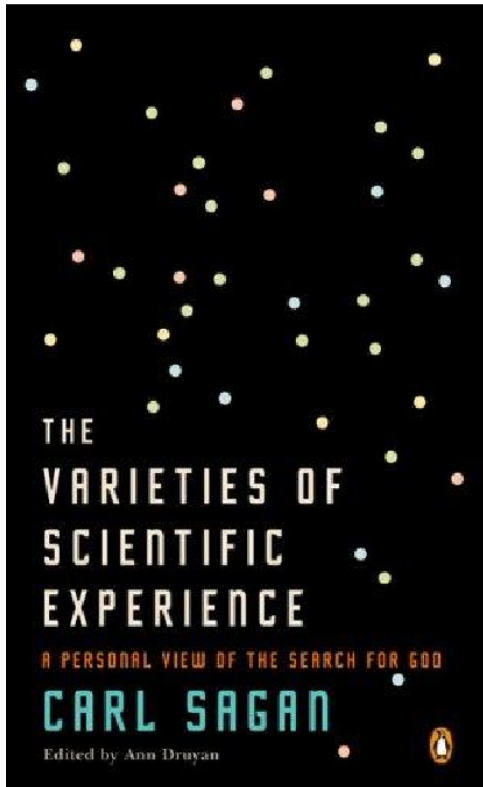


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Science & the God delusion (Fr. John Garvey)

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Books by people who see religion as a profound misunderstanding or dangerous delusion have proliferated recently.

The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins has been on the New York Times best-seller list for weeks. Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* sold well, prompting the author to write a sequel of sorts, *Letter to a Christian Nation*. Most of these attacks on religion have a common focus: religion is generally lumped with fundamentalism (nonfundamentalist believers are seen as timid, not really willing to go where their more benighted brethren do); and, like fundamentalists, the attackers seem to know exactly what they mean by God. An equally fundamentalist belief in scientism replaces religious belief, insisting that there is only one kind of knowledge that matters, only one way of knowing that can really be called knowing.

One of the more graceful entries in this genre is the late Carl Sagan's *The Varieties of Scientific Experience: A Personal View of the Search for God*, edited by his wife,

Ann Druyan, and published last year. It is a collection of Sagan's 1985 Gifford Lectures, only now released in book form, and the title is an obvious borrowing from William James's own Gifford Lectures, gathered as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The Gifford Lectures were established to promote "the study of natural theology in the widest sense of the term-in other words, the knowledge of God." The long list of past Gifford lecturers includes Paul Tillich, Jaroslav Pelikan, Stanley Hauerwas, and the atheist A. J. Ayer.

Sagan engages in genuine dialogue during the edited question-and-answer sessions at the end of the book. He makes his own disbelief in what he takes to be a creator God of the biblical sort very clear, but this is not done with the odd ferocity Dawkins brings to the subject. Sagan's love of science-even his joy-is apparent throughout the lectures and in many of the answers, and it is clear that he must have been a wonderful teacher.

There is nothing essentially new in the grounds Sagan offers for disbelief. He cites the great expanses of time necessary to bring the earth (and everything else) to its present, always changing state; the smallness of the earth and humanity as seen against the vastness of space and time; our relatively recent arrival as human beings; and the accidental nature of all of this (the evolution of the universe could have been otherwise, pace those who believe in the anthropic principle). All these points indicate the unlikeliness of God's existence, at least as monotheists (Sagan thinks) understand the word. He respects Einstein's use of the word "God" but shows-rightly, I think-that this is not the God that believers worship.

The anthropic principle is an attempt to show that the universe came to be in such a way that it seems to have been made for us. Although I share Sagan's reservations about the anthropic principle, understood as science rather than philosophy or theology, I am haunted by the beauty of one of Einstein's observations: that one of the greatest mysteries about the universe is that it is intelligible.

Sagan's objections are not new. In 1903, Mark Twain-as skeptical a writer as Sagan, but funnier-wrote "Was the World Made for Man?" The targets of that short essay were Alfred Russell Wallace's idea that the earth is the only habitable world, and the notion that humanity is "the chief love and delight of God." Quoting various estimates of the age of the earth and the length of time humans have been on it, Twain writes, "According to the figures it took 99,968,000 years to prepare the world for man, impatient as the Creator doubtless was to see him and admire him. But a large enterprise like this has to be conducted warily, painstakingly, logically. It was foreseen that man would have to have the oyster. Very well, you cannot

make an oyster out of whole cloth. You must make the oyster's ancestor first. This is not done in a day." And so on.

There are at least two problems with what should be, but is not yet, a genuine dialogue between science and religion. One is the inability of the nonbelieving side to look seriously at those deep traditions that might challenge their own set of certainties. There are essential differences between explanations and descriptions. Science is good at the business of description and leans, when it theorizes, toward explanation, but always tentatively. Wittgenstein got at something vital when he wrote, "It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists. "The Orthodox tradition of apophatic theology, which stresses God's unknowability – or what is called "negative theology" in the West-is essential here. Basil the Great said, "Anyone who says he knows God has a depraved spirit." Gregory of Nyssa said, "Concepts create idols. Only wonder comprehends anything." This could be a beginning.

On the religious side, there is a need for certainty that leads to fundamentalism and to such awkward "god of the gaps" lurches as intelligent design. It is only when we give up our need for certainty-a form of ego protection-that we can begin to find confidence, a trust that we are not wrong in our sense that love and compassion are built deeply into the center of reality, despite its obvious woundedness, and are not merely our tiny human contribution to a meaningless, if marvelous, universe.

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