

Science and Religion: The Ongoing Conflict?

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On the 2nd September 2010 the headline on the front page of *The Times* read: “Stephen Hawking: God did not create Universe” [1]. It was certainly attention-grabbing, but is the national press providing an accurate coverage of the relationship between science and religion?

Dr Fraser Watts, Reader in Theology and Science at Cambridge University, says that the debate is portrayed in a “biased way”. He thinks the media make a tacit assumption that science and religion are necessarily incompatible. Consequently, devout religious believers are made to think that they must reject good science, whilst those who value the natural sciences are forced into an atheist worldview. But this needn’t be the case.

The notion of incompatibility stems partly from the assumption that there is a link between science and atheism, as championed by Richard Dawkins. Alister McGrath, Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford University, says that Dawkins’ jump from science to atheism “lacks the rigorous evidential basis that one might expect from an advocate of the scientific method”. Rather, Professor McGrath argues that the scientific method “is incapable of adjudicating the God-hypothesis, either positively or negatively” [2]. Indeed, the fact that many professional scientists are religious believers would suggest that there isn’t a conflict at all. For example, the national group “Christians in Science” seeks to advertise compatibility [3]. Stephen J Gould, an eminent evolutionary biologist of the twentieth century and an atheist, once said: “either half my colleagues are enormously stupid, or else the science of Darwinism is fully compatible with religious beliefs – and equally compatible with atheism” [2]. According to Gould, compatibility is clearly an intellectually defensible position.

Another mistaken assumption is that the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century was a result of rising secularisation, implying that up until this point scientific endeavour had been hampered by religion. However, religious bodies were responsible for the majority of the funding supplied to scientific research in medieval universities. What is more, the motivation to study science invariably arose from belief in God. Johannes Kepler, a key figure in the scientific revolution, described himself as a “priest of nature”, believing that he was on a quest to uncover the beauty of God’s creation. Furthermore, it is impossible to conduct science without holding underlying values. Science today assumes a powerful position in our society because it provides tangible benefits, such as medical treatments for disease and technological innovations. This desire to continually improve our quality of life underpins the scientific enterprise. But in

the seventeenth century, religion was the source of many of the fundamental presuppositions of science: the idea that nature is governed by immutable mathematical laws, and that these are worth studying, came from religion [4].

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So how are we to understand the relationship between science and religion today? The Reverend Dr John Polkinghorne, previously a theoretical particle physicist for twenty-five years, explains that “both [science and religion] are concerned with the search for truth through motivated belief”. He says “the idea that one side or the other must achieve total victory in the debate... fails to recognise the complementary relationship” [5]. It is therefore helpful to view science as a description of the Universe, and religion as an interpretation. In this sense, then, science and religion, far from being in conflict, are actually mutually reinforcing perspectives; different facets of a holistic worldview. According to Dr Watts, “science can’t say everything worth saying”; for example, it can’t answer questions about existence or morality. Similarly, however, God shouldn’t be invoked to fill the gaps in science just because our current understanding is incomplete.

So what does this leave people thinking? Eurostat, the part of the European Commission tasked with producing statistics on the European Union, reported in 2005 that 38% of the UK believes in God, 40% believe in some form of spirit or life force and 20% believe in neither [6]. These statistics indicate that a large number of people are confused, agnostic or apathetic towards religion. Dr Watts suggests that we need much better research on forms of non-religiousness; “lots would like to be religious but feel it is not intellectually respectable”, he says.

This is precisely the problem. Science should never be a barrier to religious belief. It is the responsibility of the media to avoid continually portraying science and religion as polar opposites. ■

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References

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