

A United Search for Truth: Contrasting the Synthesis, Opposition, and Partnership of Science and Religion

Science and religion serve humanity by providing it with a better understanding of the world and improving its quality of life. Despite this common goal to seek truth and progress, the scientific-minded and the faithful continually come into conflict. Would humans be better served by a synthesis of theology and science, a combination of these separate entities into a unified whole? Can the battle between them be fruitful rather than destructive? Or can the compatibility between these fields be recognized without merging the pair? The synthesis, opposition, and partnership of science and religion present advantages and disadvantages to the pursuit of knowledge and increased quality of life. Yet based on the historical relationship of science and religion, each field could contribute most to this basic aim as distinct yet complementary partners.

Attempting to synthesize science and religion fails to increase human understanding of the world or improve quality of life— while initially appearing to produce less conflict, merging faith and science results in increased difficulties and can undermine both bodies of thought. For instance, naturalist Philip Henry Gosse endeavored to reconcile geologic discoveries of the approximate age of the earth with biblical interpretations asserting that the earth is 6,000 years old. He concluded that while the earth truly is as young as some theologians assert based on the genealogies of Genesis, God made it appear far older to human beings. This analysis confirms certain biblical explanations as well as geologists' theories. On the surface, Gosse's fusion of science and religion might seem to advance both faith and scientific discovery, allowing the seemingly conflicting ideas concerning the age of the earth to coexist. His synthesis, however, actually diminishes religion and science. Gosse found that "...nobody could believe his logically

admirable reconciliation of theology with the data of science” because it creates a distrust for observation through the senses, upon which science is based, and it insinuates that God planned, in effect, to deceive humanity, a notion in sharp contrast to most believers’ conception of Him (Russell 70). Even from a more modern perspective, the synthesis of science and religion would do little to improve quality of life or increase knowledge. If faith and science were merged, would public schools, for example, be required to teach the creation stories of each faith, from Adam and Eve to African tribal tales of a giant vomiting up humans and animals, alongside evolution? Would Newton’s *Principia* become the sixty-seventh book of the bible? While these questions hyperbolize, they demonstrate the difficulty in fusing the plethora of faiths in the world today with scientific thought and theories. Instead of furthering humanity, synthesizing science and religion results in the confusion or diminishment of both.

Allowing science and religion exist as opposing forces can at times increase knowledge and quality of life, yet at too many points in history this conflict has become at best unproductive and at worst violent. In a positive instance of science and religion coming into conflict, objections from certain religious groups about the destruction of embryos in the field of stem cell research resulted in delays in federal funding for such studies. This in turn played a part in challenging scientists to discover less ethically ambiguous methods of producing stem cells. Because patients’ skin cells can now be used instead of donated embryos, “...genetically matched cells from patients...enable [scientists] to study complex diseases...in the laboratory,” providing an advantage to science although such religiously-based ethical concerns were initially a hindrance (Kolata 1). Science, too, “...has gradually done much to evolve in the world...a religious spirit...more worthy of the goodness of God and the destiny of man” when it opposes some aspects of religious thought (White 451). Ideas like heliocentricity, evolution, and the

geologic age of earth defied various church teachings and generated intense debate between theologians and scientists. Yet in the end, science provided humanity with a more accurate conception of our planet and its creatures. These discoveries actually assisted religion by challenging the faithful to examine their beliefs and arrive at their own conclusions instead of blindly accepting a particular dogma, strengthening rather than weakening belief. Despite these benefits, the costs of such conflicts between theologians and scientists were high, dealt in human life and suffering. For example, because he promoted heliocentricity, Galileo was tortured, humiliated, and cut off from his family and friends. Other scientists who showed less cooperation with religious authorities were executed for their beliefs and work. This bloodshed stifles the pursuit of knowledge and diminishes quality of life rather than improving it, serving neither science nor religion. Such persecution is less common today, yet debates concerning issues related to faith and science still often become polarizing and unreasonable. Instead of appreciating the contributions of both fields, people often feel as though they must pick a side and confine themselves to that extreme. With misrepresentations or epithets such as “godless” or “bible-thumper” obscuring the central issues behind each initial disagreement, little truth is found or progress made. Although the conflict between science and religion can be productive, its tendency to become unreasonable and violent undermines each field by threatening truth and quality of life.

A partnership between faith and science could promote knowledge and increase quality of life far more than a synthesis of or the opposition of the pair. Attempts at synthesis such as Gosse’s theory have failed to become accepted or bring science and theology into harmony; the conflict between faith and science has cost many lives and often removes reason from debates. To improve humanity’s understanding of the world and quality of life, science and religion

should become allies. Francis Collins, head of the Human Genome Project and evangelical, articulates this potential relationship, asserting that the two fields are "...different ways of seeking answers to important questions" ("Francis Collins on 'The Language of God'"). While science is better able to describe natural phenomena, religion provides a basic moral code and a medium through which to contemplate what might lie beyond the natural world. And although faith and science will at times disagree, if discussions remain reasoned and respectful, truth and quality of life, the central aims of each, will continue to be served. Instead of trying to synthesize or polarize science and religion, the two fields should work as partners towards knowledge and progress.

In order to best serve humanity, science and religion seek a greater understanding of the world and man's place in it, and with that knowledge attempt to improve humans' quality of life. To pursue this common goal, instead of merging or coming into conflict, faith and science should form a respectful partnership, two separate fields devoted to illuminating the beauty of reality.

Works Cited

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