

How far Scientific is the Scientific Materialism?

- Augustine Pamplany¹

Modern Physics and Ancient Faith. By Stephen M. Barr. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003. xii + 312 pp.

While the systematic thought, as physicist Bernard Despagnat had observed, had been gravely hampered by an ideal of purity whereby each specialist looked at reality solely through the spectacles of one's own specialization, it was the salient feature of the postmodern pursuit after truth that it showed an unprecedented level of systematic interdisciplinary attention. But a critical observation may suggest that this interdisciplinary attention, especially in the context of science and religion, at least in some cases, fall short of an adequate mastery of either the scientific foundation or of the religious traditions under consideration depending on the background of the author.

The most remarkable feature of Stephen Barr's *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith* is the skillful mastery of both physics and theology and the balanced presentation of both disciplines in clear and logical arguments. The 312 pages long book has a balanced distribution and inter-placement of the scientific and religious arguments throughout, which is rarely found in science-religion literature. The substantively critical level at which the dialogue between science and religion takes place from the viewpoints of the origin, design, human and the mind is yet another scholarly beauty to the *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith* already resplendent with the scientific and theological landscape outlined in it.

Even before venturing upon outlining the central arguments of the book, the author has made clear his perspective on the dialogue between science and religion as he states quite rightly that, “The discoveries of earlier period did not prove materialism, and one should not look to more recent discoveries to prove religion. Even if religious tenets could be directly proven by science, the real grounds for religious belief are not to be found in telescopes or test tubes. Faith does not need to wait upon the latest laboratory research. What the debate is all about ... is not proof but credibility” (p. 2). This kind of discernment is quite ingenious in science-religion enterprises.

It is the major contention of the author that what is at war with religion is not science itself, but the traditional false philosophy termed as scientific materialism. Although scientific materialism is much debated an issue, Barr finds a new element necessitating a fresh look at scientific materialism. According to Barr, paradoxically, the discoveries coming from the study of the material world itself, have given fresh reasons to disbelieve that matter is the only reality. Barr begins with an adequate sketch of the materialist creed itself. Barr sees at least three highly interwoven strands in the materialist creed. In its crudest form it is a prejudice which looks upon all religion as a matter of primitive superstition. At best it is a charming tale and at worst a dangerous form of obscurantism which breeds fanaticism and intolerance. The philosophical version of materialism is epistemological in its critique of religion owing to the non-testability of the religious statements. It is his concluding finding of the analysis of the materialist creed that the “materialist ... is in a strait jacket of his own divising. Nothing is allowed by him to be beyond explanation in terms of matter and the mathematical laws that it obeys. If therefore he comes across some phenomenon that is hard to account for in materialist terms, he often ends up by denying its very existence. For instance, many materialist philosophers deny that there really is any such thing as subjective experience. Philosophers call this view ‘eliminativism’” (p. 17).

Having made a most up-to-date discussion of the Big Bang, Barr takes the discussion one step ahead of the usual debates with the question, “What if the Big Bang was not the Beginning?” Convincingly, Barr argues that the current trend in the scientific scenario itself is unlike the

traditional beliefs that the progress of knowledge has revealed a world that ever more conforms to the expectations of materialists and rightly and boldly Barr dares to quote a contemporary theologian Cardinal Ratzinger. Barr finds the reconciliation between modern physics and ancient faith regarding the origins that God can be viewed upon not only as a First Cause but also a continuing cause.

In the third part of the book Barr's affection shifts from what the universe came from to what it is like. The argument from design is the most solid foundation for such an investigation. The methodic caution of Barr is such that he presents the opponent's views as well, which is followed by an authoritative counter attack on the central pillars of the opponent's position. The same suit of methodic pattern also resembles where the objections to anthropic coincidences are answered with strong scientific and philosophical contentions. The new formulations of the design argument like in science "order comes from order" and "order comes from greater order," etc, are suggestive enough to answer the attack on the argument from design. Barr's re-conceptualization of the laws of nature as "simply patterns which we discovered empirically with world around us, but which could have been otherwise" (p.77) is a good example of the many sublime elements of originality and insightful revisions in *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith*.

The central materialist claim of the progressive 'dethronement' or marginalization of man by scientific discovery is critically examined in the fourth part of the book under the section 'Man's place in the Cosmos'. Barr has not only got his question perfectly right but also anticipates the hermeneutical bias of the materialists as he asks, "whether it (materialist claim) is justified by a dispassionate examination of the scientific data, or is based on their own philosophical pre-conceptions" (p.116).

The viewpoints of an accomplished physicist reach its philosophical maturation in the fifth and final part of the book as Barr discusses "What is Man?" from the scientific, philosophical and theological viewpoints which sends aching signals to the materialist ideology. The scientific myth of the mechanical and physical reductionism of humans are shown to be no more scientific with strong and diverse arguments from a variety of sources varying from anthropology and quantum physics to the mental

sciences. Barr's re-conceptualization of mind entails a reinterpretation of the quantum theory as well.

As the arguments of the book come to its closure, the reader will be really inspired to notice that Barr not only succeeds in his central contention but also opens up the scope for the eradication of many such unscientifically postulated scientific arguments for materialist creeds. While the substantive inter-sectioning of science and religion is progressing today in the world at large, path-clearing works, as the one by Barr, would really add an extra impetus to the already vigilant momentum. The allusion "ancient faith" in the title of the book may not be that overbearing and universal given the content of the book. For the oriental ears, ancient faith connotes more the Eastern religious philosophies of Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. The title may conclusively convey itself to the Western audience and it can well meet the expectations of the reader as the religious defense of the book is purely of the Western Christianity. However it may be slightly misleading to the Eastern mind-set which by "ancient faith" is naturally tuned to more ancient faith than that of Christianity.

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