

Are Science and Religion Compatible?

By Julie Jackson

Our modern society is a mixture of many cultures and beliefs, so it is not surprising that opinions will sometimes conflict, and one prime example of this is the controversy over science and religion. Scientists maintain a philosophy that everything in the natural world can be explained and understood; while proponents of religious beliefs deeply feel that supernatural forces exist that affect our lives. These two views may seem to be in conflict, but I feel that science and religion are, in fact, compatible.

The basic goal of science is to explain natural phenomena, explore their causes, predict their future behavior, and control the outcomes (Tavormina n.d.). Through this process, mankind gains a greater understanding of his past and gains knowledge that can be used to change the future. Studies in physics, chemistry, and biology, for example, have led to discoveries that make our lives easier, safer, and longer. Science achieves these goals by using human intellect combined with scientific instruments to understand the patterns of nature (Rutherford & Alghren 1989). The scientific method of understanding the physical universe uses reason and sense perception to systematically test hypotheses, yielding conclusive, reproducible results.

Religion's goal is to propagate certain beliefs about how people should live. Followers of religion usually believe in a supernatural creator who determines whether certain actions are desirable or undesirable. Some religions even promise a life after the one we experience in this realm. 86% of the world's population claims to believe in a higher being even though religion is achieved through faith, something which cannot be measured or observed, but only experienced subjectively. (Omsakthi 2004) Given this information, it would seem that these two views are at odds, but certain similarities do exist.

Both science and religion have evolved and changed over time. Many years ago science involved a great deal of guesswork, supposition, and superstition. Religion has also changed its tactics: In the past religion was forced violently upon people, often in conflict with the philosophies of the original founders. Secondly, both science and religion disagree within themselves: Scientists argue interpretation of data much as religious people argue interpretations of ancient texts. Finally, both fields have fringe proponents that damage their credibility. Certain vocal individuals misinterpret and misrepresent science, presenting "pseudoscience" as fact when it is mostly conjecture and opinion (Lipps 1996). Likewise, tenets of faith can be distorted, as did the terrorists who used the peaceful religion of Islam to justify attacking our country on 9/11. Significant differences also arise when comparing science and religion.

Science explores the natural world and believes only what can be seen, tested, and repeated using evidence and logic. Religion acknowledges the existence of supernatural forces as a matter of course. These are accepted on the basis of personal feeling or intuition with no empirical evidence, and, therefore, cannot be scientifically proved or disproved. The greatest difference between science and religion, however, and the one that I feel causes the perceived conflict, is a difference of scope. Science is not intended to explain and direct every aspect of life: It is meant to present certain realities about the world we live in. Religion, on the other hand addresses moral issues, values, rights, and relationships. Francisco Ayala, a professor at the University of California, made the distinction with these words, "Science seeks material explanations for material processes, but it has nothing definitive to say about realities beyond its scope. Once science has had its say, there remain questions of value, purpose, and meaning that are forever beyond science's domain, but belong in the realm of philosophical reflection and religious experience." (Ayala 2001) Some people overlap these two very separate issues and therein lay the confusion.

Some religious groups view science as a threat to their beliefs. They fear that science is attempting to disprove the existence of the supernatural, thus destroying the basis of their morality. Some scientists treat religious followers with disdain and view religion as nonsense because it cannot be discreetly measured or understood, thus the societal constraints imposed by religion are foolish and should be eliminated. Even worse, some individuals deliberately muddle the two in an attempt to further some personal agenda, for example, politicians who campaign against stem-cell research because it is "immoral." By clearly defining the role of science and the role of religion, and by removing personal bias, I feel that most individuals would see that science and religion are compatible, and that, in fact, embracing both ideologies allows a full understanding and appreciation of the world we live in and the quality of life we experience.

Thus the conflict between science and religion is only in the minds of those who do not understand the aims of these venerable establishments. Commonalities exist between the two, but, in essence, they are separate. Each represents a way to look at the world, but choosing one exclusively will not give a holistic view. Science and religion are compatible because they address different aspects of our lives, and, therefore, cannot be in conflict with one another.

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