

**NATURAL SCIENCE AND
RELIGION: TWO LECTURES
DELIVERED TO THE THEOLOGICAL
SCHOOL OF YALE COLLEGE**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649479221

Natural Science and Religion: Two Lectures Delivered to the Theological School of Yale College
by Asa Gray

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Cover @ 2017

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By ASA GRAY

NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

743 AND 745 BROADWAY

1880



20765-

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CAMBRIDGE:
UNIVERSITY PRESS: JOHN WILSON & SON.

NATURAL SCIENCE AND RELIGION

LECTURE I.—SCIENTIFIC BELIEFS.

I AM invited to address you upon the relations of science to religion,—in reference, as I suppose, to those claims of natural science which have been thought to be antagonistic to supernatural religion, and to those assumptions connected with the Christian faith which scientific men in our day are disposed to question or to reject.

While listening weekly—I hope with edification—to the sermons which it is my privilege and duty to hear, it has now and then occurred to me that it might be well if an occasional discourse could be addressed from the pews to the pulpit. But, until your invitation reached me, I had no idea that I should ever be called upon to put this passing thought into practice. I am sufficiently convinced already that the members

of a profession know their own calling better than any one else can know it; and in respect to the debatable land which lies along the borders of theology and natural science, and which has been harried by many a raid from both sides, I am not confident that I can be helpful in composing strifes or in the fixing of boundaries; nor that you will agree with me that some of the encounters were inevitable, and some of the alarm groundless. Indeed upon much that I may have to say, I expect rather the charitable judgment than the full assent of those whose approbation I could most wish to win.

But I take it for granted that you do not wish to hear an echo from the pulpit nor from the theological class-room. You ask a layman to speak from this desk because you would have a layman's thoughts, expressed from a layman's point of view; because you would know what a naturalist comes to think upon matters of common interest. And you would have him liberate his mind frankly, unconventionally, and with as little as may be of the technicalities of our several professions. Frankness is always commendable; but outspokenness upon delicate and unsettled problems, in the ground of which cherished convictions are rooted, ought to be

tempered with consideration. Now I, as a layman, may claim a certain license in this regard; and any over-free handling of sensitive themes should compromise no one but myself.

As a student who has devoted an ordinary lifetime to one branch of natural history, in which he is supposed to have accumulated a fair amount of particular experience and to have gained a general acquaintance with scientific methods and aims,—as one, moreover, who has taken kindly to the new turn of biological study in these latter years, but is free from partisanship,—I am asked to confer with other and younger students, of another kind of science, in respect to the tendencies of certain recently developed doctrines, which in schools of theology are almost everywhere spoken against, but which are everywhere permeating the lay mind—whether for good or for evil—and are raising questions more or less perplexing to all of us.

But our younger and middle-aged men must not think that such perplexities and antagonisms have only recently begun. Some of them are very old; some are old questions transferred to new ground, in which they spring to rankness of growth, or sink their roots till they touch deeper issues than before,—issues of philosophy

rather than of science, upon which the momentous question of theism or non-theism eventually turns. Some on the other hand are mere *survivals*, now troublesome only to those who are holding fast to theological positions which the advance of actual knowledge has rendered untenable, but which they do not well know how to abandon; yet which, in principle, have mostly been abandoned already.

To begin with trite examples. Among the questions which disquieted pious souls in my younger days, but which have ceased to disquiet any of us, are those respecting the age and gradual development of the earth and of the solar system, which came in with geology and modern astronomy. I remember the time when it was a mooted question whether geology and orthodox Christianity were compatible; and I suppose that when, in these quarters, the balance inclined to the affirmative, it was owing quite as much to Professor Silliman's transparent Christian character as to his scientific ability. One need not be an old man to know that Laplace was accounted an atheist because he developed the nebular hypothesis, and because of his remark that he had no need to postulate a Creator for the mathematical discussion of a

physical theorem; for a venerable and most religious astronomer, still living, who adopted this hypothesis in his "Exposition of certain Harmonies of the Solar System," published only five years ago, thought it needful to add an appendix, asking the question, "Is the nebular hypothesis, in any form, essentially atheistical in its character?" He answered it in the negative, but with the *salvo*, that "this hypothesis, having to do with a strictly azoic period, enforces no connection with 'the development theory' of the beginning or of the progress of life."

The great antiquity of the habitable world and of existing races was the next question. It gave some anxiety fifty years ago; but is now, I suppose, generally acquiesced in,—in the sense that existing species of plants and animals have been in existence for many thousands of years; and, as to their associate, man, all agree that the length of his occupation is not at all measured by the generations of the biblical chronology, and are awaiting the result of an open discussion as to whether the earliest known traces of his presence are in quaternary or in the latest tertiary deposits.

As connected with this class of questions, many of us remember the time when schemes