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John A. Bloom

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Series Editor: David S. Dockery
“Bloom has written an excellent overview of the main philosophical issues facing Christians working in the natural sciences. He shows that not only is there no conflict between science and belief in God, but there are now many scientific discoveries that support such belief. A clear, concise, and highly readable treatment. I highly recommend it, especially for college students.”

Stephen C. Meyer, Director, Center for Science and Culture, Discovery Institute; author, Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design

“With PhDs in Ancient Near Eastern Studies and Physics, John Bloom is one of the top thinkers today on the relationship between science and Christianity. Written with a clarity of style and level of approach that a freshman in college would have no trouble reading, Bloom traces the relationship between Christianity and science through history up to the present. This enables him to put his finger on the erroneous tension points between the two, debunk these alleged tension points, and chart a way forward. Though a small book, it is packed with important ideas and information. It is must reading for any college course in science and Christianity.”

J. P. Moreland, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, Biola University; author, The Soul: How We Know It’s Real and Why It Matters

“With doctorates in physics and theology, John Bloom presents a biblically sound understanding of science as it relates to Christian faith, offering many intriguing historical insights along the way.”

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THE NATURAL SCIENCES
A STUDENT’S GUIDE

John A. Bloom
To Claudia,
my wife,
helpmate,
and best friend forever.
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SERIES PREFACE

RECLAIMING THE CHRISTIAN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

The Reclaiming the Christian Intellectual Tradition series is designed to provide an overview of the distinctive way the church has read the Bible, formulated doctrine, provided education, and engaged the culture. The contributors to this series all agree that personal faith and genuine Christian piety are essential for the life of Christ followers and for the church. These contributors also believe that helping others recognize the importance of serious thinking about God, Scripture, and the world needs a renewed emphasis at this time in order that the truth claims of the Christian faith can be passed along from one generation to the next. The study guides in this series will enable us to see afresh how the Christian faith shapes how we live, how we think, how we write books, how we govern society, and how we relate to one another in our churches and social structures. The richness of the Christian intellectual tradition provides guidance for the complex challenges that believers face in this world.

This series is particularly designed for Christian students and others associated with college and university campuses, including faculty, staff, trustees, and other various constituents. The contributors to the series will explore how the Bible has been interpreted in the history of the church, as well as how theology has been formulated. They will ask: How does the Christian faith influence our understanding of culture, literature, philosophy, government, beauty, art, or work? How does the Christian intellectual tradition help us understand truth? How does the Christian intellectual tradition shape our approach to education? We believe that this series is not only timely but that it meets an important need, because the
secular culture in which we now find ourselves is, at best, indifferent to the Christian faith, and the Christian world—at least in its more popular forms—tends to be confused about the beliefs, heritage, and tradition associated with the Christian faith.

At the heart of this work is the challenge to prepare a generation of Christians to think Christianly, to engage the academy and the culture, and to serve church and society. We believe that both the breadth and the depth of the Christian intellectual tradition need to be reclaimed, revitalized, renewed, and revived for us to carry forward this work. These study guides will seek to provide a framework to help introduce students to the great tradition of Christian thinking, seeking to highlight its importance for understanding the world, its significance for serving both church and society, and its application for Christian thinking and learning. The series is a starting point for exploring important ideas and issues such as truth, meaning, beauty, and justice.

We trust that the series will help introduce readers to the apostles, church fathers, Reformers, philosophers, theologians, historians, and a wide variety of other significant thinkers. In addition to well-known leaders such as Clement, Origen, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and Jonathan Edwards, readers will be pointed to William Wilberforce, G. K. Chesterton, T. S. Eliot, Dorothy Sayers, C. S. Lewis, Johann Sebastian Bach, Isaac Newton, Johannes Kepler, George Washington Carver, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Michael Polanyi, Henry Luke Orombi, and many others. In doing so, we hope to introduce those who throughout history have demonstrated that it is indeed possible to be serious about the life of the mind while simultaneously being deeply committed Christians. These efforts to strengthen serious Christian thinking and scholarship will not be limited to the study of theology, scriptural interpretation, or philosophy, even though these areas provide the framework for understanding the Christian faith for all other areas of exploration. In order for us to reclaim and
advance the Christian intellectual tradition, we must have some understanding of the tradition itself. The volumes in this series seek to explore this tradition and its application for our twenty-first-century world. Each volume contains a glossary, study questions, and a list of resources for further study, which we trust will provide helpful guidance for our readers.

I am deeply grateful to the series editorial committee: Timothy George, John Woodbridge, Michael Wilkins, Niel Nielson, Philip Ryken, and Hunter Baker. Each of these colleagues joins me in thanking our various contributors for their fine work. We all express our appreciation to Justin Taylor, Jill Carter, Allan Fisher, Lane Dennis, and the Crossway team for their enthusiastic support for the project. We offer the project with the hope that students will be helped, faculty and Christian leaders will be encouraged, institutions will be strengthened, churches will be built up, and, ultimately, that God will be glorified.

Soli Deo Gloria
David S. Dockery
Series Editor
AUTHOR’S PREFACE

I ask God to make my spirit strong so that I direct my glance at the pure truth, from whichever side it should be presented, and do not let myself be misled, as so often happens today, by the admiration or contempt of persons or sides.

Johannes Kepler, 1606

If you love science, it’s likely that you avoid philosophy and history and that you will try to limit your exposure in these areas to a couple of the easiest general education courses. That’s certainly what I and most of my science-minded friends did when we were in college. To some extent this is justifiable, since kings, battles, Kant, and Sartre are very different from cells, lasers, rockets, and computers. But scientists think. And thinking involves certain assumptions. And those assumptions have changed over time. Thus philosophy (reflecting on our assumptions) and history (where our current assumptions come from) are important for scientists to consider so that we can think better.

Many scientists today are technically competent, but because of their high specialization, they are not aware of and do not reflect upon the foundations of their discipline. For you as a Christian student, aspiring to and training for a career in a scientific field, it is important to be counter-cultural in this regard so that you can face the prevailing winds in our society, which presume that “smart people do not believe in God anymore,” or that “Christianity and science are always at war with each other,” and similar myths.

My hope is that this brief introduction to the rich Christian

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intellectual tradition in the sciences will spur you to make this area a hobby (at least!) of lifelong interest. The richness of knowing why we think what we do and of reflecting on God’s handiwork in the world around us gives a depth and life to science that makes it all the more fascinating and rewarding.

\[\text{During my long years as a graduate student, I supported myself doing computer consulting and got involved in a project which sought input from Dr. Rocco “Rocky” Martino, a successful multi-millionaire computer genius who had helped write the Waterloo Fortran compiler and developed disk-shadowing and other algorithms to secure banking-industry transactions. I felt a bit insignificant as a poor graduate student with a crazy idea meeting with the president and CEO of XRT, a major innovative software company at the time. Wondering about my background, Dr. Martino asked why I was pursuing a degree in Ancient Near Eastern Studies when I already had a PhD in Physics. I mentioned that my interests were on the interface of Christianity and science, on topics like creation and evolution. There was a long pause, and then he said, “Wow, that’s a great area! If I could do it all over again, I would go into that too!” That wasn’t the answer I was expecting, and I took great encouragement from Dr. Martino’s words.}\]
I wish to thank David Dockery for inviting me to contribute to this important series, and I’m thankful also for helpful input from Mike Keas and other colleagues in the Science and Religion program here at Biola University. I thank Biola for enabling and encouraging me to teach a course for over ten years specifically on the integration of Christianity and the natural sciences, whose material has filtered into this book in various ways.

Looking back, I wish to thank those who enabled me to pursue a multi-graduate-degree background: the late Herman J. Eckelmann, pastor of the former Faith Bible Church in Ithaca, NY, who encouraged me and many others to get trained in theology and apologetics; Dr. Watt Webb, my advisor at Cornell, who did not think it entirely crazy that I wanted to go to seminary, and invited me to postdoc with him over the summers to help pay my bills; the members of the Bethany Bible Fellowship Church in Hatfield, PA, who provided a wonderful “work for rent” relationship which lasted a bit longer than we all initially expected (thirteen years!); my wife, family, and friends who have borne with the graduate student and busy professor lifestyle (is there much difference?) forever; and Laura Talcott and the other editors at Crossway for their help in polishing this work.

To God be the glory!
INTRODUCTION

I am fortunate to live in southern California, a few miles from “The Happiest Place on Earth,” the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in Pasadena. JPL is an incredible place to visit and marvel at the ingenuity and design of the fleet of spectacular space probes and Mars landers and rovers, which this lab has deployed throughout the solar system for decades. Disneyland, perhaps the better known “Happiest Place on Earth,” is incredible too; there I marvel at the ingenuity and design of the rides and entertainment, which the Disney “Imagineers” made for millions to enjoy.

What puzzles me as a scientist is that I can openly marvel at the ingenuity and design of the things that brilliant engineers create, but after I leave JPL or Disneyland and look at the even more incredible ingenuity and design in the world around me, I am told that I must explain it all away as the result of unguided natural processes. Why is there a disconnect here? Why can’t I see a designer of the world around me, who crafted things far more ingenious and complex than any human engineer can imagine?

Of course, as a Christian who is a scientist, I can. But this is the great Christian intellectual tradition that the modern sciences have abandoned. A Christian can see the heavens and the earth as the handiwork of a powerful and ingenious God, where we have the privilege, challenge, and joy “to think God’s thoughts after Him”1 as we study his creation. The secular scientist is allowed only to see a universe that somehow got here by accident without an ultimate explanation, that works without purpose or direction, and within which we are a fluke. This approach is well summarized

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by theoretical physicist Steven Weinberg’s famous comment: “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.”\(^2\) Such a fatalistic and depressing view of nature and of ourselves is a far cry from one which sees the universe as a glorious masterpiece and an ingenious puzzle to explore and which sees ourselves as bearing the Creator’s image.

The purpose of this short book is to give students an overview of the people and events which gave rise both to science itself and to this modern naturalistic perspective. Once we appreciate where we have come from, we can survey the current scene, look forward, and suggest a means to rekindle the original Christian vision of science.

We will begin by laying out what exactly is the Christian intellectual tradition in the sciences, drawing from biblical passages which tell us about God’s role in and relationship to his creation, and showing how Scripture gave Christians the correct way to view the world so that scientific studies could flourish. Next we will look at how Aristotle and other Greek philosophers influenced the development of science, and we’ll consider Johannes Kepler, the mathematician and astronomer who well exemplifies early science’s excitement and expectation of seeing God’s genius in nature.

Then we will see how God’s hand in nature was brushed aside as the Enlightenment movement placed absolute trust in human reason and experience while disdaining ancient authorities. Encouraging this shift was the discovery of mathematical and mechanical models that could predict behavior very well in physics and chemistry. Since it seemed as if God governed the world through laws and wasn’t as active in it as originally imagined, we will see how science shifted from a theistic to a deistic perspective—then to a completely naturalistic one—with the help of secularizing cultural pressures.

We will follow this naturalistic thread into the world of biology, where Charles Darwin and others used the problem of evil, clever rhetoric, and a naturalistic definition of science to neatly exclude God from this discipline.

After surveying this history, we will work on defining what exactly “science” is, what its goals are, and how naturalism impacts modern science. We will note that science today has two projects: (1) finding out how things work, a task that focuses on mechanical processes and is largely metaphysically neutral; and (2) asking about how things originated, a goal which is religiously loaded. Since contemporary science has chosen to restrict itself to giving naturalistic explanations for phenomena no matter what, we will find that the major tensions today in Christianity and science actually occur between Christianity and naturalism, two different religious positions, not between Christianity and data. This distinction is critical since most people respect science today for its objective and neutral pursuit of truth and are not aware of how its commitment to naturalism can seriously skew its results on questions of origins. Once we are aware of this, there is considerable common ground for those of differing worldviews to work together in the sciences by focusing on data and not on personal metaphysical interpretations. We will discuss the options of limiting science to making modest claims about physical cause and effect or of allowing science the metaphysical freedom to think outside of its current naturalistic box.

We will next survey the evidence which strongly suggests that the naturalistic box is inadequate: human reason and knowledge are fundamentally limited; our universe is so fine-tuned that it appears far more likely that we are simply hallucinating the world around us than that it actually exists; and “simple” cells turn out to be unimaginably complex, hardwired biological computational devices. Across multiple scientific disciplines it appears that the Christian intellectual tradition offers a better vantage point for
viewing the world around us unless we simply dismiss the universe as “natural magic.”

Finally, we will conclude with some pointers about how Christians can best lead the way as scientists in the future. Since a range of Christian positions (reflecting Aristotelian, Neoplatonic, mechanical, and other philosophical influences) stimulated fruitful dialogue in the past, a range of positions should continue to be beneficial as we move forward, spurring an ongoing discussion of key integrative and scientific questions. The Christian tradition’s motivation for studying the world to glorify God and to help others with that knowledge can be tremendous salt and light to our secular culture.
WHAT IS THE CHRISTIAN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION IN THE SCIENCES?

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.
The Apostle’s Creed

The best place for us to start is by noting that there is a Christian intellectual tradition in the sciences. Popular myths about the relationship between science and religion would have you believe that Christianity and science always were, and still are, at war with each other—but historians tell us quite the opposite: Christianity furnished the fertile soil in which science developed and flourished. In fact, at one time the church was the major sponsor of scientific work. So how did Christianity nourish and support science? By providing the correct worldview.

LAYING THE RIGHT FOUNDATION: PERSPECTIVE

In order to study the world fruitfully, you have to look at it the right way. If you think the world is full of gods who are constantly squabbling with each other and need to be appeased or avoided, you have no expectation that the world will behave in a regular way. Such was the universal polytheistic/pantheistic view that we find throughout the ancient world. But the Judeo-Christian perspective
changed that: if there is only one God, and he is sovereign over his creation, then the universe is not run by a fickle committee. Nor are the physical things of the world gods, or manifestations of the gods. Stuff is just stuff, and it need not be feared. Matter doesn’t have a personality to be angry, sad, malicious, or cooperative depending on its mood. The Bible depersonalizes nature by describing the sun and moon as objects in Genesis 1, and it calms Israel’s fears about possible gods in the sky:

Thus says the LORD:

“Learn not the way of the nations, nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens because the nations are dismayed at them, for the customs of the peoples are vanity.” (Jer. 10:2–3)

Moreover, God tells us in many passages that he set up the heavens and earth to work according to fixed patterns. Here are some examples:

While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease. (Gen. 8:22)

Thus says the LORD: If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night will not come at their appointed time, then also my covenant with David my servant may be broken, so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne, and my covenant with the Levitical priests my ministers. (Jer. 33:20–21)

Thus says the LORD: If I have not established my covenant with day and night and the fixed order of heaven and earth, then I will reject the offspring of Jacob and David my servant and will not choose one of his offspring to rule over the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For I will restore their fortunes and will have mercy on them. (Jer. 33:25–26)
Thus the first pillar of the Christian intellectual tradition’s foundation in science rests on God’s creation being *impersonal* and following *regular patterns*. What a relief that there is only one Being whom we need to concern ourselves with (Deut. 6:13)—not a frenzied zoo of powers—and that he and his creation are not capricious!

As part of seeing the world the right way, one needs to have the **correct idea about time**. Ancient cultures commonly had static or cyclical notions of time: either everything stays the way it’s always been or else things will eventually repeat themselves like the seasons do. But the Bible is rare, if not unique, in presenting a linear notion of time with a beginning, an unfolding story, and an end to that story. This proper sense of time instills the hope of progress and a value to learning, rather than a fatalistic resignation to whatever happens.¹

**LAYING THE RIGHT FOUNDATION: MOTIVATION**

In order to study the world, you need the motivation to do so. If you think that physical stuff is evil or illusionary, then you focus your life on the spiritual world and mystical experience, as the Christian heresy of gnosticism once did and as many other world religions do today. But the Bible teaches that the study of nature is a worthy pursuit to gain wisdom and glorify God. God’s creation is certainly corrupted by sin, but we are encouraged to learn from it as noted in many passages:

> Go to the ant, O sluggard;  
> consider her ways, and be wise. (Prov. 6:6)

> It is the glory of God to conceal things,  
> but the glory of kings is to search things out. (Prov. 25:2)

> But ask the beasts, and they will teach you;  
> the birds of the heavens, and they will tell you;  
> or the bushes of the earth, and they will teach you;

and the fish of the sea will declare to you.
Who among all these does not know
that the hand of the LORD has done this? (Job 12:7–9)

The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. (Ps. 19:1)

The founders of modern science saw themselves as glorifying God as they studied his handiwork. Galileo remarked in his letter to the Grand Duchess Christina, “The glory and greatness of Almighty God are marvelously discerned in all His works and divinely read in the open book of Heaven.” Thus a second pillar of the foundation rests on the value of studying nature: it is a good thing to do.

The Christian tradition brings an additional motivation to this foundational pillar beyond the abstract pursuit of wisdom: “The relief of man’s estate.” Francis Bacon was among the first to encourage scientific studies, not only to glorify God, but in order to overcome some of the effects of the fall through better technology and medicine. This promise of a better future continues as a strong drive in the sciences and in our culture today, even in its secular context, but the application of scientific knowledge for practical and beneficial ends has its roots in the Christian call to relieve suffering and to help others.

LAYING THE RIGHT FOUNDATION: APPROACH
In order to study the world, you need to be patient. Most of nature’s regularities are subtle and confounded by multiple effects that are all happening at the same time. For example, it is difficult to see the conservation of momentum using objects much bigger

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3Francis Bacon, The Advancement of Learning, 1.5.11.
4Christopher B. Kaiser, Creational Theology and the History of Physical Science: The Creationist Tradition from Basil to Bohr (Leiden: Brill, 1997) has an excellent summary of early Christian medicine.
than individual atoms, because frictional forces obscure it. Years of work and study are necessary to develop the equipment and the mathematical tools that allow us to model what exactly is happening in the physical world. The Christian worldview teaches us, in an additional pillar of the foundation, that hard work is good and satisfying,\(^5\) that our senses are generally reliable, and that our efforts are worthwhile because there is truth to be found.

In order to study the world, you must expect the unexpected. Philosophers call this the contingency of nature: God could have created the world any way he wanted to, so we can’t figure out how it works by sitting in an armchair and applying human logic alone. God does whatever he pleases “in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps” (Ps. 135:6, see also Ps. 115:3). Thus if we want to learn what God actually did and is doing, another pillar of the foundation is that we need to go out and look at it. Interestingly enough, many of the greatest discoveries in science were unexpected and came from doubting conventional wisdom. The physicist Richard Feynman once famously quipped, “Science is the belief in the ignorance of experts.”\(^6\)

In order to study the world, you need to trust others. While sometimes one can make progress by doubting the experts, no one has the time to repeat centuries of experimental and theoretical work, thus we must stand cautiously on the shoulders of our teachers and other scientists. For science to flourish, a community of trusted individuals must work together to share their insights and results. This requires, as the last pillars to the Christian intellectual tradition in the sciences, both collegiality and high ethical standards. Unfortunately, fudging or “selecting” data in order to

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5 Adam was created to cultivate and tend the garden of Eden before the fall; thus God intended work to be a good thing. After the fall, our work became harder and more frustrating, but nevertheless, work can and should be a fulfilling and satisfying aspect of our lives. A “do the minimum to get by, so that you have the most time to play” attitude is not a Christian approach to life. John Calvin in The Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life and the apostle Paul in many of his letters encouraged believers to pursue their work (even lowly manual labor) as God’s calling in their lives and to glorify God through the work of their hands.

obtain grants or publish papers is reportedly becoming a serious ethical problem in the sciences today. For example, pharmaceutical companies have lost millions of dollars in attempting to develop promising new drugs that were initially reported to work, but the “successful” results could not be replicated later by others. As the ethical standards of scientists (like the rest of our culture) weaken, scientific progress becomes much harder, because it is difficult to trust anyone else’s work.

In addition to these main pillars, there are subtle ones. Because the Christian intellectual tradition offers the most realistic picture of human nature, it provides the best cultural setting for science and technology to flourish for everyone’s good. For example, as selfish as it sounds, the promise of personal gain motivates almost everyone to work harder. The ability for inventors to get rich is something that our society has learned to protect through patents and copyrights, because otherwise this powerful drive to improve and innovate is lost. While we normally think of selfishness as a bad thing, if it is properly harnessed and rewarded, it encourages people’s creative drives in music, art, technology, and the sciences.
In this accessible guide for students, a well-regarded science professor introduces readers to the natural sciences from a distinctly Christian perspective. Starting with the classical view of God as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, this book lays the biblical foundation for the study of the natural world and explores the history of scientific reflection since Aristotle. Bloom argues that the Christian worldview provides the best grounds for studying the natural sciences, offering readers the framework they need to think and speak clearly about the pursuit of scientific knowledge.

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Series Editor: David S. Dockery