

# Chapter 18

## Science and Religion

### 18.1 Homework

Readings – van Fraassen, Lipton (Bb)

Study Questions :

1. Before you read: Write a paragraph about how you think science and religion relate to each other: do they conflict with one another? are they complementary? are they compatible?
2. After you have read: Write a paragraph on the same topic. Make sure to explain whether or not the readings have helped you clarify your own view, whether or not you changed your mind, and how.

### 18.2 Basic models for the relationships between science and religion

The classical work on this in from Ian Barbour<sup>1</sup>.

1. **Conflict** – There is full blown conflict if and only if we have the following attitudes toward science and religion:
  1. Attitude towards science: scientific realism, scientific exclusivism, metaphysical naturalism
    - scientific realism: scientific theories tells us the (at least approximate) truth about the world
    - scientific exclusivism: the scientific method, committed to empirical evidence, is the best (if not the only) way to get truth about the world.

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<sup>1</sup>I am using here the chapter on science and religion in Peterson, Hasker, Reichenbach and Basinger, *Reason and Religious Belief, An introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford University Press, 2009

- metaphysical naturalism: nothing else exists than natural stuff – that is, matter-energy
- 2. Attitude towards religion: religious realism, scriptural literalism, and religious exclusivism
  - religious realism: religious texts tells us the truth about the world
  - scriptural literalism: scriptures have to be understood literally
  - religious exclusivism: scriptures are the best (if not the only) way to get truth about the world

→ *To get a full blown war between science and religion, one must be radical on both sides. There are many other attitudes one can take over science and religion, such that they do not stand in direct conflict with one another.*

**2. Independence** – Science and religion can be conceived as independent:

	Science	Religion
Object	Nature	Supernature
Method	Logic and Experiment Objective Technical language	Revelation Subjective Suggestive or metaphorical language
Aim	Impersonal objects Objectification of the world Explanation, Prediction, Manipulation	Personal life Communion with the world Moral life, Values

→ *Here the idea is that science and religion are separate. They do not have the same object, the same method nor the same aim. Because of this, they peacefully coexist. They do not conflict because they play different games, on different playgrounds, so that they never meet.*

→ *The problem with this view is that it restricts drastically the domain and significance of the religious scriptures in confining them to metaphorical language and value talk. Some are quite happy with it, some are not.*

**3. Dialogue** – Some attempt to go beyond the independence thesis, and try to find room for a dialogue between science and religion. Barbour distinguishes two main places in which dialogue could occur:

**Religion at the boundaries of science** – Science does not have answers to everything. Religion can be seen as answering the questions that science either does not, or maybe cannot, in principle, answer:

1. Religion as filling the gaps: religion gives answer to the questions that science has not answered yet.

→ *The problem with that view is that, while science extends its domain, theology sees its own shrink (Note that the same problem arises for philosophy)*

2. Religion as an independent foundation of the possibility of science: Why is the world understandable? Why is it understandable in mathematical terms? If we believe that they are laws of nature, where do they come from?

Note that, on this view, religious doctrines do not compete with the sciences on the origin and history of the universe. Instead, it provides a foundation for the very possibility of science. Theology complement science at the foundational level.

Note that a great deal of modern science has followed exactly this pattern: Descartes, Leibniz, Newton, Darwin, Einstein etc. all consider (more or less systematically) religion as a foundation of science. In Descartes' system for example, God is nothing less than the sole condition for the possibility of knowledge, beyond the knowledge of our own self.

→ *The idea of a rational creation gives an answer to these questions: the world is in a rational order, and we humans have been provided the tools (reason and empirical methods) to find out about this order.*

→ *The problem is here (at least for some) that it favors a deistic view of God, that is, as a watch maker instead of the personal God of the Christian faith.*

Some find it unsatisfactory:

**Pascal, *Memorial* :**

Fire.

“GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob”

not of philosophers and of scholars.

Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.

**van Fraassen (p.193) :**

There is one special case of personhood: God. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a person. (...) I shall not even mention in the same breath naive simulacra as Descartes' God, let alone a ruler of the universe located somewhere in space or space outside of space, or some other pseudo-scientific miscreant. Encounter with the divine does not mean seeing the ghost in the world machine, nor contemplation of a theoretically postulated hypothesis of which neither science nor we ourselves have any need. ...

An encounter with God does not involve solving a theoretical equation or answering a factual query; its searing question is an existential demand we face in fear and trembling. As with a human person the encounter coincides with a call to decision: possible stances toward ourselves and to our world come to the fore and ask

for choice. The choice is momentous and sometimes, inescapable, for it pertains to our ultimate concerns.

**Science, Religion, Parallel Paths** – The description made of science and religion in the independence thesis is somewhat outdated. The methods of science and religion may be closer than we thought.

- Since the 60's: recognition of the role of subjectivity in the development of science – based on the study of the history of science

Kuhn: paradigms and revolutions

Lakatos: research programs

- There is a history of religion too! There might be more objectivity in religion than is usually thought. The religious doctrines are chosen and designed by scholars, who use reason, logic, and presumably some empirical data.

At the end of the day: Theologians face the same kind of choices as scientists do: theory choice!

- One can read this history as following a similar pattern of normal religion, anomalies, and religious revolution as paradigm shifts.

Religious communities share a common paradigm or research program, just as scientific community do. Same resistance to change, for the same reason that paradigms and research programs contain normative claims about which types of questions, and which types of answers are acceptable. The core theory is always the hardest to give up. That said, religious revolution are still possible.

→ *The idea is then that religious beliefs, just as scientific claims, are the product of human history, logical reasoning and pragmatic choices. However interesting this view may be, from the point of view of the method of theology, it does not give us a solution for the conflict between science and religion, unless it is completed with a way in which the two disciplines, the two research programs, can relate to each other.*

**4. Integration** – Some hope for a full integration of the two:

**Science as informing Religion, and vice versa** – try to combine the two in order to form a complete and coherent worldview.

1. Natural Religion and the teleological argument
2. If one takes religion as a guide for morality, then it can become a guide for the ethics of science
3. Science provides us with knowledge about the world. Many think that religious beliefs and values should be informed by our best science.
  - On what the world is like: heliocentrism, history of the earth, evolution etc.
  - On our values: example of abortion

**Whitehead's systematic synthesis** – Whitehead, important 20th century philosophers

- rejects both the medieval (kingdom) and the Newtonian (atomistic) worldviews
- endorses the view which is supported by the new sciences (evolution, ecology, relativity and quantum theory) : interdependence, community.
- constructs a full system of philosophy, including theology and philosophy of science.

**Conclusion** – At the end of the day, it seems that, if we put aside the option of the full blown conflict, we have the following options:

1. Independence – Science and Religion do not deal with the same stuff. Unlike science, religion would be confined to:
  - Suggestive or metaphorical language
  - Talks about values and personal life
  - Foundations of the possibility of science
2. Integration by selection – Try to select claims from both sides so that we end up with a consistent set of beliefs.

### 18.3 Lipton's immersion solution

**Lipton rejects both the independence and the integration views :**

- The independence view diminishes the value of the scriptures – Lipton notes that it is false to say that all scriptures are to be read in a metaphorical way, or that they only talk about values.
- The integration view leads to “two many holes in the religious text” – Lipton does not feel like we should cut the scriptures wherever science tells us to do so.

**A distinction: content vs attitude** – Lipton makes a distinction between ways in which one can solve a contradiction:

1. changing the content of the claims
2. changing our attitude towards the claims

The main way in which we can change our attitude toward given claims: *acceptance and use without belief*.

**Changing attitudes 1** – example of Descartes:

- Realist towards religion
- Anti-realist (or instrumentalist) toward science

**Changing attitudes 2** – on the basis of Kuhn’s view on science (extended)

- Kantianism towards science

- Kantianism towards religion

→ No conflict left because two different phenomenal worlds. Both of them rooted in the noumenal world. Possibility of maintaining two inconsistent view together (even if we use them in different context and at different times)

Parallel with the ordinary table vs the scientific table (Arthur Eddington)

**Changing attitudes 3** – Lipton uses van Fraassen constructive empiricism, but applies it to religion and not to science

- Realism towards science

- “ Modified Constructive Empiricism” toward religion

The “ Modified Constructive Empiricism” toward religion has three components:

1. Literal interpretation of the scriptures

2. Methodological immersion

3. acceptance, or partial belief

The last one is the hardest one: “Accepting a religious text thus means believing some but not all of its claims, but which claims we believe is largely externally determined, by moral reflection, and in some cases by science”

That said, because of immersion, this does not reduce to the integration-selection view:

“Acceptance is not just partial belief; it is also a kind of commitment to use the resources of the theory. ... In the religious case, ... we also commit ourselves to using the text as a tool for thought, as a way of thinking about our world.”

**Conclusion** – Lipton proposes to take religious scriptures as a tool to lead a religious life. This involves reflection and struggle, but according to Lipton, it has the advantage of preserving “the integrity and hence the useful power of the religious text”.

Something that not everybody will appreciate: the view does not necessarily include belief in a supernatural entity.

That said, you can adopt Lipton’s strategy, without choosing to believe the same set of beliefs as he does. You may put the existence of a supernatural entity in your set of beliefs.

→ *We don’t have to accept Lipton’s solution in its entirety, but at least it gives us an alternative and interesting way to think about the conflict between the claims of science and religion. One might want to work at the level of his or her attitude towards the claims instead of at the level of the content of these claims.*

## 18.4 Conclusion

At the end of the chapter, it seems that there are many options to avoid a full blown conflict between the claims of science and religion. There is a full blown war only if we are radical realists for both disciplines. The other, more peaceful, options include:

**Independence** – The object, aims and methods of science and religion differ. They simply are not concerned with the same stuff. While science is an attempt at understanding the world as an object and through empirical observation and rational inferences, religion is an attempt at providing a guide for our personal moral life as integrated in the whole of the universe through metaphorical and suggestive language.

Example: the structure of the universe: Bultmann, , quoted by van Fraassen p.186

The world picture of the New Testament is a mythical world picture. The world is three-story structure, with earth in the middle, heaven above, and hell below. Heaven is the dwelling place of God and heavenly figures, the angels; the world below is hell, the place of torment. But even the earth is not simply the scene of natural day-to-day occurrences, of foresight and work that reckon with order and regularity; rather, it, too, is a theater for the working of supernatural powers, God and his angels, Satan and his demons. These supernatural powers intervene in natural occurrences and in the thinking, willing, and acting of human being; wonders are nothing unusual.

We can take the above description of the world either as a factual description, or as a metaphorical picture of the situation of humans in the universe.

**Integration** – These two worldviews (scientific and religious) are not independent but complementary instead. Both science and religion are born from a sense of wonder about the world. If someone's sense of wonder is still not satisfied when given the scientific account of the world and of how we humans relate to it, then religion can find its place:

- as giving an understanding of the very possibility of the scientific inquiry and its success
- as giving an understanding of all these mysteries as consciousness, personhood, morality etc.
- when religion seems to talk about anything else, in particular when religious scriptures make it has to be discarded

In this case, the believer can hope to develop a full and coherent understanding of the universe and of our relation to it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Here, the non-believer has two options: either deny the need to answer these questions, or deny that religion provides a satisfactory answer.

**Differential attitudes** – The idea here is that we do not have to change the content of the claims of either science or religion, but our attitude towards them instead.

- Two attitudes towards claims: belief vs acceptance, i.e. realism vs instrumentalism
- First option: Religious realism and scientific instrumentalism
- Second option: Religious instrumentalism and scientific realism.

In this case, while the *content* of the claims that you use in your life may conflict, your *beliefs* remain consistent.