

It Keeps Me Seeking: The Invitation from Science, Philosophy and Religion, by Andrew Briggs, Hans Halvorson and Andrew Steane

Book of the week: if the material world does not exhaust reality, what lies beyond? asks Simon Oliver

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By [Simon Oliver](/author/simon-oliver) (/author/simon-oliver)



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In 1874, John William Draper, an English scientist working in America, published *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*. This book articulated the “conflict thesis” – the idea that science and religion offer fundamentally different and competing accounts of the world. Draper argued that religion inhibits science and that every advance for science is necessarily a blow to the religious worldview.

The conflict thesis is alive and well among the more vociferous atheist scientists and commentators. It is also alive and well in the popular imagination; one sometimes hears the claim that “science has disproved God” as if it were self-evident. From a historical perspective, the conflict thesis is untenable. There are many examples, not least the founding of the Royal Society, where a religious sensibility provided the impetus to scientific enquiry. While many scientists, assessing the evidence supplied by their training and research, conclude that “God” or anything beyond material nature is at best unnecessary for a full and rational understanding of the cosmos, many others, subject to the same training and surveying the same evidence, reach the opposite conclusion. The relationship between the myriad traditions and practices that fall under the capacious terms “science” and “religion” is historically and philosophically very complex.



Why We Need Religion: An Agnostic Celebration of Spiritual Emotions, by Stephen T. Asma (</books/why-we-need-religion-agnostic-celebration-spiritual-emotions-stephen-t-asma-oxford-university-press>)

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Beyond the conflict thesis, one way of developing the engagement between religion and science is to listen to those who inhabit both worlds, to learn about how empirical and experimental attention to the natural world fits with a commitment to transcendence, meaning and purpose. Such is the invitation extended in *It Keeps Me Seeking*. This is a very unusual combination of transcribed conversations and jointly authored chapters by two eminent University of Oxford (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-oxford>) scientists, Andrew Briggs and Andrew Steane, and the Princeton University

(<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/princeton-university>) philosopher of science and logician Hans Halvorson. All three are committed to the scientific enterprise in one form or another. All three are unapologetic Christians. All three regard their scientific and religious commitments as mutually enhancing. In reading this book, one is listening in on a very honest, occasionally personal, but always rigorous conversation about what it is like to inhabit a world that is illuminated by both scientific and religious practices and commitments. The chapters cover a huge range of topics, from scientific method to the nature of the human person, quantum physics, evolution and biblical interpretation.

In listening to this conversation, what does one hear? Almost immediately, one hears the rejection of a common view that science provides cumulative evidence for or against the existence of God. This is what lies behind the New Atheism or the intelligent design hypothesis. Instead, the authors are committed to the view that “God” does not name some kind of thing that might or might not exist. In other words, the claim that science proves or disproves God is simply a misunderstanding of the nature and scope of science and the meaning of the word “God”. So, “God is a being to be known, not a hypothesis to be tested.” This does not mean that science has nothing to say about God or the religious life, for it has so much to say about the world that is God’s creation. Rather, the authors wish to point out that “God” does not name another item in the world, a cause among causes or even a thing alongside the world. God is the source of the universe’s existence and therefore the ground of there being anything like rational scientific enquiry in the first place. What one hears in this book is not a cumulative argument for God’s existence, but a narrative or way of perceiving the world that opens us to the claim that the world *as it appears to us* does not exhaust reality, but rather points us into a deeper mystery of meaning, purpose and value. In other words, it keeps us seeking.

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By inhabiting a religious approach to the world, the authors are committed to the view that nature exhibits meaning and purpose. This is where a tension arises, because one of the commitments sometimes associated with the natural sciences is that the world is composed only of the material order and that order is purposeless. Broadly speaking, this view is known as “naturalism”. One strategy discussed by the authors is to make a distinction between “methodological naturalism” and “ontological naturalism”. Methodological naturalism is the view that science has a method that attends only to the material order and (in the broadest sense) mechanical causes. Methodological naturalism makes no claims about whether material nature

is, or is not, all there is. For some scientists, this is a way of preserving science's proper autonomy from metaphysics and theology. God can be put to one side, the natural world can be investigated by science and God can be reintroduced at a later stage if one wishes. "Ontological naturalism", on the other hand, is a metaphysical claim about what there is. For the ontological naturalist, material nature exhausts reality. Ontological naturalists are perforce atheists.

One of the authors of the book comments, "I thus [as a scientist] methodologically reduce everything to naturalism. But then in my life as a whole, I realize that there are wider aspects of being alive...that cannot be reduced to naturalism alone." One senses that this distinction lies behind much of the book's approach to the relationship between science and religion.

Is this too easy a rapprochement? There are numerous challenges, not least the fact that scientists often breach the boundary of methodological naturalism to make the metaphysical (not scientific) claim that material nature is all there is. More important, however, it is not clear that something such as "material nature" can be methodologically isolated and explored in any straightforward sense, if only because science, particularly quantum theory, shows us that the nature of matter itself is so ambiguous and mysterious – see the fascinating account of "entanglement" in quantum physics in Chapter 7. An account of the material always seems to provoke a metaphysical account of what matter *is*. On one view, matter is brute sottish stuff subject only to mechanical causes. On another account, there is no such thing as "pure matter". Pure matter would be entirely potential, never anything actual; to be intelligible, matter must always be metaphysically qualified as this or that type of thing – a vase, a tree or a person – by receiving a certain "form". Strangely, this latter view may make more sense of what contemporary science understands of matter in its various complex guises. It also happens to be the view of Aristotle, who sees matter as purposeful and meaningful through the forms it receives. The metaphysical framework of science will make all the difference.

It Keeps Me Seeking captures extremely well the range of arguments, practices and commitments that make us human, whether they be scientific or religious. The discussions of modern science and Christian theology are rigorous, crisp and clear, although in a work of such huge range it is not surprising that a few accounts (notably of Aristotle's metaphysics and Trinitarian theology) will leave specialists puzzled. Nevertheless, the authors have invited us into a world that is both scientific and religious, where the human imagination is enriched by both.

Simon Oliver is Van Mildert professor of divinity at Durham University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/durham-university>). His next book is titled *Creation's Ends: Teleology, Ethics and the Natural*.

It Keeps Me Seeking: The Invitation from Science, Philosophy and Religion

By Andrew Briggs, Hans Halvorson and Andrew Steane

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The authors

Since 2002, **Andrew Briggs** has been the first professor of nanomaterials at the University of Oxford (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-oxford>), where he works on the practical implications of quantum technologies. He studied physics at Oxford; taught physics and religious studies in school; conducted research for a PhD at the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge; and then decided to study theology. He went on to a series of scientific posts at both the universities of Cambridge and Oxford. Deeply interested in questions of human purpose, he is also the co-author of *The Penultimate Curiosity: How Science Swims in the Slipstream of Ultimate Questions* (<http://andrewbriggs.org/book/>) (with Roger Wagner, 2016).

Hans Halvorson, Stuart professor of philosophy at Princeton University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/princeton-university>), studied philosophy at Calvin College (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/calvin-college>) in Michigan and went on to master's degrees in mathematics and in philosophy (and then a PhD in philosophy) at the Pittsburgh Center for the Philosophy of Science. Based at Princeton since 2001, he has also held visiting positions at Oxford, the Mathematical Institute in Utrecht and the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics in Ontario, Canada. He is currently exploring "the goal of science", trying to move beyond "intuitive answers" such as "to find the truth" and to come up with better ones, "drawing lessons from formal logic as well as from the particular sciences (especially physics)".

Andrew Steane, professor of physics (atomic and laser) at Oxford, studied physics there and went on to a PhD on "laser cooling of atoms". He has remained at Oxford for his subsequent career, apart from a short spell as a postdoctoral fellow at the École Normale Supérieure (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/ecole-normale-superieure>) in Paris and visiting positions at the University of California, Santa Barbara (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-california-santa-barbara>), the University of Innsbruck (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-innsbruck>) and the University of Ulm

(<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-ulm>). His research focuses on the manipulation of atoms and quantum information theory. He has also long taught Sunday school groups.

Matthew Reisz

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