

SCIENCE AND RELIGION

GRADED PAPER 2

JONI HIRSCH

The thesis and arguments

You clearly state an interesting thesis—one for which I looked forward to your arguments. Unfortunately, you engage in a bit of hyperbole and extremism when trying to support your point. You dismiss religious scientists too easily as people who don't really know what they believe—an unfair criticism without substantial support. The lynch-pin of your argument is the consequences of science one day evaluating some central doctrines. Unfortunately, such evaluation is impossible. Worse, you consider the limits of science to be imposed by religion, but in fact it is self-imposed by scientific method itself. You apply the metaphor of blindness and sight too aggressively when it does not cleanly apply to this situation.

In all, you had a compelling topic, and along the way you made some interesting points. The structure of the paper lead from one argument to another reasonably well, and remained focused on supporting the thesis throughout. The great weakness of this paper is the content of the arguments themselves.

The writing

There are a few errors of diction, and some excess verbiage, but overall your writing was reasonably sound. I had no difficulty following your line of thinking, and you communicated your ideas clearly.

Items marked on the paper

- (1) Before any reader is compelled to read a story, he must know **why** he is reading it. Here, I have no idea what the purpose of this story is. Don't lead the reader through unnecessary steps—come straight to the point.
- (2) A sighted person cannot have blind faith? Your claim here doesn't make sense. Moreover, the population of religious scientists would argue that they **do** have faith and skepticism at the same time.
- (3) Isn't this choice loading the deck in favor of your argument? You must offer justification for selecting this constraint.
- (4) What? If we could disprove religious doctrines—and I'm not sure quite what concept **means**—then in what way is that not a victory (so to speak) for science? Wouldn't that approach to evaluating knowledge become the dominant one? Support your assertions!

(5) You seem to be misunderstanding, in a significant way, from whence the limitations of science are derived. It is **scientific method** that limits science to the natural world. The inability to apply science to supernatural phenomena is inherent in empiricism, which tautologically can be performed only on the natural world. Religion has no place in establishing those limitations—it is entirely external.

Nor do those limitations make science subordinate. Collins does claim that science is “forced to remain silent on the topic” of the supernatural, but that hardly implies that Collins view science as “a child of religion.” The latter is a claim that requires clarification and justification, and I have difficulty seeing how it would be supported.

(6) This entire line of argument seems to be much ado about nothing. **Who** has claimed that science will **ever** attempt to address these questions? What do we gain by considering this impossibility? The core of your argument rests on doing something that cannot be done, and so your argument is logical (from false premisses you can infer anything), but devoid of content, let alone reason or persuasion.

(7) You conclude more than your argument and support allows. One of Collins’ points, and one that is compelling, is that Christians who deny scientific conclusions do so to the detriment of their own faith, which loses credibility. Scientists gain little from antagonizing religions—sometimes even unintentionally. Moreover, many scientists **are** religious, and must find ways to harbor both systems of belief within themselves. In what way again would some kind of reconciliation, synthesis, or unification **not** be desirable? Your argument has only suggested that, for Christians, if something impossible happened, then it would be to their detriment. That seems a small risk.

Grade: B-

Joni Hirsch

October 16, 2008

Science and Religion

The Impossible Reconciliation of Observable Evidence and Blind Faith

Because science and religion have never gone hand in hand, one might expect a theory that logically combines the two to be widely appealing – especially to Christians who constantly defend their religion against the attack of scientists. Nevertheless, Philip Henry Gosse's *italics* Omphalos hypothesis, which did just what? Ambiguous just that, received only meager support from either side. He attempted to synthesize geological evidence suggesting Earth's old age (billions of years) with Biblical texts that depict a more youthful Earth (thousands of years) by suggesting that God created Earth to look as if it had been created billions of years ago. This reconciliation of religious and scientific beliefs, however, sacrifices integral aspects of both science and religion. On the one hand, those who believe that truth only derives from that which can be observed scientifically tend to believe all that the scientific method can observe. Christian faith, on the other hand, requires believing in that which cannot be observed. ~~Gosse attached thin threads of the two opposing belief systems and claimed they hang together, but~~ In abandoning core aspects of both science and Christianity, Gosse inevitably lost followers from both sides. Science and Christianity cannot be reconciled. There is little sense, therefore, in attempting to synthesize the belief in observable evidence with the belief in blind faith.

what does this phrase mean?

Consider ~~the situation of~~ two starving men, one of whom is blind, who have been stranded for many weeks in a desert. The blind man reassures his companion that they

1

will be rescued soon. "I have faith that salvation is near," he proclaims. The seeing man refuses to believe this claim without any hard evidence but then sees an automobile in the distance and finally believes his friend. Perhaps the blind man (representing blind faith) was better off, for he had hope all along, while the seeing man (representing science) waited for observable proof. What is the difference? Yet perhaps the blind man had no idea whether a car would

come and merely chose to believe it for his own comfort. Just as possibly, the vision of a

vehicle could have been a mirage, as human senses can be misleading (just as science

word choice

supports theories (not proofs). This WC metaphor merely suggests that a man cannot be both

blind and seeing, and therefore the same man could not have these two experiences. Both

men ascertained the arrival of help, but neither understood the other's means. In this

sense, science and religion cannot be combined. To reconcile them is to contradict their

definitions. ~~we can explain the world through observable science or blind faith.~~

awkward phrase.

②

Too metaphorical

In his book Religion and Science, Bertrand Russell mentions "three central doctrines—God, immortality, and freedom—which are felt to constitute what is of most importance to Christianity" (144). Russell states that his "own belief is that science cannot either prove or disprove them at present, and that no method outside science exists for proving or disproving anything" (145). For the purpose of this argument, we will assume the same point of view – that science is the only method with the potential to either prove or disprove Christian doctrines. Russell argues that science has not yet "proven" the matter one way or another, and therefore, the battle between science and religion is at a standstill. Gosse's hypothesis, even apart from its lack of support, was a futile attempt to settle the conflict because even in the case that scientists harness the

③

power to prove or disprove the religious doctrines, we arrive upon a lose-lose situation;
no circumstances allow either side to prevail.

④

⑤ One such doomed circumstance involves scientific evidence disproving the existence of any of the central Christian doctrines. While scientists may see this as victory in the battle between science and religion, believers will see this as a false proof. Many Christians, like vocal Evangelical Francis Collins, believe that God reigns over science. Science is “forced to remain silent on the topic” of God because God is outside nature (Collins interview). The same reasoning could be applied to immortality or free will. According to Collins, science is a child of religion and has no right or power to create rules or boundaries embodying these greater forces. Therefore, science cannot win this battle, for any proofs it could ever obtain are obsolete in the context of religion.

Informal

⑥

Let's presume that science proves the existence of God, immortality, or free will.

This proof, instead of validating religion, creates a paradox. Now, science has proven one of the pillars of religion while destroying another: blind faith. Such scientific proof would turn religion into a science, something that those who acknowledge only the observable would believe. If scientific evidence established God's existence, an ironic situation could arise where Christians stayed loyal to the belief that science has no power to comment on God and would deny the scientific proof that God exists in order to preserve their faith.

Only if
Christians
could not
adapt—but
they have
before!

⑦ Given these two situations (science either proving or disproving Christian doctrines), Christians should not want a reconciliation of science and religion; they cannot win. Similarly, scientists have no desire for a synthesis. They strictly believe in

What about religious scientists?

the natural, not the supernatural and have no drive to compromise their beliefs. The only circumstance is which scientists may need to reconcile their beliefs with religious ideas would be if they find proof of the supernatural. However, if scientific evidence arises that supports the existence of the supernatural, no reconciliation is necessary because the presence of scientific evidence would not conflict with the scientists' belief system.

Neither side can win. The only desired outcome is a draw in which they agree to disagree. Science has no power to convince Christians that it has exclusive power while abiding by religious definitions, and religion has no power to convince scientists that it has exclusive power while abiding by scientific definitions. The reconciliation of science and Christianity makes sense only to individuals who are unsure of what they believe.

By definition, blind faith and observable proof cannot coexist in reference to the same principles. Gosse's synthesis could convince only people who do not understand the redundant grammar principle concepts and purposes of science and religion that the two can work together

~~(which is perhaps why his support was limited)~~ Science, in a sense, is a religion, one that, like Christianity, explains the creation and framework of the Earth. To believe in them both is akin to believing in two conflicting religions. Gosse's claim that God made

Earth to look billions of years old understandably alarms both sides, deeming ~~the~~

~~almighty~~ God manipulative and Not correct here. science deceiving. The conflict between science and

religion will continue, but until someone discovers how to reconcile being blind and seeing simultaneously, the attempts are futile.

stretched metaphor.

Unconvincing

Works Cited

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=9207913>, Francis Collins
interview

Russel, Bertrand. Religion and Science. Oxford University Press, 1997.