Searching for patterns

by Ted Peters in the November 15, 2000 issue

How We Believe: The Search for God in an Age of Science, by Michael Shermer

How do we believe, especially believe in God? Do we believe for rational reasons? Is a leap of faith rational or irrational? If science has a patent on reasoning, and if religious faith is denied a license to use reason, then faith gets stuck with what is not rational. Because many skeptics assume that religion has nothing to do with reason, for them faith or lack of faith is the product of a choice based on emotions.

Michael Shermer, editor of *Skeptic* magazine, argues that some people believe in God "because they 'see' a pattern of God's presence in the world [that is, for intellectual or 'empirical' reasons] . . . and . . . because such belief brings comfort [that is, for emotional reasons]." He finds these reasons insufficient. Shermer believes in science, he says, and this belief liberates him from religion. "Finding science and discovering glorious contingency was remarkably empowering and liberating. It gave me a sense of joy and freedom."

We have many options for picturing the relationship between religion and science these days. In the popular mind, the warfare model dominates. Science is pictured as the young and vibrant champion of intellectual honesty, fighting valiantly for the sake of the truth. Religion is pictured as old-fashioned, atavistic and dogmatic, defending superstition by burning scientific martyrs at the stake.

A different model has dominated the academy since the middle of the 20th century. It is what I call the two-language view. Science is said to speak the language of fact, while religion speaks the language of value. Science deals with natural truths, and religion deals with personal meaning. Science employs empirical evidence, and religion relies upon intuitive faith. The two-language view is championed by both scientists and theologians, by both Albert Einstein and Karl Barth. Stephen Jay Gould, president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, describes the science-religion relationship in terms of NOMA, "non-overlapping magisterial authorities."

Shermer appears to agree with this view, calling it the "separate worlds model." Science and religion are "separate spheres of knowledge," he writes, "divided by, more than anything else, a difference in methodologies. . . . Because we live in an Age of Science and no longer in an Age of Faith, temptations abound to use science to bolster faith. Such attempts at reconciling science and religion always fail for the fundamental reason that religion ultimately depends on faith. The whole point of faith, in fact, is to believe regardless of the evidence, which is the very antithesis of science." But a closer look at Schermer shows that he operates with a model different from the separate-worlds view. I call this the scientific imperialist model.

Scientific imperialism is a variant of the warfare model, in which science wins the war by providing the explanation for religion. Rather than letting religion explain its own foundations, science steps in to explain them better. Shermer's plan is to use the various sciences to explain "why religion and belief in God evolved in human societies." By appeal to evolutionary biology (actually sociobiology) he tries to provide what he calls "ultimate causes" to explain why religion exists.

If he were operating with the two-language model in which science respects the language of religion and vice versa, then he would allow religious reflection--that is, theology--to provide its own ultimate explanation. Shermer argues that religion is a social institution resulting from evolutionary development for the purpose of promoting myths and encouraging altruism. Religion functions to enforce social rules such as kin altruism in the service of genetic adaptation according to the principle of evolutionary fitness. It makes its adherents more fit to survive.

Why does religion take the form it does, and why do religious people believe in God? Shermer's answer is that the human impulse to interpret our lives meaningfully leads to identifying patterns of divine activity in nature that do not in fact exist. He begins with an anthropological presupposition: human beings seek patterns. Then he defines divinity: "God is a pattern, an explanation for our universe, our world, and ourselves." Clearly, Shermer is trying to provide a scientific explanation for the religious explanation of our universe, our world and ourselves. Like religion, Shermer is in the business of offering explanations, but he is one up because he can explain religious belief in God in terms of evolution.

Is Shermer's presupposition right? Do we human beings chase down patterns? Yes, it seems we do. In fact, pattern-seeking could be judged as essential to all that humans do--in science as well as religion. "Science has been one long struggle to

tame the contingent beast by finding necessitating laws that govern nature," Shermer declares. We could therefore define science as the search for patterns--what Cambridge cosmologist John Barrow calls "compressions." And the patterns it discovers provide predictability. Laws of nature can be formulated and united with one another by the presumed pattern of all patterns, a universal mathematical structure. Science is the preeminent example of human pattern-seeking.

This leads to an important question: Are patterns objective or subjective? Do patterns actually exist, or do we simply make them up? Shermer seems to presume that religious pattern-seeking emerges from human subjectivity, and that we superimpose ordered patterns upon otherwise disordered experiences. The invalidity of religious views of God, according to Shermer, is due to subjective superimpositions of patterns on otherwise unpatterned natural events. "Humans are pattern-seeking animals who have a remarkable ability to find patterns even when none exist." He assumes that no actual pattern of God's activity exists in nature.

Does pattern-seeking apply to science as well as to religion? Scientists, like theologians, have faith that the patterns they describe belong to nature itself. Science could not proceed without this faith. So I ask Shermer: If pattern-seeking equally drives both scientific thinking and religious thinking, then just what has he explained? Does Shermer assume that scientific pattern-seeking is objective while religious pattern-seeking is merely subjective? If so, his book leaves this assumption unexamined. Shermer has not really provided an explanation of religion that distinguishes religion from science.

Shermer does not like creationists, whom he describes as "arrogant and indolent." Curiously, he acknowledges neither who the creationists are nor what their arguments are. Instead of citing any of the prominent creationists such as Henry Morris or Duane Gish, he cites advocates of the intelligent-design school such as Michael Behe, Phillip Johnson and William Dembski. Perhaps he does not know the difference between the two groups, though that difference is about as wide as the Grand Canyon. Intelligent-design advocates affirm evolution; scientific creationists deny it (or, at least, deny macroevolution). The argument of the vociferous intelligent-design school is that we find "irreducible complexity" in certain biological forms, and that this complexity implies purposeful design. But purposeful design is denied by standard Darwinian theory. Both design advocates and Darwinists affirm evolution while disagreeing over the question of purposeful direction.

In a recent visit to the Institute of Creation Research in San Diego, I asked director John Morris how he felt about the intelligent-design school. He answered that creationist arguments and design arguments are incompatible. Nevertheless, he held that design advocates would be allies with creationists in the fight against the reductionist materialism and social Darwinism accompanying evolutionary biology in our educational institutions. The key problem with evolutionary theory, he said, is that it is a mistaken form of science that supports a social ethic of the "survival of the fittest" and a brutal capitalism that has no room for "love of neighbor." In this way, evolutionary ideas are corrupting our society.

Creationism comes in two varieties, scientific and biblical. Scientific creationism is an argument based upon science--that is, because the fossil record shows human skeletons at the lowest strata of fossils, we can see that the simple amoeba as well as dinosaurs and people were created at the same time. Biblical creationism, which is a separate line of argumentation, appeals to the authority of the Genesis account. Failing to distinguish these two approaches, Shermer lumps both, along with design arguments, into the category of "a religious problem in dealing with the findings of science." Even though both scientific creationists and intelligent-design advocates see themselves as scientists, Shermer fails to acknowledge this. Though I disagree with both the creationist and the intelligent-design schools of thought, I believe they should receive fair treatment. Shermer's description of our situation only hopelessly confuses matters.

Though his subtitle indicates that his book belongs in the field of science and religion, Shermer fails to include footnotes or index references to the leading scholars in this field over the past 30-some years: Carol Albright, Ian Barbour, Wim Drees, John Haught, Philip Hefner, Arthur Peacocke, John Polkinghorne, Huston Smith and the like. He grants one passing allusion to Nancey Murphy and Robert John Russell, citing not their published books but a newspaper article quoting them. He reports no reading of journals such as *Zygon*, *CTNS Bulletin* or even *Science and Spirit*. How could an author possibly feel justified in publishing a book with the subtitle "The Search for God in an Age of Science" without consulting the world's experts on his topic?

Today's scholars in the emerging field of science and religion grapple theologically with the religious consequences of the new understandings of nature coming from scientific research. The field of theology, understood in Anselm's terms as "faith seeking understanding" (*fides quaerens intellectum*), has always sought clear

justification for belief rather than relying upon emotion, magic or superstition. Shermer lumps superstition, cargo cults, UFO suicide cults, messianism and millennialism with historical religion without making any distinctions between them. But he would have to distinguish them had he read even minimally in the field in which he is writing. Why did he avoid this?

Perhaps the answer can be found in an aspect of the agnosticism to which he claims adherence. Agnosticism is an intellectually respectable position. It can indicate intellectual honesty in the face of very perplexing questions regarding the nature of reality. Shermer cites Thomas Huxley on agnosticism, saying "it is not a creed but a method" that follows reason as far as it can carry one without other considerations. Agnosticism as a method says that we should withhold certainty when we lack what "logically justifies" certainty. So far, so good. Yet the word itself literally means "without knowledge." It shares the root of the words "ignorance" and "ignoring"--the terms that best describe Shermer's book.