

Briefing Sheet Session 1: Science and Knowledge of God

Christians take God's revelation in Jesus and the Bible as the basis for their knowledge of God. For example, by reading about Jesus we can know that God is merciful and also that he also hates evil.

We can also see the glory of God displayed in what he has created.

For example, the universe looks like it has been set up with life in mind.

If the laws of nature weren't exactly as they are, there would be no planets, no oxygen – none of the things in the universe that are necessary for us to live. There doesn't seem to be any scientific reason why the laws of the universe should be like this, they just are.

Some believing scientists say, therefore, that although this isn't definite proof for God, it is consistent with the existence of a powerful creator. This amazing truth is enough to get some scientists who aren't Christians thinking about the possibilities of a creator. Still other scientists reject this possibility, arguing that it is just what you would expect a Christian to say! But the argument is powerful enough to make many scientists wonder about the possibility of God.

A helpful way for Christians to think about God and nature (sometimes called 'natural theology') is to ask, 'Given what we know about God, what should the universe look like?' For instance, we might say that given what we know of God, we would expect the universe to be ordered – and indeed it is. We could ask the question, 'How does our knowledge of God affect the way we see the universe?' Looking at the created world helps us to appreciate what an amazing creator God is.

There are several problems to be aware of here:

1. Taking this further and claiming that we have definite proof for God through science is dangerous. Because science moves on, arguments based on current science can quickly become obsolete. Does this mean that the glory of God displayed in the beauty of nature is just an illusion based on the latest scientific theory? No, because history shows that each new theory provokes even more wonder at what God has made. It is only when people attempt detailed 'proofs' that things come unstuck.

2. Arguments based on natural theology may be useful, but they do not get you to Christian faith. Christians believe in a God who is Trinitarian and personal, and they believe that God became a man in Jesus Christ. It is impossible to arrive at these and other core beliefs of Christianity simply by looking at nature.

3. If you learned about God solely from nature, how could you respond to the human suffering that is part of nature? You could conclude that God enjoys suffering, but this obviously would not be a very good thing to do. You could, of course, say that these things are not in the same category as the beautiful parts of nature, but how do you know that? The only way to begin to understand suffering is through to turn to God's revelation of himself in Jesus and in the Bible.

Further Reading

Natural Theology section in John Polkinghorne, 'The Science and Religion Debate: An Introduction', www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/faraday/Papers.php.

Alister E. McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (Blackwell, 2008).