

Science vs Scientism

My primary care physician is a sort of scientist in his own right. His skill and knowledge come from the scientific advancements spanning back to the beginning of the historical period referred to as “The Enlightenment,” (18th century) through the “Industrial Revolution,” right up to our day. His knowledge comes from many decades of experimentation and observation which are the characteristics of scientific method. I go to my doctor to monitor and observe my health and to treat any maladies which may arise in my physical body.

If I were to go to my doctor and he told me that he had measured dangerously high blood pressure in my body which would require medication and lifestyle changes and my response to him in this circumstance was “*Wrong answer. Give me a different diagnosis.*” That would be crazy! Would it not? Dangerously high blood pressure means, among other things, the danger of a life-altering stroke! It would be foolish, in the extreme, not to accept his diagnosis and treatment.

If, by contrast, my doctor prescribed me some pills which he had made in his kitchen which, he promised, would enable me to live forever and with no further concerns about sickness or disease, then I would surely be on alert that he had crossed over from science into quackery. No doctor, no chemist has that knowledge or power over life. The body is, by definition, a “mortal body:” Even if life could be extended by hundreds of years, the inherent futility of this life would make such existence unbearable.

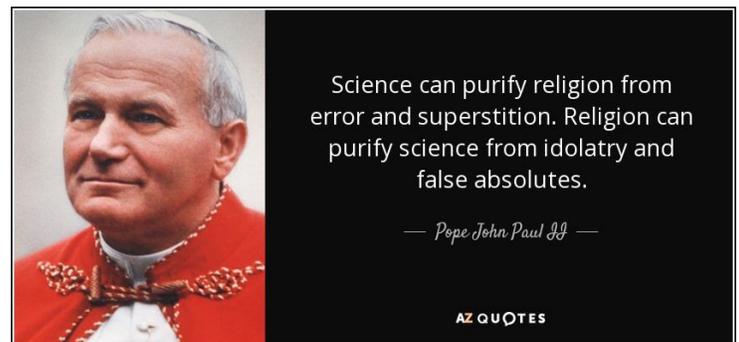
We live in a historical moment wherein science is being called into question and part of the blame is probably attributable to science itself. When science crosses over into “scientism” it tends to attack the aspects of the sacred and of mystery. “Scientism” is science pretending that, if given enough time in the laboratory, it can answer every question about existence. It tends to be ‘materialistic;’ that is, it reduces everything to matters of biological evolution and theories of particles in motion.

And so, “scientism” has no place for God or spirit or love or transcendence. And, for many or most human beings, this is an insult to our existence:

Scientists who espouse scientism consider us nothing more than collections of particles in motion or mere animals borne of natural selection.

The analogy I propose is one with news media: When they cross the line from reporting events into sensationalizing them they lose credibility. If everything is “Breaking News” then nothing is! So too, if scientists reduce all of reality to their own categories they begin to lose our trust. And, it is all the worse if, as in the case of pharmaceuticals, they offer false hopes or traffic in exaggerations as to what one pill can do for a suffering person, (though, the marketers are, likely, more to blame here).

I, for one, look forward to receiving the vaccine for COVID 19. By all accounts, it sounds like the scientific community has done an outstanding job for the human race in this time of unprecedented danger. I think we should be grateful to God for the men and women who, through their scientific methods, have, so quickly, given us remedies which may enable us to return to lives of relative freedom. I think it would be a shame for people to reject these remedies based on bad information or conspiracy theories.



And this, I think, is the important subtext which speaks to the broader problem of our times: Whether science or media or politics or, even, clergy, we need to respect the reality of our limitations. It is not helpful to make exaggerated claims or to peddle in spurious theories. The foundation of a civilized society must be based on some level of trust and trustworthiness. And, as we can see, on so many levels, there has been a massive erosion of these values. We all need to take responsibility for our roles in this erosion and in the work to rebuild.