

SCIENCE *and the*  
RENEWAL OF BELIEF

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Two rivers loaded beyond belief  
By gifts of a green thaw  
Running easily to meet  
In the same sea's open arms —  
O Sea!

*Libby Houston*





## *Contents*

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Preface	ix
1 Introduction	3
2 In the Beginning	7
3 On How to Interpret the Bible	13
4 The Message of the Myths	21
5 Adam and Eve in a New Light	25
6 The Emergence of the Human Spirit	34
7 Superhuman Life-Forms?	38
8 Miracles under Scrutiny	47
9 The Touchstone of Christian Belief	68
10 Scientists at Work	81
11 Taking on Trust	85
12 An Experiment with Prayer	88
13 Attempts to Demonstrate God's Existence	97
14 The Whole Is More Than the Sum of Its Parts	108
15 The Galileo Scandal	117
16 The Significance of the Individual	129

17	God in and beyond Space and Time	143
18	The Place of Paradox in Science and Belief	161
19	Why Does God Permit Evil?	182
20	Destiny, Chance, and Choice	189
21	Only Wholeness . . .	200
22	In Conclusion	211
	References	219
	Index	223



## Preface

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IT IS OVER TWENTY YEARS since this book first appeared in the United Kingdom in its original version. Since that time, much has changed.

The study of the inter-relationships between science and religion has evolved into one of the fastest-growing academic areas. The most recent edition of *Who's Who in Theology and Science* lists over 1000 scholars drawn from 40 countries actively researching and publishing in the field. There are currently sixty institutions, organizations, and other more informal groups, and thirteen journals devoted to exploring this interface. The endeavor has developed far beyond the bounds of merely demonstrating that science and religion are compatible with each other. The emphasis now is on exploring how the study of science and religion can mutually enhance and enrich the understanding of the other.

And yet, despite all this activity and the sheer volume of advanced scholarly output, there remains a pressing need for treatments of the subject that are accessible to the non-specialist, for example, a young person or a member of the general public. That was the intention behind writing *Science and the Renewal of Belief* in the first place.

This current edition is a completely revised and updated version, made available in the United States for the first time.



SCIENCE AND THE RENEWAL OF BELIEF



# 1

## *Introduction*

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THE REACTION ON HEARING that I am both a scientist and a Christian is usually one of surprise. Believers and nonbelievers alike find it hard to think of science and religion as being compatible with each other. It is not difficult to see why: Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection seems to undermine the Adam and Eve story; the geological and astronomical evidence on how the universe evolved over thousands of millions of years contradicts the six-days creation story in Genesis; thunder and lightning, once regarded as manifestations of God's wrath, are now known to be nothing more than electricity; biochemists claim to be able to show that each of us is nothing but a pile of chemicals, assembled by chance rather than by design and needing no extra ingredient that can be labeled spirit or soul; miracles are an affront to the scientific laws; the very nature of scientific investigation, based as it is on skeptical reasoning and the demand for proof, contrasts with the approach one associates with religion—an approach dependent to a large extent on taking things on trust. There was the persecution of Galileo over his teachings concerning the earth going round the sun—an example, so it is held, of the way the church fights a rear-guard action against scientific advance.

These are just a selection of the problems put to me whenever I am called upon to talk about the relationship between science and religion. The people who raise these issues are those who, while wanting a spiritual dimension to their lives, feel that it must be one that can honestly

face up to the realities of present-day scientific knowledge; they are not interested in a faith that appears to have been proved false.

My aim in this book is to demonstrate that such a belief is possible. What I hope to show is that the alleged controversies of the past were not what they are now widely thought to have been. The very latest revelations of science, instead of posing fresh difficulties, have led to new harmony. The methods of investigation used in science and religion, far from being opposed to each other in their outlook, are in many ways similar. Indeed, before we have finished you might well think it easier for me, as a scientist, to believe in God than it is for you!

In considering how to tackle the subject, I wondered for a time whether to try and adopt a detached point of view, setting out the arguments without allowing my own views to intrude. I decided, however, this was not practicable; such an approach would be unlikely to ring true and would, in any case, make for dull reading. So throughout I shall speak quite openly of the way I feel about each issue. But that is not to say that the book sets out to present religious belief in the best possible light. If that had been the case, I would have made a judicious selection of the topics to be included. This I have not done. All the major questions that have ever been put to me on the subject are to be found here, including those I find awkward and for which my replies are inadequate.

I also had difficulty in deciding what to do about the purely scientific parts of the discussion. I am anxious for the book to be as widely accessible as possible—particularly to those who have no previous knowledge of science, let alone an acquaintance with some of the advanced topics to which I shall refer. So the plan I have adopted is that each time I come to some new scientific idea, I shall pause and give a brief explanation of it before going on to discuss its significance. Sometimes these explanations will be no more than plain statements of the scientific findings without any attempt on my part to justify them, but occasionally I shall go a little deeper and sketch out some of the thinking behind them in order to make the conclusions more plausible; this will be the case with those topics where the scientific findings are especially difficult to reconcile with commonsense ideas. I trust you will not find these parts of

our discussion daunting. I have done my best to keep them short and clear. If at any time, however, you do find the going hard—my apologies. You should aim to get the general gist of what I am saying without worrying overmuch about the details. If all else fails, give it a miss for the time being and move on to the next chapter.

Much of what I have to say about the compatibility between science and religious belief applies equally to any set of religious beliefs—it is not confined to Christianity alone. Apart from the discussion of a few specifically Christian topics, such as the resurrection of Jesus and the meaning of the Trinity, readers of other faiths should for the most part be able to draw upon parallel experiences of their own.

As for what I hope you will get from our discussion, it will depend upon you. If you already believe in God, then you will find here an opportunity to reassess your beliefs in the light of modern thought. This is unlikely to be easy; exposing long-cherished convictions to skeptical reappraisal can be a painful process. You might not like the way I go about it; for example my attitude toward the Bible might strike you as lacking in reverence, my interpretation of various miracles harsh, my rejection of so-called proofs of God's existence distressing. But some hurt is unavoidable if certain aspects of belief are found to lack integrity and so ought to be discarded. And discarded they must be if you are to reconstruct for yourself a strong faith built only on what is true, essential, and in keeping with our modern understanding of the world.

If, on the other hand, you do not believe in God, you must not expect me to argue you into doing so. No one comes to know God by passively sitting back reading books or listening to arguments, no matter how cleverly and persuasively they might have been devised. Coming to know God involves active participation (the subject of a later chapter). The objective of this book, so far as you are concerned, is not to bring about your conversion, desirable though that might be, but the more modest one of removing some of the obstacles that might be in your path at present. When this is done, you will find that, whatever additional reasons you think you have for not taking the necessary step toward making contact with God, an incompatibility between science and religion cannot legitimately be counted as one of them.

One final point: I have avoided cluttering up the text with references and footnotes. This is a book for enjoyment as well as for study; it is not a textbook, and I did not want it to look like one. There is, however, a list at the back for anyone who wishes to look up biblical quotations and other references.