

Disestablishing the Dichotomy: Fusing the Spheres of Religion and Science

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Applicable definitions for this essay:

Scientist: a science-minded person; a person who views the world in a scientific way; not necessarily someone who engages in scientific studies. The scientist can be religious, but must exhibit interest in science.

Religion: the organized, traditional faiths (Judaism, Christianity, etc.), as opposed to “personal religion” or “spirituality.” The religious person can be interested in science, but must identify as religious.

When faced with difficulties, an often natural response is to reaffirm one’s faith in the God and prayer of a traditional, organized religion. For example, when a family member falls ill, it is comforting to know that a force larger than you is watching over and protecting your family member. Because of this faith, people often avoid controversial issues, which could compromise the integrity of their religion. A particularly prominent controversy is the dichotomy between religion and science. While some religious officials recognize science, and many scientists often claim forms of religion, the dichotomy has strengthened over time. Science and religion appear to be at war with one another to understand the workings of the universe. People fall into a trap of thinking that the key to understanding the world rests exclusively in either religion or science. This dichotomy between religion and science is not inherent in the universe, but is rather societally enforced, creating an unnecessary controversy. We can only truly appreciate the vast beauty in the world by breaking away from the dichotomy and acknowledging the importance of both science and of personal, spiritual undertones around us.

Historically, religion likely emerged as a way of answering the “big questions” of the universe. Humans are conscious thinkers and instinctively inclined to wonder why we exist. Before a rational, logical scientific explanation of the evolution of the universe emerged, the most likely explanation was an anthropomorphized being in the under-explored skies above, creating the world. He began with light and darkness, and eventually, created man and woman to populate His creation (Genesis, 1:3-4; 2:7, 22, New Revised Standard Version).

With the emergence of science, tension arose from different religions. For example, the Catholic Church believed that the sun must revolve around the earth. The earth was the original birthplace of Jesus, thus giving it immense holiness. Galileo’s telescopic exploration of the universe revealed otherwise. The earth appeared to revolve around the sun, causing opposition and eventually violence between scientists and the Church. Later on, Darwin’s theory of evolution compromised the idea that God created humans from the earth. Furthermore, the idea of humanity’s descent from monkeys compromised the perception of God-given human value and importance. Over time, these conflicts between religion and science lead to rising tensions and eventually, the stark difference still seen today.

Following the emergence of science in society, religion began to uphold a new reputation. Although the religious continued to believe in different levels of literacy of their texts,

others began viewing religion as mystical, fantastical, and without the rational capacity that science presented. From similar views grew the stark dichotomy between science and religion, continuously harvested in society today (Collins, 2007, pp. 145-158, 197-211). In public schools, students are kept away from stories of creation and are only taught evolution. In parochial schools, students are often taught only stories of creation and may be uncomfortable learning evolution, as they fear it may negate what they have learned about creation. As adults, the dichotomy is further enforced. For example, filling out a survey that asks, “Do you believe in God? yes/no,” in which “yes” might imply the anthropomorphic God or “no” would imply atheism, as if the answer is a definitive “yes” or “no.” The societal enforcement of the science and religion dichotomy may lead to the struggles of limiting oneself to either science or religion.

The personal restriction to abide by only religion or only science leads to inevitable personal struggles. At the religious end, people may feel intellectually cheated or unsatisfied in our society. People are beginning to recognize the realistic scientific aspect to the universe, but often fear that this negates their religious beliefs in a larger power. This leads to difficulty in some of the main aspects of religion. Prayer and certain rituals may lose their intrinsic value when members of religions begin to question their validity or necessity.

At the opposite end of the religion and science spectrum, scientists may struggle to find comfort in difficult times without some perception of a higher being. Acknowledging the suffering of others without faith in a higher power protecting the inhabitants of His world, giving life a greater purpose, may feel lonely and uncomfortable. Although some scientists are deterred from belief in a higher power (of whom they have often limited to the anthropomorphic God of traditional religions), others are able to reconcile their scientific studies with some form of spirituality.

To overcome the struggles of the dichotomy, scientists and people of different religions often attempt to reconcile the two based on traditional religious beliefs. This can lead to either further contrast or to some form of personal satisfaction. For example, Gerald Schroeder, an orthodox Jewish physicist, wrote a book entitled *Genesis and the Big Bang* (1991) in which he explained the Judeo-Christian Creationism as a literal story, using science as evidence of his claims. In another instance, in the book and movie *Heaven is for Real*, a young boy wrote about his near death experience in which he “met” God (Burpo & Vincent, 2009). Some of these reconciliations seem to help the religious who are skeptical of science, fearing its negation of their religious beliefs.

Although scientists have argued Schroeder’s idea made little scientific sense, or that the little boy’s experience was merely a rush of neurotransmitters, the public became enthralled with these forms of “proof,” thereby strengthening their faith in their religions. The scientists, however, felt intellectually dissatisfied with these reconciliations, saying that science was over-compromised and “wrong”. As a result of reconciling traditional religious beliefs with science, the dichotomy strengthened. Scientists saw the increasing inability to give rationality to some form of a higher being. The reconciliation we are searching for does not lie in our attempts to create coexistence between science and traditional religions, but rather between science and personal religions: spirituality.

According to the Pew Forums (2007), more people identify as “spiritual” than “religious.” While one can argue about the difference between spirituality and religion, it would seem

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that the popular definition of religion refers to Clifford Geertz's definition :

"a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (1973, pp. 87-126).

These rituals and symbols may lose their original meaning over time, possibly as a result of increasing secularism. The lack of proof to substantiate claims of ancient religions leads to additional skepticism. Scientists are generally cautious of identifying as "religious" given its reputation as irrational or mystical. Richard Dawkins (2008) was "ecstatic" about nature and the universe, but does not identify as "religious," as this may be consistent with the traditional religious definition, yet he may identify as spiritual (pp. 32-50). For that reason, reconciling traditional religion with science (such as Schroeder's attempt in *Genesis and the Big Bang*) would seem arbitrary. Spirituality, on the other hand, refers to a more personal form of connection to some aspect of the world.

Rather than focusing on the societal definition of religion, we must look at the intrinsic value of the historical emergence of religion. The original purpose for which religion evolved was to answer the greater questions of life and its meaning before a rational scientific approach was possible. Over time, the answers different leaders provided lead to institutionalized, ritualistic worship: organized religions. Carl Sagan, a cosmologist, described his spiritual experience, which he entitled Naturalism, as an awe of the universe resulting from his intricate studies (2006, pp. 1-10). Albert Einstein similarly described nature as magnificent, and led him to a non-mystical religious feeling, which he described as, "a new kind of religion" (Dawkins, 2008, pp. 32-50) Alan Lightman, a physicist, wrote about the "Accidental Universe" and described the amazingness in the small likelihood of our evolutionary success. Human survival, according to most scientists, requires water, food, oxygen and more; the likelihood of the earth developing in a way to harbor human survival is incredibly slim (Lightman, 2011, pp. 34-40). Appreciation of the world can be enhanced by recognizing these intricate qualities of the universe.

"Religion" can be redefined using the original purpose of religion: to identify that which puts one in awe and gives a further understanding of the universe. As per Einstein's revelation of, "a new kind of religion," void of mysticism, we can find comfort in the idea of these more "personal" religions, void of institutionalized or impersonal rituals. One can find personal meaning and purpose in the evolutionary or molecular properties of the universe, as Sagan and Lightman did, in the beauty of music or art, or in certain traditional religious rituals (void of the institutionalized necessity to perform said rituals). We can take comfort in that this personal, intellectually satisfying form of spirituality, or personal religions, does not necessarily negate a higher being (as science is commonly perceived to do) while still contributing to our understanding and amazement of the universe.

This idea of personal religion is compatible with scientific explanations to understand the universe, as well as with the comfort of some sort of higher being in the universe. According to epistemic scientism, everything in the knowable universe is rooted in science. We can take intellectual satisfaction with the idea that we are a scientifically progressive world, constantly moving forward in our understanding. However, this approach acknowledges that if God were to exist, God exists

outside the realm of science. Science, therefore, cannot negate nor prove God. Instead, this form of God is seemingly non-active in our lives, but may have initiated the intricate processes of the big bang or the evolution of cells into organisms (Stenmark, 2001, pp. 3-17). In this sense, a person is able to find his or her own spiritual connection to the world, acknowledge the value of science (and its potential strengthening of his or her perception of the beauty of the world), and rest comfortably with the knowledge that God cannot be disproven by any scientific or religious principles.

By furthering our understanding of the world through science, we recognize its complexity and intricacy more deeply than organized religions allow us. We are able to recognize that the world is far too complex to suddenly appear in full organization, but is rather the product of billions of years of evolutionary success. This view of the universe can only enhance our appreciation of the world and our ability to find some objective meaning in the evolutionary success, and in the small likelihood of our successful existence. Because science allows us to perceive the world with utmost amazement, and because of our potential to identify personal religions and Gods (or lack thereof) for ourselves, we are able to focus on the spiritual undertones around us, in addition to the scientific aspect of the universe.

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