Science and Religion – Sibling Rivalry
By Matthew Carneal

Throughout the history of human society, people have sought to make sense of their experiences as living beings in order to escape the misery and uncertainty of existing contingent to an effectively infinite number of factors beyond our control. Indeed, in the model proposed by the philosopher GWF Hegel, the foremost desire of all human beings is to live in a world that makes sense to them, in which their experience of the outside world reflects the constructs that exist internally. According to Hegel (1821) we wish for nothing so much as freedom from the bafflement and frustration of having our lives and happiness subject to forces that we neither understand nor feel connected to. In order to attain the sense of understanding necessary for Hegel’s ideal of experiential symmetry, many modern people turn to the teachings of science and religion; two distinct methodologies of thought that, despite their ongoing history of conflict, have the potential to be used together to acquire this understanding to a degree that neither paradigm, used exclusively, could facilitate.

Science, at its core, is the practice of organizing the endless individual sense perceptions that we experience every day in to more complex concepts about the form and behavior of the physical world, then determining the validity of these concepts by investigating their ability to effectively predict the experience of observing future events to which they are relevant (Tavormina, n.d.). The goal of science is to establish a cognitive framework that allows human beings to slowly and methodically grow closer the elusive knowledge of (and therefore at least some measure of control over) the world that surrounds us. In so doing, science brings us ever nearer to satisfying our basic human hunger to operate within an external sphere that never contradicts the concept of it that we have cultivated internally.

Religion is another means by which people seek to attain knowledge of and insight in to their experience as human beings, and in that sense it is similar to science, but the differences between the two are vast. For one thing, “religion” refers to a spectrum of institutions, traditions and notions so diverse that it is extremely difficult to make precise statements that can reasonably be said to apply to its entirety. This is largely due to the fact that, unlike science with its relatively standardized procedures and requirements of objectivity, religion has throughout the development of its various forms centered its focus on the subjective, personal experiences that arguably constitute a much greater part of the actuality of what it is to live as a human being than do those sensory phenomena that can be expressed empirically. Additionally, religion attempts to answer the questions of cosmic purpose, whereas science is limited to the study of natural order (Ayala, n.d.). It would seem that no matter how extensively scientists come to understand the matter that makes up the universe and the laws that govern its interplay, they will never be able to give a compelling reason why anything should be at all, rather than nothing. Science’s inability to answer
the questions that religion does is a product of the same cognitive difference that renders religion unable to prove by scientific standards its many views; such answers are not arrived at by reproducible observation of the natural world, but by the extremely powerful yet subjective and individual experience of faith.

I conclude that, though the accounts of natural and human history related by many religious texts are at face value contradictory with the conclusions that science has drawn, there is on a larger scale no reason that the two cannot coexist and even be mutually adhered to by a single individual. The applied reasoning of science may seem to be incompatible with certain statements in a given religious text, but one must bear in mind that these texts were recorded, gathered and preserved with the intent of passing on the accumulated lessons and wisdom of a culture with regard to the divine. The truth contained in such texts is not negated by the fact that outdated understandings of the natural world were used to illustrate these lessons any more than a scientific understanding of physical phenomena is negated by the use of an incompatible physical model to elucidate a philosophical or spiritual point. While the short-sighted members of both communities who perpetuate the concept of an adversarial relationship between science and religion are legion, there is no reason we need or ought to follow their example and become similarly mired in baseless conflict.

Works Cited
