

Modern Physics and Ancient Faith, by Stephen M. Barr

reviewed by [S. Brian Stratton](#) in the [September 6, 2003](#) issue

Books on the dialogue or debate between religion and science are appearing at a rate daunting even to those who are used to working with big numbers, bringing to mind Qoheleth's claim: "Of the making of many books there is no end and much study is a weariness of the flesh." But Stephen M. Barr's book does not fall into this category. It energizes the reader, since its philosophical positions are well argued, its writing is clear and accessible, and its religious affirmations are provocative for believers and nonbelievers alike.

Barr argues that there is no debate between religion and science. The real conflict is between religion and materialism. He contends that the great discoveries of modern physics are more compatible with the central teachings of traditional Christianity and Judaism than with materialism. Though the book is an apologia which deals with the issues science raises for religion, Barr claims a harmony between religion and science which will intrigue even readers uninterested in apologetics. Refreshingly, Barr's apologia does not make grandiose claims for his conclusions, for "what the debate is about . . . is not proof but credibility."

Scientific materialism, or the claim that "nothing exists except matter, and that everything in the world must therefore be the result of the strict mathematical laws of physics and blind chance," is Barr's opponent. His definition does not cover all materialisms, for some would include energy with matter as the fundamental constituents of the universe, and laws of sciences other than physics as producers of what exists in the world. The definition is still serviceable, however, for many materialists combine reductionism with physics as the ultimate explanation in their worldview.

Scientific materialism comes in three forms: a crude prejudice against religion as a primitive superstition; an epistemological claim which objects that religious claims are not based on reason and are unsupported by evidence; and an argument that

religion has been discredited by science. Barr's effective division of materialism enables him to deal with its less sophisticated forms without diluting his argument.

His responses to the cruder materialist arguments are deftly executed and highly convincing, drawing upon history, clarifying often misunderstood theological concepts and discussing the relationship of faith and reason in traditional Catholicism and Protestantism. Barr's treatment of epistemological claims, though credible, is less convincing. For example, he uses attempts to prove the existence of God as evidence that religious believers do indeed use reason. While this is true, those who do not find the arguments convincing are probably not going to be impressed by claims for religious people's rationality.

The story of scientific materialism since the Enlightenment has been one of triumph--until it ran into five important scientific discoveries, which Barr calls "plot twists." The Big Bang, unified field theories, anthropic coincidences, Gödel's Theorem and quantum theory all cast serious doubts on materialism and give credence to Judeo-Christian claims about God and the universe. Each of these topics is handled skillfully, and Barr has a real gift for making complex scientific ideas understandable. But not everyone will be convinced by his arguments. Even he admits that the anthropic coincidences might be just that--coincidences, and readers will no doubt find things with which they disagree in Barr's discussion of each of these topics.

Traditional religious believers (though not fundamentalists) will find a credible apologetic for their faith in these pages, and other readers will find many provocative ideas to consider. Barr is a welcome conversation partner in the religion and science dialogue.