
THE CONFLICT BETWEEN SCIENCE AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Science is a systematic inquiry into nature through observation, experiment and objective articulation of its findings. The empirical method of science is in conflict with theological method of ascertaining the truth, thereby making Christian truth and faith questionable, relative and doubtful. Therefore, the paper examined the conflict between science and theology with the aim of resolving the conflict. The study used phenomenological approach. Two major sources were used which include primary and secondary sources. Primary sources were observation and experience and secondary sources were mainly drawn from books and internet materials. It was discovered that despite the fact that theology and science were in conflict; yet they complemented each other. The researcher recommended that science should not usurp theology in order not to produce unscrupulous people in society. Rather, they should harness their complementary roles in the advancement of human welfare and society.

Keywords: Science, Theology, Church, Conflict and Christianity

INTRODUCTION

There have been perennial differences that mar the relationship between science and theology. The antagonism between scientists and adherents of Christian religion has caused great rivalry between science and theology. There is a claim by both scientists and theologians that science will one day abolish Christianity. Science directs its attack to theology which is a vehicle of Christian faith. The term theology was derived from the two Greek words, *Theos* and *Logos*. *Theos* means God and *logos* means either word

or reason. The literary meaning of theology is discourse about God¹. It is a systematic study about God. The Greek word for theology is *theologia* meaning study of God. It can connote the knowledge of God².

Science is “a body of knowledge painstakingly acquired by observation, experiment and induction (p.4)³. Science is the study of nature which enables the generation of body of natural laws. It is the body of laws or theories systematically derived from experiments and observations of the phenomena. Science is “the century old endeavour to bring together by means of systematic thought and perceptible phenomena of this world into a thorough going association as possible⁴”. Science is the study of the physical world. Thus, science has been considered an organized body of knowledge concerning the physical world⁵. Theology is concerned with the study of God and science is the systematic study of nature. The explanations given above have indicated that Science and Church have divergent views about God, Universe and Nature which have caused conflict between them. This paper will deal with the conflict between science and Christian theology with the aim of resolving the conflict.

The Background of Science and Theology

Science owes its origin to the biblical account of creation (Gen. 1:26,28; Psalm 8:6) where God instructed man to have dominion over the earth and nature. From that time man swung into action of dominating nature by scientific learning, invention and technological development⁶.

The church fathers used science as a metaphysical term when they said “*Perfecta Scientia Deum Scire*” meaning perfect science is the knowledge of God. To the church fathers, theology was science, until it split into two branches, theology and Divine science or science of God during the time of Thomas Aquinas. It is noteworthy that Divine Science was not like natural sciences that deal with laws, experiments, empirical verifications and cause and effect⁷. Science originated from the beginning of the race and was developed by the Egyptian astronomers. It was in Greeks and China that science received formulation and practical inventions respectively⁸.

Prior to the Augustinian era, Christian teaching (theology) was regarded as *Sapientia* (wisdom) and not *scientia* (science). In the thirteenth century, Augustine was the first church Father to call Theology a science. Theologians like Karl Barth, Pannenberg, Bultmann agreed with Augustine that theology was *wissenschaft* (science). However, science had to do with temporal things while wisdom was concerned

¹ M. Oguike, *Every member ministry* (Umuahia, Lintdsons Publications, 1999) P. 33

² V.N. Uzoho, “An Ideal College of Theology” in *The Anglican Church in Nigeria* (Ikot-Ekpene, Clean Hands Productions, 2001) P. 251.

³ J.R.W. Stott, *Understanding The Bible* (California, Regals Books Division) P.4

⁴ E.C. Ekeke, “Religion and the Limitations of Science” in *Readings in the Scientific Study of Religion* (Calabar, University of Calabar Press, 2011) P.212

⁵ R.O. Nnachi, *compact History and Philosophical Background of Science* (Owerri, Hudson-Jude, 2011) P.3

⁶ J.B. Taylor, *Primal World Views* (Ibadan, Daystar Press, 1976) P.44

⁷ G.C. Anyanwu, “Religion and Spirituality: The Christian Science Perspective” in *Religion and spirituality* (Port Harcourt, Emhai Printing and Publishing company, 2001) P.125

⁸ C.E. Raven, *Christianity and Science* (London, Lutterworth Press, 1955) P.21

with the eternal Beings like God⁹. It must be noted that modern science originated from Christian worldview. Science was referred to as natural philosophy, until the term science was coined in the nineteenth century. Natural philosophy and natural theology were closely linked to the extent there was no difference between natural philosophy and natural theology. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the contribution of Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), Isaac Newton (1642-1727) was known as “physico – theology”¹⁰.

The Necessity of Science

Science is *sine qua non* for the development of technology in the country. Animalu (2001) described technology thus:

Technology means the exploitation of material resources for the benefit or detriment of a societal group; it is a practical problem-solving enterprise propelled by scientific discovery or by societal or private need; and it is basically an application, manifested in physical gadgets or organizational forms for the achievement of specific goals¹¹

It is the brain child of science. It is the application of scientific discoveries in solving the physical challenges that confront man. Science has been criticized for manufacturing gadgets like bombs, nuclear energy and other sophisticated weapons of mass destruction.

To buttress the necessity of science, the United Nations (UN) founded United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural organization (UNESCO) in 1946, which was saddled with the responsibility of collaborating with Nations in education, science, culture and communication. The UNESCO which has its headquarters at Paris, France, has about 180 nations as members. This organization champions educational scientific and cultural exchange programmes worldwide. It also engages in international science programmes, literacy, technical and teacher-training programmes, and regional and cultural history projects. Efforts are made by the organization to sustain and preserve world’s cultural and natural heritage and human rights¹².

Relationship between Science and Christian Theology

Naturally, there should not have been conflict between Christian theology and science if Christian fanatics do not use Christianity and its theology to determine the authenticity of scientific discoveries¹³. Similarly, fanatic scientists insist that scientific method is the only method of ascertaining the veracity of Christian

⁹ J. Beyers, *HTS Teologiese Studies* Volume 74(4) <https://www.researchgate.net/publication.2019>, P.1-4.

¹⁰ N. Murphy, *Science and Theology: Mapping the Relationship*, <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu>, ny, p.1

¹¹ A.O.E. Animalu, *2001 Igbo Day Lecture Technological Capacity Building: The making of An African Tiger*, (Enugu: Snaap Press Limited, 2001) P.14

¹² V. Gamut, “Peace Education and peer mediation” in *Introduction to peace and conflict studies in West Africa*, (Ibadan :Spectrum Books Limited, 2006) P.178

¹³ C.O. Isiramen, “Religious Education and the Nigerian Nation” in *Religion and the Nigerian Nation* (Ibadan : En-Joy press, 2010) p.118.

faith.

The relationship between science and theology is made glaringly clear thus:

The (word) “without” refers to the external nature of reality, the material realm explored by the scientist. Equally significant, however, is the “within” – the immeasurable dimension of things, the underlying “spiritual” realm of purpose and unity – so often ignored by researchers but discussed by theologians¹⁴

Human existence is made up of two spheres of life, the physical and the spirit realms. Science and theology satisfy man’s existential and ultimate quest to know the physical and spirit worlds. They handle body-soul dichotomy. Brown affirms that science has enabled chemists to discover drugs that can heal incurable diseases. It has empowered Engineers with skills to construct sophisticated roads, bridges and buildings that defied the crude technological and scientific know-how of the forebears. Scientific knowledge has been helpful in building hydro-electric power stations, nuclear power, radio and television¹⁵.

Jesus made it clear that science and theology are inseparably linked. Both are closely linked to the extent that it is difficult to separate theology from science. Jesus alluded to scientific disciplines in his teaching to his disciples. Jesus is portrayed in his teaching as a versatile and renowned scientist who used science in solving numerous problems confronting the people of his time. From time to time, he exhibited mastery of scientific teaching technique. For instance, Jesus used his knowledge of Ornithology (study of birds), Dendrology (study of trees), Anemology (study of winds, floriculture (study of flowers), carpology (study of seeds), Edaphology (study of soils), Ophiology (study of reptiles), Horticulture (study of weeds) in driving home his theological teachings to his disciples. Consequently, Jesus displayed exceptional knowledge of plant and soil sciences. He also demonstrated his erudite knowledge of Biological Sciences and climatology¹⁶.

Science’s encounter with culture has brought enlightenment to superstitious belief and ignorance. The paradox of scientific advancement and Christianity is that the same science that has helped in bringing enlightenment and dispersing ignorance has created a vacuum between God and man¹⁷. Critics of science have not considered the life expectancy that is higher in advanced countries. Development of science and technology in advanced countries has increased life expectancy. Unlike, in Nigeria which is one of the developing countries that has low life expectancy of between 51-54 years. Life expectancy in the country

¹⁴ S.J. Grenz and R.E. Olson, *20th century Theology* (Illinois: Paternoster Press, 1992) P. 132.

¹⁵ D.A Brown, *A Guide to Religions* (London: SPCK, 1975) P.224

¹⁶ M.A. Mkpa, “Teacher Effectiveness: The example of Jesus Christ” in *Contemporary Issues for Authentic Existence* (Enugu: Snaap Press, 2018) P. 983-986.

¹⁷ V.N. Uzoho, “An ideal College of Theology”, Op Cit, P.253-254.

is not in comparison with UK and USA that have 76 years due to growth in science and technology¹⁸.

Conflict between Science and Theology in the Medieval period

The Ptolemaic view that influenced Christianity tremendously held that the earth was the centre in which the sun, planets and stars revolved. However, this Christian view of the universe was later changed by Copernicus who discovered that the sun was at the centre of the universe in which the earth is a mere satellite that is in orbit round the sun¹⁹. Copernicus was the first scientist to discover that the earth orbits the sun and moon. This scientific discovery received maximum support from Galileo who used more sophisticated scientific instruments like mathematics and theory to arrive to his scientific findings that the sun is the centre of the universe. The earth moves round the sun. It is ascertained that Copernicus and Galileo's scientific discoveries were against the scriptures. Scriptures make it clear that Joshua commanded the sun and it stood still and not the earth²⁰. The Catholics supported Copernicus and Luther was in support of Galileo. Copernicus and Galileo's scientific discoveries shook the foundations of the *Parousia* (second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ), heaven and ascension and rendered them baseless.

Scientific world view contradicts both Christian and African traditional worldviews that remove God from creation by emphasizing that God is part and parcel of creation. This implies that God is subject to the law of creation (natural law). Therefore, man is the master and creator of the universe²¹. Perhaps, it has led some philosophers and scientists to think that with natural laws, miracles are untenable. Locke and Hume argued that "natural laws were inviolable, and therefore that miracles could not happen"²². Miracles mean God's intervention in nature. Locke and Hume refuted the miraculous works of Jesus Christ like walking on the sea, feeding of the five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish, healing the paralytic and restoration of sight to the blind. Scientific worldview does not accept the religious belief that God created the world; rather, it is man who created God and the universe²³. Scientists like Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo and Newton changed science from teleological to mathematical method of investigating nature in which they discovered that God is not a cosmic ally and judge but a cosmic mathematician²⁴. It was in 17th century that scientific revolution began which made man the mastery of nature. Scientists have created a barrier between the knowledge of God and the physical universe²⁵.

It is observed that prior to the invention of science, the Judeo-Christian and traditional beliefs were replete with belief in the existence of various kinds of spirits and demons. The emergence of science responded

¹⁸ M. Ekanem, "The Clergy, Old Age Medico-Social Problem Management" in *The Anglican Church in Nigeria* (Ikot Ekpene : Clean Hands Productions, 2001) P.148.

¹⁹ M. Warren, *I Believe in the Great Commission* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1976) p.166

²⁰ E. H. Vick, *Quest on exploration of some problems in Science and Religion* (London: Epworth Press, 1975) P.18

²¹ W.H. Crane, "Indigenization in the African Church" in *The International Review of Missions* (Geneva Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, 1964) P.414

²² R.J. Berry, "Miracles: Scepticism, credulity or Reality?" in *different gospels* (London: society for promoting Christian Knowledge, 1993) P.69.

²³ E.C. Ekeke, "Religion and the limitations of science" Op cit, P.218.

²⁴ V. Ferm, *An Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York, Philosophical Library, 1945) P.204

²⁵ I. Lobo, "Towards a morality based on the meaning of History. The condition and Renovation of moral Theology" in *concilium An International Reviews of Theology* Volume 5 number 3 (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967) P.13.

to the belief in invisible beings by saying that anything that is not visible does not exist. Science does not believe that invisible beings like God, Angels, evil spirits, demons and witches exist. It further claims that sicknesses are not supernaturally caused, they are caused by viruses, bacteria and fungi which can be proved in the laboratories²⁶. The scientific exploits made the hologrammatic time or cyclical time to give way for linear time. In hologrammatic time, the past and present interpenetrated each other. The primitive society arrived to the hologrammatic time based on the rhythm of nature. On the other hand, linear time is a time that is literally straight as the name denotes. It is a time that is heading to an end. Newtonian revolution brought the linear time to a lime light during the enlightenment era²⁷.

Christian Faith and Darwinism

The churchmen's publication which was entitled *Essays and Reviews* in 1860 and Darwin's essay on the origin of species that followed later, paved way for biblical criticism that is shaking the foundation of the inerrancy of the scriptures that are believed to be the *sola scriptura* – the bible is believed to contain everything one needs for salvation. Today, biblical criticisms have destroyed the traditional belief about the scriptures²⁸. The perennial conflict between Christianity and Science is exacerbated by the Darwin's theory of evolution²⁹. Theory of evolution states that man originated from Ape. This theory is contrary to the Christian faith on divine creation of the universe. This is one of the responsible factors that led to the conclusion that science is an enemy of Christianity³⁰.

The conflict between science and Christianity took a new dimension in the early twentieth century in the United States. During that period, conflict between Christianity and science was characterized by criticism of the scriptures and evolutionary theory in the United States of America. There was the emergence of liberal theology (modernism). The fundamentalist Christians responded to the conflict between Christianity and science by declaring scriptures which adopted evolutionary biology to be against the biblical position on the origins of the earth and humans³¹.

In the eighteenth century, the French philosopher, Jean-Francois Lyotard made it clear that “narratives’ like Christian gospel which was conveyed in symbolic or mythical terms were no longer valid in an age of science. He stated that ‘myths’ of progress which is ‘master’ or ‘meta narratives’ had replaced the age of long narratives³². Among the implications of Lyotard's position is that reason and scientific knowledge have taken the place of Christian faith and narratives.

²⁶ A.F. Dike, *Church, Society and Globalization* (Jos: Challenge Publications, 2015) P.176

²⁷ M. Matthews, *Rediscovering Holiness* (London: The Society for promoting Christian knowledge, 1996) p.37

²⁸ B. Nwankiti, *The Lambeth Conferences and the Growth of the Anglican Communion* (Owerri: Springfield Publishers 2000) P.2

²⁹ K.N. Okoro, “Religion and Science” in *Readings in the scientific study of Religion* (Calabar: University of Calabar Press, 2011) P. 192.

³⁰ M.M. Thomas, “Indigenization and the Renaissance of Traditional cultures” in the *International Review of Missions* (Geneva: Commission on World Mission and evangelism, 1963) p.193

³¹ N. Murphy, *Science and Theology: Mapping the Relationship*, Op cit,

³² A. Walker, *Telling the story* (Britain: Society for promoting Christian knowledge, 1996) P.4

Thomas F. Torrance in agreement with Karl Barth said that theology is a scientific discipline – the status of theology as a science is not different from natural sciences that make their enquiries by probing reality objectively. For theology to maintain its rightful position as scientific discipline it should surrender its forms of questioning, conclusions, structure of thought and interpretation to objective control and testing as in other natural sciences³³. Perhaps, Torrance and Karl Barth lost sight of the fact that it is not easy for theology to surrender its religious phenomena like doctrines, beliefs, texts, institutions, form of worship and ethics for objective control and testing due to theology will lose its credibility³⁴.

Science and Christianity in the 21st Century

The German – British philologist Friedrich Max Muller (1823-1900) was the first scholar who suggested that people should be concerned with the place of theology or religion in the scientific age. Muller's pioneering role in propagating the scientific study of religion in the nineteenth- century argued that for the study of religion to be objective, it must adopt scientific approach for it to have a place in the midst of mankind³⁵.

The works Muller did on the relationship between science and religion was similar to the pioneering role played by Ian Barbour when he published a book entitled issues in science and religion in 1966. Works on the relationship between science and religion took centre stage in 1980s and 1990s and were championed by John Polkinghorne, Arthur Peacocke and Paul Daves³⁶.

The place of theology or religion in the scientific age has suffered setbacks due to the obstacles that confront the study of theology and religion in the scientific age. Sociologist of religion, Comte postulated that “science was to replace theology as the source of ultimate values and perspectives”³⁷. This idea is referred to as positivism. Comte further postulated that human mind had undergone three stages of development which consist of theological or fictitious stage, metaphysical or abstract stage and scientific or positive stage. Each stage left impression in human mind. The theological stage was interested in attributing the causes and effects of phenomena to the Supernatural Being. It was not so with the metaphysical stage that had nothing to do with the supernatural Being and was only concerned with speculating on the abstract. Consequently, people started thinking that science would finally usurp the supernatural Being and replace it with science that is interested in the objectivity and experiment of nature³⁸.

The society is in the age of positivism. Science has its world view which revolves around positivism.

³³ J.C. Heron. “What is wrong with Biblical Exegesis? Reflections upon C.S. Lewis” criticisms” in *different gospels* (Britain: society for promoting Christian knowledge 1993) p.99.

³⁴ E.M. Uka, “The Relevance of Religious Education in Nigeria” in *African Journal of Religion, Culture and Society* Vol. 1, no. 2 (Calabar: Department of Religious Studies/Philosophy, 2007) p. 168.

³⁵ S. Arvidsson, “Aryan Mythology as Science and Ideology” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 67 no 2 (USA: American Academy of Religion, 1999) P. 333.

³⁶ M. Fuller, *Science and Theology: An Introduction* <https://www.thinkingfaith.org>, 2010, p.1

³⁷ J.M. Yinger, “Secular alternatives to Religious Action” in *Religious Quest* (London: Routledge, 1988) P.545

³⁸ E.C. Ekeke, “Religion and the limitations of science” Op cit, p. 211.

Positivism means that truth is objective. For something to be true it must be verifiable by specific observations and measurements carried out by unbiased people. Scientific worldview does not regard any truth that is not verifiable. In science, things like love, trust, commitment, beauty and so on are subjective not objective³⁹. Similarly, science holds that empiricism is the norm in science. Empiricism is a scientific method of research in which the phenomena are ascertained to exist if they can be seen, touched, heard, smelt and tested. Outside this scientific empiricist method of investigation, the phenomenon does not exist⁴⁰. Early study on science and theology agreed that the divergent opinions of science and theology are borne out of different approaches employed in scientific and theological inquiries. Science and religion base their findings on natural revelation and special revelation respectively. Natural science arrives to natural revelation by exploring the natural order through observation and experiment while theology derives special revelation by studying the scriptures⁴¹. Science investigates the unknown, thereby, unraveling the mystery behind the hidden nature of the cosmos. There is no doubt that science has rendered the world pointless and meaningless by making the universe comprehensible⁴².

Science has no solutions to all human problems. By scientific knowledge man has the awareness of his physical origins, it has no power to inform him of his nature. It is only the bible that can give account of man's nature created in God's image which has been degraded by sin⁴³. Some people have criticized Christianity for being strict with its formal and static worldview that poses obstacle to change. Christianity initiated scientific and technological discoveries; yet some churches discourage their members from making use of scientific and technological advancement which they see as materialism⁴⁴. Some Christians out of ignorance condemn technological and scientific discoveries as signs of anti-Christ and end of the age.

Science has eaten deep into the fabrics of society by applying natural sciences to every aspect of life. Therefore, organized religion is challenged to review its concepts, revise its vocabularies in order for it to be meaningful⁴⁵. This idea is known as revisionism. Christian religion should not review its doctrine which can make it to compromise with the standard of science and yields to its challenge. This revisionist agenda has led people to ask the following questions.

1. Can there really be a God who transcends this great universe in which we live, and who has been present through all its long history?

³⁹ C. Birch, J. Francis et al, *Faith Science and the future* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1978) P.13

⁴⁰ M.C. Anaekwe, "Introducing Educational Research and Statistics" in *Basic Research Methods and Statistics in Education and social sciences* (Onitsha: Sofie Publicity and printing limited, 2007) p.5-6.

⁴¹ L. Jaeger, "Themelios, themelios the gospel coalition" volume 41 issue 3, 2019, np

⁴² H.E. Amolo and S.T. Ihuagwu, "The spiritual and Ethical implications of Darwin's Theory of Evolution on the contemporary Christians" in *Christianity and persecution in the contemporary world* (Abeokuta: Crowther Theological Publishers, 2016) p.226.

⁴³ J.R.W. Stott, *Understanding the Bible* (California: Regals Books Division, 1978) P.4

⁴⁴ H.A. Chung, "The Image of the Minister in social Change" in the *Northeast Asia Journal of Theology* volume 1 number 1, ny, nP.

⁴⁵ N.S.S. Iwe, *Christianity and Culture* (Onitsha: University Publishing Company, ny) p.52

2. If there is a God who transcends this great universe, does he really pay attention to such insignificant creatures as human being?
3. Because science can tell us so much that are new about the universe, what is the value of the myths by which people of different religions explain the beginnings of the world? Because we can control disease by medicine and medical knowledge, what extra help does prayer give to us? Which is more important, prayer or medicine?⁴⁶.

Church leaders attributed the cause of AIDS to punishment by God by comparing it with the biblical plagues. Scientists later discovered that AIDS was caused by virus⁴⁷. Again, space exploration has emptied heaven of its taboos. However, the church cannot run away from the influence of science since religion and scientific discoveries are the major factors that stimulate ideas⁴⁸.

CONCLUSION

The conflict between theology and science has been an old conflict. This incessant friction between science and theology has been a result of scientists' quest to abolish religion from the planet earth. It must be acknowledged that the church is making use of scientific discoveries that do not clash with church doctrine in the advancement of the gospel.

There are Christian scientists that are influenced by their Christian belief when carrying out scientific research. The church also encourages science by establishing science schools that propagate scientific knowledge among the people. All the scientists and theologians should do is to create a forum for dialogue in order to avoid incessant clashes between science and theology.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The scientists and Christians have to respect the worldviews of each other. Stakeholders in both science and theology need to realize that science and theology complement each other. Christians are not expected to use theology as a yardstick of determining scientific truth and vice versa. Scientists are required to realize that subduing and dominating nature does not mean that science and technology should be used to manufacture weapons of mass destruction that destroy the church teaching on dignity and value of human life. Christians need to emulate Jesus Christ who adequately incorporated scientific knowledge in his teaching ministry. Scientists have to accord respect to Christian belief in the spirit of tolerance. In a bid to make theology relevant in the scientific age, theology can subscribe to scientific inquiries that agree with its theological point of view.

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⁴⁷ L.N. Mbefo, *Christian Theology and African Heritage* (Onitsha: Spiritan Publications, 1996) P. 123.

⁴⁸ D. Burnett, *Clash of worlds* (Britain: MARC Monarch Publications, 1990) P. 169.

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