dialogue.

One more example from my own life and I'm done, I promise. When I was struggling to engage with CSR, one of the things I found most helpful was discovering that there were Christians working in this field. This changed my view of what a Christian could be – it is possible to affirm CSR and still be a Christian. Feeling thus 'shielded', I started engaging with the CSR literature, and I'm very glad I did. Sometimes we may need someone we instinctually trust (i.e. an ingroup member) to 'take us by the hand', so to speak, even if it's just to start looking into a new field. This might not always be easy, or necessarily ideal, but if the alternative is to continue ignoring important work, I would argue it's better than nothing. I suspect finding other exemplars of fruitful cooperation between religious and secular academics may help us broaden our horizons. I've benefited a lot from finding honest academics who are willing to engage in fruitful collaborations across party divides (aside from the Peaceful Science team, of course). Here are a few examples:

- Christian philosopher of science Hans Halvorson working with atheist cosmologist Sean Carroll on critiques of invalid fine-tuning arguments for God
- Anglican priest and social psychologist Jonathan Jong working in CSR alongside atheist psychologists of religion
- Atheist psychologist Joshua D. Greene giving a talk on the evolution of morality and cooperation during morning prayers at Harvard University
- Christian philosopher Lara Buchak working with atheist psychologist Tania Lombrozo on understanding how people react to debunking arguments



- Atheist anthropologist Fern Elsdon-Baker working with social psychologists to reduce underrepresentation of religious individuals in science

There are more, but I cite these authors because they show that dialogue is both possible and can lead to fruitful collaboration with important scientific/philosophical outcomes.

I should say at this point that I am not claiming there is no conflict at all between faith and science. There may well be, and dealing with these challenges is important work. But these conflicts are not the whole picture, and there can be space for collaboration when we start from a place of shared identity. Promoting inclusion, scientific literacy, and cooperation seems like something both the secular and the believer should agree is a good thing. I suggest it is time to stop believing we share no common ground, because we do.

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