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Can a Scientist Believe in Miracles? | Ian Hutchinson

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The Veritas Forum

For over 25 years, Ian Hutchinson (MIT) has been a speaker at Veritas Forums across the country. Throughout those years, he's answered countless student questions about science, theology, and his Christian faith. In his latest book, *Can a Scientist Believe in Miracles?*, Hutchinson compiled every question asked of him at a Veritas Forum and set out to answer them. On our latest podcast, we sit down with Hutchinson to discuss his book, his journey to Christianity, and his hopes for the next generation of scientists.

Transcript

[Music] Welcome to the Veritas Forum podcast. My name is Caleb Godhart, and I'm the Communications and Media Manager at Veritaas. For over 25 years, Ian Hutchinson, a professor of nuclear science at MIT, has been a speaker at Veritaas Forums across the country.

Throughout those years, he's answered countless student questions about science, theology, and his Christian faith. In his latest book, *Can a Scientist Believe in Miracles?* | Ian Hutchinson. The Veritas Forum.

In his latest book, *Can a Scientist Believe in Miracles?*, Hutchinson compiled every question ever asked of him at a Veritaas Forum, and he's set out to answer them. A couple weeks ago, I sat down with Hutchinson to discuss his book, his journey to Christianity, and his hopes for the next generation of scientists.

[Music] Alright Ian, thanks so much for coming in to come to talk to us, the Veritaas Forum podcast.

It's a pleasure to be here. Yeah, we're here talking about your book, *Can a Scientist Believe in Miracles?*, which is due out here very soon in 2018, September. We're very excited to have that out on shelves.

But I thought it would be good. You opened the book with a brief conversation about your journey. How that became a central part of your life.

I was wondering if you could briefly talk about how that happened for you? Sure, the book gives a much longer story than I would be appropriate for now. Sure. But broadly speaking, I didn't grow up a Christian.

My family didn't go to church. But when I was an undergraduate at Cambridge University, I had a couple of close student friends who were Christians. I wasn't ignorant of Christianity because in my high school, as was the case for many of the English, British schools in those days, had prayers and hymns at it.

So it was a Christian school in that sense. So, and actually, while I was in high school, I was looking for another subject to add to the subjects that I was doing for my public examinations. And I was looking around for an easy subject.

And I lighted on the idea that I would do New Testament studies because that sounded really easy. And so I actually had read the New Testament not very well understood it since I didn't do terribly well in my examination. I don't squeak through.

Anyway, as an undergraduate at Cambridge, I began to take Christianity more seriously and went to a series of lectures that were given by Michael Green, who is well-known speaker in those days in Britain. And in part, by the influence of my friends and these lectures and so forth, I gradually realized that, well, I pretty much thought that Christianity was real. I began to realize there was good evidence for the truth of Christianity.

And what at the time seemed to me more surprising than anything else was the notion that one could have actually a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. And that had not been something I had even considered before. And I reached the point of realizing that I did pretty much believe it, not 100%, but it seemed like it made sense to me.

And I knew that if it was going to become a reality to me, I would have to go further than merely intellectual knowledge. I would have to make a step of faith and of commitment, and I did that in my second year as an undergraduate in Cambridge. So I've been a Christian for more than 40 years now.

Right, and so that's happening at a similar time as you're beginning your scientific career as well. Yeah, so I was studying mathematics and physics at Cambridge as an undergraduate. And so there's a sense in which my Christianity and my science grew up together as an undergraduate at Cambridge.

And I began to get serious about my Christianity, and I began to develop my science and my understanding of the world. And they grew together. I think perhaps that's one reason why I've never had some of the same struggles that some people have to try to make sense of the relationship between science and Christianity.

That's by the way, largely what my book is about. I mean, the book starts with this question, "Can a scientist believe in miracles?" Right. But that's just one of the questions that I address in the book.

The book is constructed in such a way as to answer all of the questions I was able to transcribe from the many, many Veritas forums at which I've spoken. And so these are the real questions asked by real people, and I tried to address those. And because I usually am speaking about the relationship between science and Christianity at Veritas forums, most of those questions are on that topic.

Well, that's what I really enjoyed about reading this book. The fact that you're transcribing questions that are actually on the minds of students. It's not just, I think people are asking these questions.

Like, I was asked this question at this event, and this is what is on the minds of students at these forums. Yeah, that's right. A lot of the forums, the majority of the forums in which I participated are video recorded.

And so that's why I was able to transcribe the literal questions, complete with stumbling grammar, which I slightly corrected in a couple cases. But I basically didn't change the questions, and I didn't omit any questions. So there are some questions that are kind of similar to other questions, and so these are grouped together in the book.

So my answers don't have to be repetitive in that same sense. But I wanted to represent the kinds of questions that people, young people, students, university students primarily, are asking today about the relationship between science and faith. Of course, they're in response to specific talks that I've given, and so some of the topics are guided by the things that I've talked about.

But I think they are a nice representation of what young people are asking today. Did you notice as you were gathering these questions and listening to these talks, a sort of common thread or a set of common themes that students are asking or maybe some questions underneath the question? Well, one common theme that I generally address in my talk, in which *Before* comes up in the book, is the question of scientism, which is something that I've written in a more, let's say, academic or a studious book about, which is a cut, I wrote the book, *Monopolizing Knowledge* in 2011, and it's an assessment of scientism. scientism is the erroneous belief that all the real knowledge there is comes from science.

And I think that's a very widespread misunderstanding in our culture today. And I usually take the chance to bring it out into the open, examine it and say it is a mistake. But a lot of people who are coming from that scientific viewpoint recognize that science doesn't prove that there is a God.

Maybe science points to God, and we could talk about that later, but I would agree that science doesn't prove that there is a God, and they conclude that therefore God doesn't exist. But that's of course foolish, and science doesn't prove anything about the intangibles of this world. It doesn't prove that such a thing as justice or mercy or love.

And yet those are realities in our world that we all recognize and consider to be very important. And it's the same way with theological questions. And so, they are important, they're vital, and yet they are not susceptible to being investigated by science.

Yeah, and do you find that there's been good response towards explaining the limitations of science? Or students have you noticed in conversation maybe after forums, sympathetic to that point, and kind of realizing the inheritance of a scientism has a belief system instead of science in its proper place? I think students are very open to thinking about that topic and realizing how predominant scientism is, and realizing that they can't possibly really be right, even though we somehow breathe it in and the academic air in which we live. So yes, broadly speaking, students are very receptive to that. When I give talks in Veritas forums, I typically have lots of questions that are part of the forum, but then typically afterwards, loads of people come up to me because they still got questions, they didn't get their questions asked and hence not answered, and so forth.

And a lot of those exchanges give me a good flavor for or insight into what people are thinking behind that. And I think that's certainly one thing that young people are willing to take seriously. There are some people who react in a different way, they just simply buy into scientism, they just think science is the way we found out everything, and so that's it.

But I think I try to challenge them to think broadly about that. And you talk too in the book, and I've been at forums where you've discussed this too, this idea that the earliest foundations of science, as we often know it, were founded by Christian thinkers who were not indebted to this subject. And that is a science of a belief system.

Could you talk a little bit about that? That's true. Certainly the people who founded the scientific revolution in the 17th century were by and large religious believers, mostly Christians. And so they certainly believed that much of what we know comes from sources outside of science.

And that's of course still the case. What's more, coming focusing in on the question that is in the title of the book, "Can a Scientist Believe in Miracles?" Which is only one of the questions, more than 200 questions I get asked, but it's one of the key questions. You're going to have to read the whole book to get those questions.

They were people who believed in miracles by and large. At the very least they believed in the miracle of the resurrection. And so those people, historically those great scientists of history were able to answer very affirmatively that a scientist can believe in miracles.

These days we know a lot more science than they did. And so sometimes people just assume, well these were the things people believed in those days. They were the ideas that people inherited from their culture.

Actually that's not really true of many of the great scientists of history, Boyle, Kepler, Newton, Faraday, Maxwell. These people that I just mentioned were very serious Christian believers. They had thought through their Christian faith and had an intellectual belief behind it.

So it wasn't just that they were absorbing their current culture. But we are in a culture these days which places more emphasis on science and technology than it does on theology.

[Music] How have you learned to translate the conversation on the question that you're asking Can a scientist believe in miracles into our current cultural, I guess, milieu? Well I think it's important to understand by understanding what science is.

So science is as we now understand the world where it's unqualified by which we mean natural science. It's important to make that clear because life gets very complicated. We're not talking about political science.

That political science is using the word science in a totally different way. So when we're talking about natural science, natural science has certain approaches to understanding the world which are based on understanding the world insofar as it's reproducible and insofar as it can be described with a kind of clarity or unambiguous description which often involves measurements and sometimes mathematics and so forth. But there are other characteristics.

Those two characteristics of science define what we mean by natural science and in a certain sense they also define what we mean by nature. So we actually mean by nature the regular course of the world, the way in which the world behaves in a reproducible and unambiguous way. And so if that's true then obviously if there are things in our world which aren't regular which aren't capable of description in unambiguous terms and so the examples of the things that I put forward as things that aren't reproducible are for example human history.

Human history is made up of unique events. You can't do a reproducible experiment to find out whether Julius Caesar was assassinated on the Ides of March in 44 BC to one off. And similarly there are all sorts of things in our world which are not, which don't possess the kind of clarity and unambiguous description that we require in science and I'm thinking of things like beauty and justice and love and so forth.

Since those things do exist and since there are important knowledge, there is important knowledge in our society to be gained about them. Science does not describe

everything. So first of all the most important thing to understand is what is science? What do I mean by science? Having said that we then begin to see how science and other disciplines depend on one another, fit together.

And in fact for the people of history that we're just discussing, theology wasn't irrelevant to their science. It was actually quite relevant to their science and the way they thought integrated lots of different things together. And so in fact theology, belief in biblical creation and so forth was almost certainly a very influential in the minds of many of the people in the scientific revolution.

And it actually led to science's birth being successful into science gaining the momentum that it has in the West initially and now throughout the world. And so in a certain sense it was that biblical worldview in my opinion that acted as a kind of fertile climate in which science took root and flourished. It might be helpful now that we've defined what science is and how we're using it in the context of this book, how you're defining faith too.

A lot of the questions you're getting at these forums are all on the lines of isn't Christianity just blind faith, isn't it just superstition, isn't it just some comfort for the suffering in the world? How have you come to understand faith in a more robust and rational way? Right, well in English the word faith really has three different meanings or threads of meaning. One is belief in propositions, and very often this is belief in propositions you can't prove. The second one is trust in an idea or a person or something like that, so trust and the third is loyalty, so commitment to a person or to a cause to an ideal.

And those three threads are all present in the word faith. Very often in particularly discussing with the critics of faith they tend to focus on the first and to emphasize that it's belief in things you can't prove. And sometimes the aphorism is used that faith is believing what you know ain't so.

This is a joke, okay? But actually when it comes to the Christian faith the second and third meanings, trust and loyalty are actually the ones that are most important. They're the ones that are the heart of faith when you read the Bible, when Jesus calls for faith in his hearers or when people are encouraged to have faith. It isn't believe things, propositions, it is trust God and also live loyally towards your God, act in faith towards God.

And so those aspects of faith are just as important. Now, so the contrast between having scientific ways of developing our beliefs and simply blind faith is a convenient contrast for the critics of faith, for the antithiest, but it actually isn't the way Christianity works. Faith in the context of Christianity involves all three of those threads and it's not so terribly different from the way we act towards our knowledge in the sciences.

In other words, it's not the case that science completely dispenses with all faith. Science

is based on certain types of belief that we can't prove, for example, that the world is comprehensible. It has been remarked by many scientists, both believers and unbelievers over history that Albert Einstein put it, the most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it's comprehensible.

So that's a kind of faith. Similarly, it's not the case that scientific theories and descriptions are immediately subject to revision if there's the slightest evidence against them. That's simply a fallacy.

Scientists develop serious, well-attested theories and models to describe the universe. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about this idea of science is over here and it's on domain and faith is over here and it's on domain. Let's say someone grants, they're not incompatible as long as you keep them in their own domain.

But over the course of your book, you're telling a more complex picture. There is some sort of interaction here for you in particular and in your work. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about how you see the commingling of science and faith for yourself.

Yeah, okay. So the two extremes are to say that is to have what is considered often a kind of warfare model that somehow science and faith are at war and always have been. This is a complete myth that's been debunked by historians of science over the last 100 years but is still believed by a lot of people.

And of course, the people who believe this generally take the view that science is overthrown faith and so faith is thrown away. It's conquered. So that's one view.

The opposite view is to say that these two things are about such completely different areas of domains of knowledge or interest that they simply don't overlap. So these are sometimes in the phrase that Stephen J. Gould used, non-overlapping magisteria that they can't contradict one another because they're about different things. I don't believe that either.

I actually think that science and faith do overlap, as I've already said, they overlapped very carefully and significantly in the minds of the scientists of history and in the science of their day. So it is not historically true to say that they were entirely separated and about totally different things. Theology has influenced science and science influences theology.

So I think it's simply a fallacy to say that they're non-overlapping magisteria and can never influence one another. The way I put it is that they often assist one another. So I think, in fact, it's remarkable that the scientists of history, so large a fraction of them, have been theists and largely Christians, but other theisms too.

And I think that's a significant fact that shows that there is actually a helpful and

encouraging and mutually sustaining interaction between science and faith. And I think also there are occasions when science and faith mutually constrain or correct one another. So up until the 17th century, all Christians thought that the earth was stationary and the sun orbited the earth.

Not just Christians, everyone in society believed everyone thought that. But we found out from science that that's actually not the case and that the earth orbits the sun rather than the other way around. And this required a certain amount of reinterpreting of some Bible passages during the controversial times when this was being established, there were people in the church who argued, no, the Psalms say the earth is firmly established and cannot be moved.

And that means it can't be the case of the earth revolves around the sun. Well, that was a misinterpretation of that Psalm. And so these days we don't make those interpretations.

We realize that Psalmist was speaking poetically and in a way that was communicating about the appearances and the significance of our local environment, not about cosmology. But there are other ways on the other side in which faith constrain science. And the example I usually use is that if we are doing experiments on human subjects that are funded by US government funds, everyone in the US is required to have a whole committee that oversees research on human subjects and ensures that their safety is ensured that there is transparency.

People are aware of the risks and things are done ethically. There's an area where ethics, which even still in our society is largely influenced by religion, by faith, is constraining science. And I think it's perfectly justifiable and actually essential that those kinds of considerations should constrain science.

We shouldn't be just rushing off and supposing that science has some purpose of its own, which overrules whatever ethical considerations might come up. Right. There are people and concerns at stake here in that regard.

I mean, we've talked a little bit about how people who are maybe worship science in a sense are maybe a misunderstanding faith. How have you even counted also a lot of questions about how Christians are very skeptical of science, the practice, either just through some sort of cultural bias or just misinformation about what science is? Could you talk a little bit about how you come to see science as not a threat to your faith and actually something even alluded to earlier as something that even points to God? Yeah, I'm happy to do that. These questions at forums, some of them come from skeptics or anti-theists, some of them come from genuine seekers.

A lot of them also come from Christians who are trying to make sense out of their relationship between science and their Christian faith. Well, you're right. Many of those

questions do sometimes betray an uneasiness, a kind of suspicion about science, maybe nervousness about science.

As I explained, I never really had that same level of nervousness that is often the case, particularly in America and in orthodox Christian circles. It's been the view within the Christian church since at least St. Augustine, and this became a viewpoint which was very much emphasized during the 16th and 17th centuries, that God has revealed himself in the form of two books, the book of his words, which is the Bible, and the book of his works, which is creation, nature. And that both of these tell us something about God and that both of these books are appropriate to be read metaphorically by Christians on the basis of what they are.

And because God is the author of both of these books, we don't expect them to contradict one another. And if they seem to contradict, as we're reading them, then what needs to happen is that as we bring them together, if we see contradictions, we have to realize that we are misinterpreting one or other of those books and we need to think hard about our interpretations. And so that's true of the written word, we have to think about our interpretations of the analysis, but it's also true about our interpretations of the book of God's works.

So, you know, some people, as science was developing, gained the opinion that science was describing a closed universe in which everything was predictable from everything else that was completely deterministic. And that led them to conclude that God could not be active in the world, and this led to things like Unitarianism and so on, and ultimately in many cases to atheism. But actually, we know now that that was incorrect interpretation of science.

We know now from our studies, for example, of quantum physics, that the world is not a deterministic closed universe. So science today, science as we know it, physics as we know it today, actually far less supports the view that the universes are closed system, incapable of being influenced by outside or other spiritual, for example, forces. That is a less plausible conclusion from science today than it was in the 19th century.

And so that's an area where we need to look at our interpretations of the book of God's works and adjust those interpretations so that we find that those two books don't contradict one another. It sounds like it's an ever evolving process too, but it's not like I like putting it forward, not as a process we should go at with fear. Like there's actually almost an excitement in how we come and come to reconcile these two worlds together because they should be informing each other.

They should be, they do inform one another. It's certainly the case that in areas of theology, we expect that the evolution of theology to be more to be slower and to be more gradual. In part, that is because we Christians believe that God has revealed himself and in fact we believe he has revealed himself once and for all in Jesus Christ.

And so we don't expect some areas of theology to experience an evolution of knowledge, but that's not, but it doesn't mean that theology never advances. It doesn't mean that our understanding of the scriptures don't advance. They do advance.

Maybe not as spectacularly quickly as we now take to be commonplace in science. Science tends to progress much more rapidly. But in both those areas, these are progressive disciplines.

And I think that that's, as you say, there's an excitement in discovering that and realizing that these two areas inform one another. I'm wondering what you, when you look at the next generation of maybe scientists in particular, and as you've, you know, amassed all these questions and listened to these lectures again, are you overall, are you optimistic about the future of science and in particular that future scientists will have a better understanding of how science and faith can inform each other? There is an openness actually within science to the significance of religious things, which is perhaps even greater this decade than it was before. For example, the American Association for the Advancements of Science, the biggest scientific organization in the world, has a whole program called the Dialogue on Science Ethics and Religion, which is, whose whole purpose is to improve the relationship between science and religious communities.

Because the AAAS recognizes that religion is an important part of our society, and it's important for science, that it should be in a constructive relationship with people of faith. So, in that sense, yes, I think I am optimistic, and so what I want my book to do is to help, and the Veritas forums to do, is to help those people make sense of this inner more constructive way. Well, that was naturally leading into my last question, which was, "What do you hope that Christians would take away from the book?" And it seems to answer that.

Well, you know, I see the book as having two types of readers. One is Christians who want to understand the relationship between their faith and science better. And the other is people who aren't Christians, who maybe have doubts about whether the Christian faith could be consistent with science, or who are simply persuaded that it doesn't, but are still interested in the question.

OK, and what I want both of those groups to do is, first of all, to recognize that the question is really important. The big questions of life are something which is very greatly undervalued, in my opinion, in higher education these days. We're focusing on technical and professional development much more than we are about understanding what life is really about.

So one of the things that the Veritas forum tries to address is the big questions of life from the perspective of the Christian faith. And so that's what my book wants to help people to be able to do, is to come back to the big questions of life, to do so with a better understanding of both science and of Christianity. And if they find, you know, from

reading the book, or from going to Veritas forums, or thinking about it, or whatever, that they have a new respect for and a new comprehension of the significance of these questions.

Then the most important thing that I want them to do is to take those things seriously and go further. Ian Hutchinson, thank you so much for being here with us. His book, "Can a Scientist Believe in Miracles" is due out from "Inversely Press" in early September.

You can follow us on our Facebook page or Instagram or Twitter and our website, Veritas.org, to get more information about it. We'll be doing a bunch of promos around it, publishing some excerpts in case this conversation didn't convince you to get it. But at this point, it's on you if you're interested.

You can't be helped. Thanks again, Ian. We look forward to having your book out in the world.

Thank you very much.

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