

Essay

Science & Faith: Preconditions for a Unifying View

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ABSTRACT

A fruitful dialogue between science and religion presupposes a frame of thought which is free from ideological prejudice and rigid beliefs. This implies an understanding of science and a religiosity which is developed and deepened to the level at which there is no longer a sharp boundary between scientific knowledge and religious truth. Religious faith can become as consistent with our experience as our scientific knowledge. The foundation of faith then is the very Truth which lies at the basis of our existence and of the whole of everything. The scientific and religious worldviews no longer are two separate views but a unified one. The whole of the universe - space, time, matter, energy, spirit, individual consciousness and the whole of consciousness - in truth is one undivided whole. To our mind it consists of individual objects. But any 'complete physical theory (of objective nature) would be a temporary product of philosophically completely self-satisfied physicists'. Within the undivided whole, Truth keeps re-emerging as original, dynamic and authentic experience. And Truth is personal: By identifying themselves with the deeper Truth that lies at the foundation of this wonderful universe, scientists would regain their dignity as human beings and as responsible participants in the ongoing process of creation. Preconditions for such a unified view are discussed here.

Key Words: science, religion, faith, precondition, unifying view, God.

Science and religion

Many lecturers and authors on science and religion emphasize the importance of developing a new frame of thought which would encompass and unify these two domains. Most of them suggest that an unified language does not yet exist, that its development appears to be most difficult, and that we all should put effort into the problem.

In contrast, I myself believe that the common language exists, that it is readily explained, and that all of us should put effort into its actual practice. So what is this common language?

Ian Barbour

In his book entitled 'Religion in an Age of Science'¹ Ian Barbour proposes that there are four relationships between science and religion: Conflict, Independence, Dialogue, and Integration. The following is cited from the review of Barbour's book by Eugene Selk in the American Journal of Physics²:

'Dialogue and Integration'

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"Barbour adopts a combination of the Dialogue and Integration positions. He holds that any theology today must begin with the position that nature is 'a dynamic evolutionary process with a long history of emergent novelty, characterized by chance and law' (p. 26). Barbour's own position is that science and religion can be integrated through process metaphysics. This metaphysics, with its historical roots in Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, emphasizes change, chance, emergence (versus reductionism), and conceives of God as acting in the world by creative participation and persuasion."

'Conflict'

The review of Barbour's book was subsequently criticized in a letter by physicist Jay Orear of Cornell University³:

"... According to the reviewer, Barbour's thesis is that present day followers of religion can 'live under a coherent worldview, one in which science and religion are consonant.' But it seems to me that the basic underpinning of most modern religions is unquestioning acceptance of life-after-death as an absolute truth. But this is in direct conflict with the scientific fact that there is no life after death. (One such proof: human memory is stored in the circuitry of the brain and after death this circuitry completely decomposes.) I fault the reviewer for not telling us how Barbour resolves this fundamental conflict between science and Religion. And if this question is not dealt with in Barbour's book, the reviewer has an obligation to criticize him for not facing up to it" (end of citation).

This obviously is a clear example of the 'Conflict' position.

Life-after-death

With respect to 'life-after-death' I mention only very briefly that today there is such a wealth of empirical material on the state of consciousness which apparently awaits us after death that it is simply unscientific to flatly deny any kind of life after death solely because of the fact that our nerve cells will decay. Some authors believe that among the central tenets of all religion is (a) some theory of creation and (b) some theory of life-after-death. But the central truth of religion has to do - neither with the distant past nor with the distant future - but with the present.

Depth of religiosity

Many scientists and theologians speak and write on science and religion, but some of them obviously haven't developed their own religiosity to the depth where they would discover the central truth of religion, or what has been called the religion inside the religions. They seem to lack the personal experience of having fallen onto the grid which halts the fall of those whose own schemes have ended in failure, i.e., the experience which makes religion necessary. At best they discuss faith as a reasonable option which at least is not ruled out by science⁴.

The dear solution

Although the language which unifies science and religion isn't too difficult to describe, it is not a trivial matter to speak it creditably. If we are not satisfied with cheap proposals but ask for a solution that stands up to tests under adverse conditions then we must not be surprised to hear

that the process of learning, like the performance of any art, demands much study, practice, patience, and discipline.

Erich Fromm

In his well known book 'The Art of Loving' Erich Fromm has discussed the preconditions for a genuine practice of loving, and these preconditions also apply to the art of expressing the common language of science and religion. Among these preconditions, as explained in great detail by Fromm, are discipline, concentration, absolute interest, attentiveness, patience, perseverance, reason, objectivity, faith, reliability, overcoming self-centeredness, learning from exemplary masters, humbleness, courage, being active.

James Fowler

Fromm emphasizes the importance of overcoming self-centeredness. Similarly James Fowler, in his book entitled 'Stages of Faith'⁵, describes the successive stages through which we develop and through which our consciousness grows and our horizon widens, until, in the very last stage which can be envisioned, the horizon of our consciousness encompasses all of heaven and earth (whatever that means). The transition, or crisis, through which this ultimate stage is reached, involves subduing our own self. I will return to this point below because it is of decisive importance.

Hans Primas

Another precondition for the integration of science and religion has been formulated by Hans Primas:⁶ In the present crisis of orientation, scientists must no longer be content with their search for correct scientific knowledge, but they must also search for a deeper truth. It is no longer sufficient for science to be correct: it must become true. And truth is not purely rational, objective and impersonal, but truth, in last analysis, is personal. By identifying themselves with the deeper truth that lies at the foundation of our existence, today's scientists would regain their dignity as human beings.

Three preconditions

I have so far mentioned the following preconditions for a creditable practice of the unified language of science and religion:

First, the horizon of our consciousness must widen, until it encompasses the scientific heaven and the religious heaven, and until we realize that what first appeared to be two heavens, in truth actually is one heaven.

Second, when our consciousness has become as wide as that, we will notice that we have let go of much of our own Ego, we have given up much of our self-centeredness, without experiencing this as an unbearable sacrifice.

Third, after we have gone through the necessary stages of widening our horizon, and after we have suitably transformed our own self-consciousness, we become aware of our responsibility to take a personal stand for truth: 'Truth is personal'.⁶

Objective science

In the academic world we have become accustomed to writing and speaking in an impersonal style. We treat scientific knowledge as if it consisted of objective facts independent of our world view. We see ourselves as subjects and see our facts as independent objects. The only language we practice in our profession is a language of strict subject-object separation.

Personal involvement

In contrast, when I want to write or speak about Truth I must use a language which is personal and which is intimately interwoven with my own way of thinking and feeling, and with my own conduct of life. In fact, **I myself am the common language of science and religion:** To the extent to which I am true scientist and truly religious, I express that common language. I do it with my entire way of living, thinking, feeling, and of conducting the daily affairs of my life. This is what I mean when I say this language, just like truth, is personal. No authority outside of myself can, in final analysis, relieve me of this responsibility as a scientist.

Inner growth

The language which unifies science and religion must be based on an understanding of science which is free from ideological prejudice, and on a faith which is free from parochial religious beliefs. This is easily said but attained only via a long series of inner crises. In each crisis I have to let go of some prejudice or of some particular belief. But in this process I find that my knowledge and my faith are strengthened, because no longer are they based solely on belief in teachings of scientific and religious authorities, but on my own experience. However, at that stage my personal experience agrees with the teachings of those who have gone through these transforming processes previously, anywhere, any time, in any culture.

Knowledge and faith

As our horizon widens, we begin to realize that the sharp boundary between scientific knowledge and religious truth existed but in our minds. Our religious faith becomes as consistent with our experience as does our scientific knowledge. No longer do we depend mostly on established scientific and religious authority. The foundation of our faith is now the very Truth which lies at the basis of our existence and of this whole wonderful universe.

Becoming one with Truth

The ultimate goal of religion is to become one with Truth: 'I am the Truth'. This is not a target that can be reached today or tomorrow. But goals which fill life with meaning don't need to be within immediate reach. Truth is something we will never be able to rationalize completely, nor to grasp it, nor to bring it under our control. It resists all attempts at complete understanding and description. It keeps re-emerging as original, dynamic and authentic experience.

Humanistic ideals

Why is it so difficult to understand and manifest religious truth in practice? One of the reasons is that as we grow up we learn to master our own lives by standing on our own feet and by following our own designs. We don't want to put our faith into a spiritual power that would

govern us. First we try to master life with courage and based on our own strength, on reason, humanism, and other such valuable principles.

Death of the Ego

But life eventually proves to be more powerful than our own resources. We experience that we are doomed to failure as long as we remain rooted in ourselves. After admitting our failure, we turn around to reconnect ourselves to our original roots. Our Ego must die to make room for our true Self, which is rooted in a Truth that transcends our own resources. The one who I appear to be must shrink to make room for the unfolding of the one who actually in truth I am. This is the so-called experience of death and rebirth. There is no cheap bypass past the death of my Ego. No saviour will substitute himself or herself for me in this decisively important crisis. In order to make progress I must go through this myself. The saviour may set an example by demonstrating the process, such that I may follow. I may then discover the meaning of the word: 'First you die, then you live'. Because those who say: 'First you live, then you die', are in error, for first you die and arise, then you live.⁷ Many who believe they are living are actually dead: They are not yet awakened to the kind of life deserving of that name.

Truths based on experience

Does this have anything to do with the common language of science and religion? Indeed it does: Both science and religion are based on the search for those truths which stand the test of experience. The central teachings of Moses, of Jesus, and others, when tested against life, reveal themselves as very deep truths. Nobody can ignore them and live successfully, whether he or she be religious or not. (Just like the laws of science: they apply to those who believe in them as well as to those who don't.)

Unified worldview and wholeness

The scientific world view and the religious world view are not two separate views but they are one unified view. This unified view holds that the whole of the universe - space, time, matter, energy, soul, spirit, my individual consciousness as well as the whole of all consciousness - is one undivided whole. To my mind it appears to consist of individual objects. But 'scientifically complete physical theories (of objects) are the temporary product of philosophically completely self-satisfied physicists'.⁸

And what about God?

You may have wondered why so far I have avoided to use the word God. The reason is that people have very different images of 'God'. Any image tends to limit God to something less than the whole. On the other hand, we should not be so purist with respect to avoiding the word that it becomes difficult to communicate. The best image of God is the one with which it is easiest to communicate. The important thing is to be in on-going conscious connection, or dialogue, or prayer, with whatever It is that people call God.

Communicating with 'God'

Theoretically it may not be necessary to believe in a personal God. But in actual practice it is much easier to communicate with 'God' than with same more abstract idea of a spiritual source of

strength, love, and knowledge which supports us all. It is also easier to communicate among ourselves if we allow ourselves to use the word 'God'. We all understand immediately what is meant by the following verses of a poem:

Von guten Mächten wunderbar geborgen
Erwarten wir getrost was kommen mag.
Gott ist mit uns am Abend und am Morgen
Und ganz gewiss an jedem neuen Tag.

The poem 'Von guten Mächten' has been written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the Gestapo prison 1944/45, a few months prior to his execution. As pointed out by Jürgen Audretsch⁴ the poem expresses the knowledge of one for whom the words 'God loves me' have had deep meaning. And it may be significant that religious truth can more effectively be expressed through poetry and through words which speak to the heart than through intellectually highly demanding language. That may be another reason why scientists and theologians don't succeed with their complicated search for a unified language of science and religion which would satisfy their self-imposed sophisticated academic standards.

Kahlil Gibran: The Prophet

And if you would know God, be not therefore a solver of riddles. Rather look about you and you shall see Him playing with your children.⁹

In your own search for the language which unites your activity, whatever it may be, with religion, I wish you much fun and satisfaction. 'God' bless you.

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