

Multiple Perspectives, Levels, and  
Narratives:  
Three Models for Correlating Science  
and Religion

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# What this lecture is not about

This lecture is about ways of enabling a critical yet positive interaction between science and religion

It assumes that engagement is possible and productive

It's **not** about models for the interaction of science and religion, such as Ian Barbour's problematic four-fold scheme.

# Science & Religion

My own work at Oxford began in the physical sciences (chemistry, with major emphasis on quantum theory), before moving into biological sciences

Biology and quantum mechanics are very different! So what about other sciences?

And what about the complexity of “religion”?

A false Enlightenment universal?

A placeholder for something else?

# Mary Midgley



“For most important questions in human life, a number of different conceptual tool-boxes always have to be used together.”

We need theoretical frameworks, however provisional and heuristic, to help us cope with complex realities

This lecture is about three ways of relating science and religion that I have personally found helpful

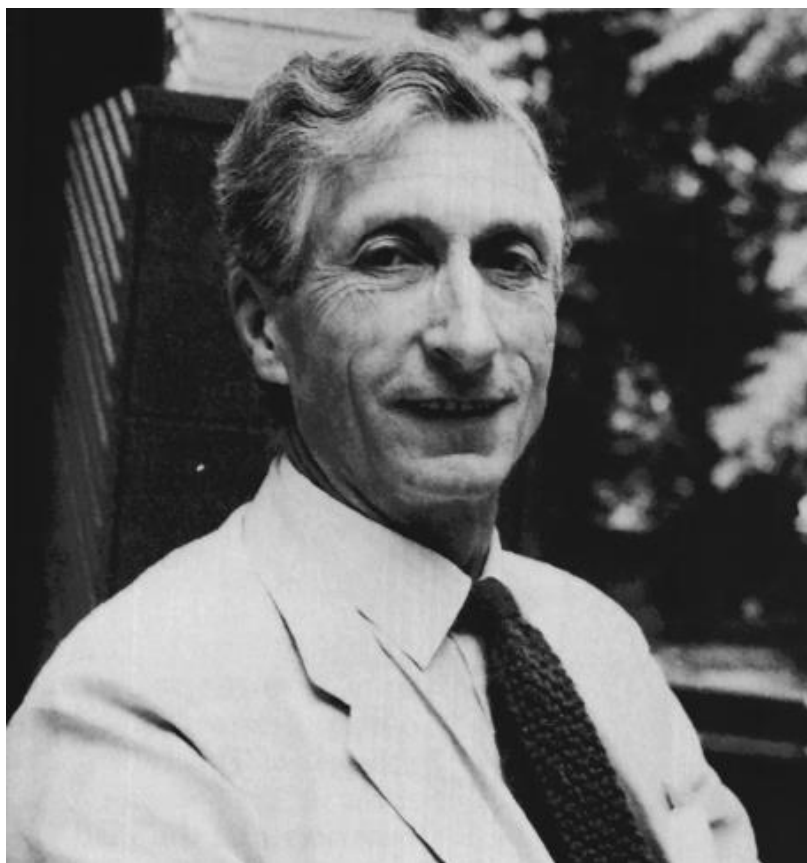
Multiple *perspectives, levels, and narratives*

Each has their own strengths and weaknesses

Each is helpful within its limits

# Charles Coulson (1910-74)

Oxford's first Professor of Theoretical Chemistry



# Charles Coulson (1910-74)

Best known for his *Science and Christian Belief* (1955) – still worth reading

Fundamental coherence of nature and faith

Rejection of idea of “God of the gaps”

Christianity provides an explanatory vision that explains the success of science

Need multiple perspectives

Coulson was a mountaineer in his spare time . . .

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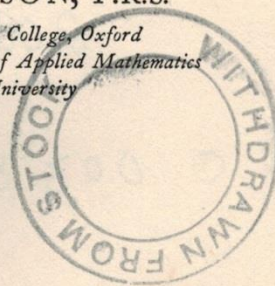
*Twenty-fifth Series*

# CHRISTIANITY IN AN AGE OF SCIENCE

BY

C. A. COULSON, F.R.S.

*Fellow of Wadham College, Oxford  
and Rouse Ball Professor of Applied Mathematics  
in Oxford University*



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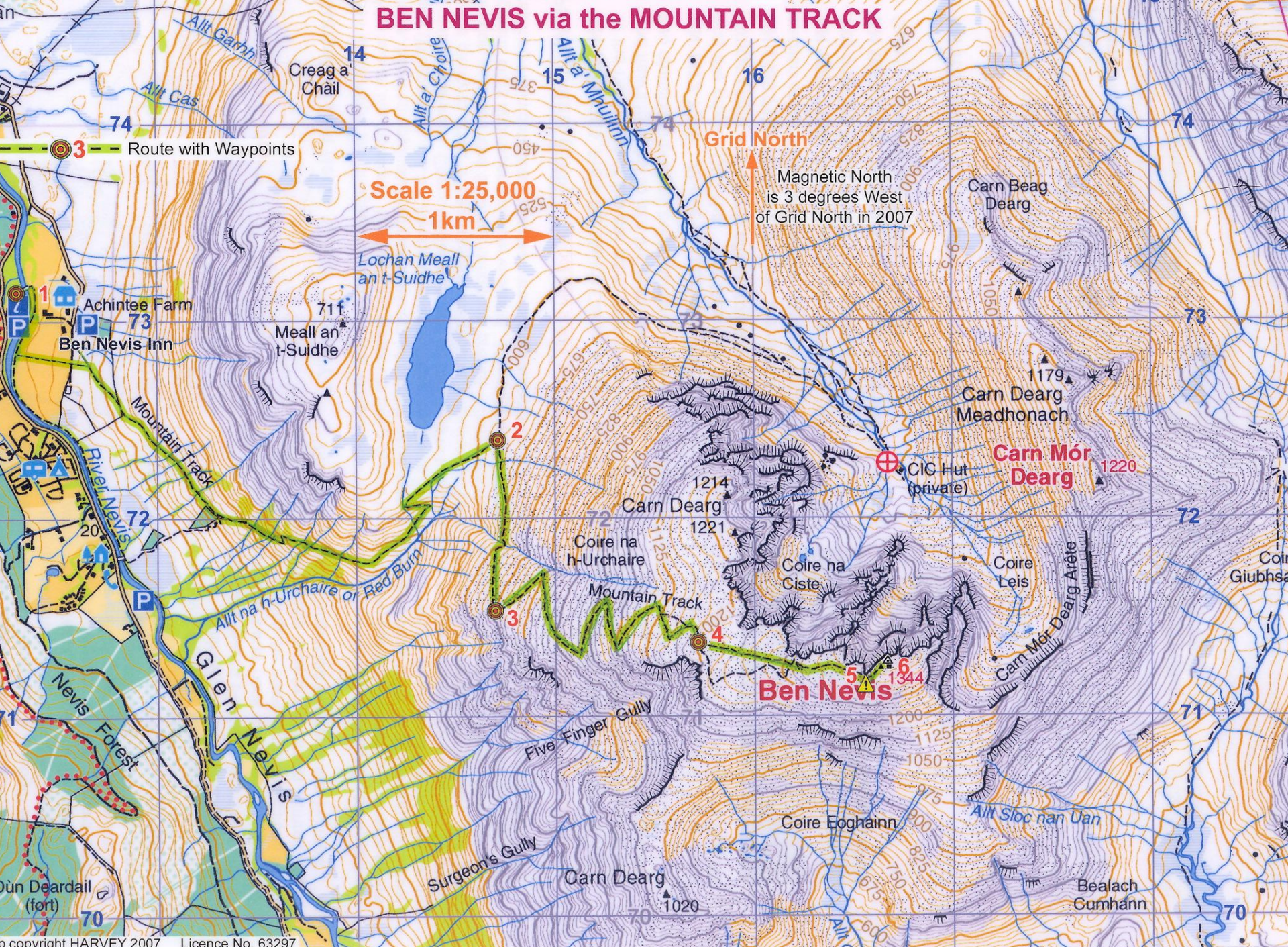


# Ben Nevis





# BEN NEVIS via the MOUNTAIN TRACK





# Ben Nevis

Ben Nevis looks different when seen or approached from different directions

“A partial knowledge can be supplemented by sharing with others in the descriptions which they give us.”

“It is only the man who cannot, or will not, look at it from more than one viewpoint who claims an exclusive authority for his own position”.

# Mary Midgley



Multiple maps of reality

None good enough on its own

Example: an aquarium

# Mary Midgley

Looking at a big aquarium:

“We cannot see it as a whole from above, so we peer in at it through a number of small windows ... We can eventually make quite a lot of sense of this habitat if we patiently put together the data from different angles. But if we insist that our own window is the only one worth looking through, we shall not get very far.”

# What does this say about Scientism?

Mary Midgley:

“Scientism’s mistake does not lie in over-praising one form of [knowledge], but in cutting that form off from the rest of thought, in treating it as a victor who has put all the rest out of business.”

Treats one perspective as the only valid perspective

# Francis Crick

“You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. . . . You’re nothing but a pack of neurons.”

A total account of human nature?

Or just a neurological perspective on human nature being presented as if it were the only valid perspective, or a total account of human nature?

# Multiple Perspectives

We could think of science and religion as representing different approaches to reality, offering different angles of view, each with a language appropriate to that angle.

Build up to give deeper picture.

Good – but not good enough.



Ian Barbour's seminal work *Issues in Science and Religion* (1966)

Develops a form of critical realism, similar to that later found in John Polkinghorne and others  
Science and Religion here essentially understood as physics and theology.

Very flat intellectual landscape!

# My concern

Science and religion designates:

- a) A multiplicity of scientific disciplines and methodologies. Methodologies designed for physics don't work well in social psychology or cultural anthropology
- b) Religion*, not just theology. Religion is a social reality, not a set of ideas.

We need a rich account of a complex, layered reality

In the early 1990s, I grasped the importance of recognizing multiple levels of a stratified reality

Yet many accounts of such an approach are unsatisfactory

# Multiple Levels

Scientists are used to speaking of “levels of explanation”

Think of the way an electron is depicted and used in physics, chemistry, and biology

Giving a framework which allows us to develop this idea further.

Roy Bhaskar’s “critical realism”

# Bad Example

Nicolai Hartmann, *Problem der Realitätsgegebenheit* (1931)

Four “layers” or “levels” (*Schichten*) of reality

Inorganic; organic; mental; spiritual.

Bit like Kant’s categories: *a priori*, not empirical

Sadly, Hartmann not very knowledgeable about science

# Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*

Ontology determines epistemology

“Naturalism holds that it is possible to give an account of science under which the proper and more or less specific methods of both the natural and social sciences can fall. But it does not deny that there are significant differences in these methods, grounded in real differences in their subject-matters. . . . It is the nature of the object that determines the form of its possible science.”

# Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*

While the observable facts of the natural sciences are “real,” they are nevertheless “historically specific social realities.”

We need “a conception of the world as stratified and differentiated”

Bhaskar insists that each stratum of reality – whether physical, biological or cultural – is to be seen as “real”, and capable of investigation using means appropriate to its distinctive identity.

# Thomas F. Torrance

Ontology determines epistemology

We know things *kata physin* – according to their distinct nature.

Karl Barth vs. Heinrich Scholz

Is there a universal methodology, which applies across disciplines? *Mathesis universalis*?

Or does the distinct subject matter of theology determine its specific approach to knowledge?



# Application to Science and Religion

Both science and religion are stratified

Physics – chemistry – biology – sociology

Religion: about much more than theology!

Symbols, rituals, practices, language, values, as well as beliefs

Unless you reduce “Science and Religion” to “physics and theology,” you need a richer and more complex way of engaging reality

# An Example of a Stratified Reality

What does it mean to speak of “illness”?

An example not used by Bhaskar, but which clearly illustrates his method

I'll use the ICDH-2 taxonomy (1999), developed by the World Health Organization

This recognizes four levels of illness, as follows:

## 1. Pathology

Abnormalities in the structure or function of an organ or organ system

## 2. Impairment

Abnormalities or changes in the structure or function of the whole body

### 3. Activity

Abnormalities, changes or restrictions in the interaction between a person and their environment or physical context

### 4. Participation

Changes, limitations or abnormalities in the position of the person in their social context

# Mode of Investigation

Bhaskar: “the nature of objects” determines  
“their cognitive possibilities for us”

Can't use the same research methods for each  
level

Ontology determines epistemology

In other words, the nature of a level of reality  
determines how we must investigate it

That's why we have multiple sciences

# Mode of Investigation

Suppose you have a brain tumour:

**Pathology:**

**Impairment:**

**Activity:**

**Participation:**

Can't use the same research methods for each level

Positron emission tomography

# What does this say about Scientism?

Bhaskar: Scientism denies “any significant differences in the methods appropriate to studying social and natural objects”.

A research tool determines what you discover

A tool that works well at one level may be blind at another

Scientism uses a single research method, and limits reality to what it can discover

Epistemology here determines ontology

# My own use of Bhaskar

A SCIENTIFIC  
THEOLOGY: NATU

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*volume one*

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ALISTER E. McG

A SCIENTIFIC  
THEOLOGY: THEORY

T&T CLARK THEOLOGY

*volume three*

ALISTER E. McGRATH





# Multiple Narratives

Perspectives and levels are useful tools

Allow us important insights

But not good enough

They don't really help us understand the cultural interaction of science and religion, or their interplay in questions of meaning and value

We need another tool . . .

# Multiple Narratives

“[We] are animals who must fundamentally understand what reality is, who we are, and how we ought to live by locating ourselves within the larger narratives and metanarratives that we hear and tell, and that constitute what is for us real and significant.”

Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps, “Narrating the Self.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 25 (1996): 19-43.

# Multiple Narratives

Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

We use multiple narratives to make sense of a complex reality, and our own place within it

Often we use different narratives for different aspects of reality, without worrying about their commensurability

# Multiple Narratives

Smith notes a number of such narratives encountered in the twenty-first century, which provide frameworks of meaning for those who hold them – such as the Christian narrative, the Militant Islamic Resurgence narrative, the Capitalist Prosperity narrative, the Progressive Socialism narrative, the Scientific Enlightenment narrative, the Liberal Progress narrative, and the Chance and Purposeless Narrative.

# Multiple Narratives

So which narrative do we use to locate science and religion within our culture, or our personal systems of meaning and value?

Warfare narrative as an aspect of the Scientific Enlightenment narrative?

Work in progress . . .

# Publication

Alister McGrath, *Inventing the Universe: Why we can't stop talking about science, faith, and God*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, October 2015

North American edition: *The Big Question: Why we can't stop talking about science, faith, and God*. New York: St Martin's Press, November 2015

Also being translated into Italian, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish