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Lett, James (2003) Irreconcilable Differences: The Fundamental Incompatibility of Science and Religion. *Think* Issue Four, Summer: 75-80.

Among many recent arguments for a reconciliation between science and religion, one of the most eloquent is the late Stephen Jay Gould's appeal for scientists and theologians to embrace what he calls the principle of NOMA, or 'nonoverlapping magisteria' ('magisteria' is an archaic word he resurrected meaning 'teaching authority'). According to Gould, the '*lack of conflict* between science and religion arises from a *lack of overlap* between their respective domains of professional expertise.' As Gould envisions it, science and religion are potentially complementary: 'The net of science covers the empirical realm: what is the universe made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The net of religion extends over questions of moral meaning and value. These two magisteria do not overlap.'¹

Besides being an eminent scientist, Gould was a remarkably graceful and intelligent writer, which only strengthens the appeal his argument has for many people. Unfortunately, his argument is founded upon a false premise. In point of fact, the scientific and religious domains *do* overlap to a considerable extent, as Richard Dawkins made clear in his rebuttal to Gould. A universe that did have a supernatural component would be fundamentally different from one that did not, and whether it did or did not would clearly be a question of great scientific import. Furthermore, as Dawkins points out, religions *do* make factual claims that *are* amenable to scientific investigation. For example, Christian claims about the Virgin Birth, the bodily Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Resurrection of Jesus, and the survival of human souls after death are all claims of a scientific nature. 'Either Jesus had a corporeal father or he didn't,' Dawkins writes. 'This is not a question of 'values' or 'morals,' it is a question of sober fact.'

The Scientific Approach to Knowledge

The best system that human beings have ever devised for addressing questions of sober fact is a system of collective rationality called science. Science can be succinctly defined as an objective, logical, and systematic technique for acquiring propositional knowledge, but the key to understanding the essential nature of the scientific method is to recognize that science has a built-in mechanism for correcting its own errors. Science is an open-ended enterprise, erected on the cornerstone of a perpetual search for falsifying evidence; in science, every claim is subject to relentless scrutiny. Nothing—no fact, no idea—is sacrosanct. In contrast to religion, which claims to be in possession of absolute truth, science claims only to possess provisional truth.

Therein lies the virtue of science, however, because the knowledge it produces is continuously being refined and expanded. Science may not be a perfect approach to propositional knowledge, but it is vastly superior—and immeasurably more successful—than any alternative that has ever been proposed or adopted by any group of people anywhere in the world at any time in human history. The biologist E. O. Wilson calls scientific knowledge the 'signature achievement of humanity;' that observation is not, as he says, a 'paean to the god of science' but rather a salute to 'human ingenuity.'²

The Religious Appeal to Faith

Religious believers know that their beliefs can't be supported by scientific reason, and that's why most of them don't even try. Indeed, most of them rarely reflect upon their beliefs at all. As Steven Pinker notes, religious believers 'don't pause to wonder why a God who knows our intentions has to listen to our prayers, or how a God can both see into the future and care about how we choose to act.'³ The striking thing about religious beliefs, in fact (striking, that is, to nonbelievers), is just how preposterous those beliefs are. 'Such shocking nonsense,' is how H. L. Mencken⁴ characterized religious belief; for him (and for many other perceptive thinkers), religious belief 'is so absurd it comes close to imbecility.' In *Letters from the Earth*, Mark Twain applied his inimitable wit to the ludicrous nature of Christian belief, with uproarious results; it is highly recommended reading.

Religious believers generally retreat behind the mask of faith when challenged to defend their beliefs, because they have no real option (if they could successfully defend their beliefs on the basis of reason, they'd do so in an instant). The problem, however, is that the appeal to faith is insupportable on any grounds. The appeal to faith can't possibly be justified by reason (after all, faith simply means *belief without any supporting evidence whatsoever* or *belief despite abundant contradictory evidence*, and neither alternative is remotely reasonable). At the same time, the appeal to faith can't possibly be justified by faith itself (after all, faith in Christianity tells you that faith in Islam is misplaced, and vice versa, so clearly faith is fallible—at least *some* of the faithful have to be wrong).

Remarkably, religious believers have persuaded themselves not only of the absurd notion that faith can somehow be used to lend intellectual respectability to their irrational beliefs, but also of the execrable notion that faith is somehow admirable. Religious believers are deluded on both counts. Faith is nothing more than blind, irrational, unreflective prejudice; it is a vice rather than a virtue. The huge irony, of course, is that faith happens to be socially and politically respectable at the moment; nevertheless, faith is both intellectually indefensible and morally reprehensible.

Faith is morally reprehensible for the simple reason that it can be used to justify absolutely any kind of horrific evil humans can imagine or invent. In the history of the world, faith-based religion has inspired countless acts of censorship, imprisonment, torture, mutilation, and murder, all directed against individuals who refused to embrace the particular supernatural beliefs of the faithful. That's what leads Steven Weinberg to conclude that 'on balance the moral influence of religion has been awful,'⁵ and that's what leads Daniel Dennet to argue that 'there are no forces on this planet more dangerous to all of us than the fanaticisms of fundamentalism.'⁶ Richard Dawkins aptly describes the pitfalls of faith in his characteristically trenchant style: '[It] is capable of driving people to such dangerous folly that faith seems to me to qualify as a kind of mental illness.'⁷

Conclusion

There can be no reconciliation between science and religion because the two approaches are antithetical to one another. It is impossible to conduct a rational dialogue with people who insist upon basing their position upon irrational arguments. Consider the question of moral principles, for example. Those who are religiously inclined believe (incorrectly) that principles of morality derive from divine law and divine revelation; those who are scientifically informed believe (correctly) that principles of morality derive from human nature and human reasoning. It is logically impossible to reconcile these beliefs, and that means there's no possibility of any genuine progress in a dialogue between science and religion. Steven Weinberg makes this point eloquently: 'I am all in favor of a dialogue between science and religion, but not a constructive dialogue. One of the great achievements of science has been, if not to make it impossible for intelligent people to be religious, then at least to make it possible for them not to be religious. We should not retreat from this accomplishment.'⁸

Religious belief is always intellectually indefensible, because it is inherently irrational. Religious behavior is often morally reprehensible, as the history of the world has repeatedly shown. There is yet another damning indictment that can be directed against religion, however: it is deeply demeaning to human beings. Religion insults human intelligence, denigrates human courage, and undermines human nobility. The deity envisioned by the world's major monotheistic religions, for example, is either powerless to stop the abundant evil that occurs in the world, or he is able to stop it but chooses not to. If it's the former, he's impotent and worthless; if it's the latter, he's monstrous and tyrannical. In either case, the notion that humans should prostrate themselves before such a being, and shower him with worshipful praise, is enormously offensive to anyone with a shred of self-respect. The only appropriate response to such a being, if he indeed existed, would be to oppose him with every last resource of human ingenuity, courage, and resolve.

Those who would like to see a peaceful coexistence between science and religion should remember that, while science has always recognized the right of religion to exist, religion has not always granted science the same right. Instead, religion has often sought to imprison scientists, to squelch scientific discourse, and to outlaw the teaching of scientific truth. Despite that ugly history, few if any scientists or other reasonable people would wish to respond with comparable crimes against religious believers. However, while we should respect people's right to believe whatever they want to be, that doesn't mean we have to respect people's beliefs. Religious belief is intellectually indefensible and morally reprehensible, and religious believers don't deserve to be sheltered from the announcement of that fact.

Science is a relatively new adversary to religion in the battle for the hearts and minds of humans, but if the past four centuries are any indication, there's reason to be optimistic about the long-term prospects for science. Religion once enjoyed exclusive dominion over a very wide range of human interests, with no opposing force to challenge its superstitious accounts. Science has steadily and dramatically encroached on that domain, however, offering accounts of vastly greater explanatory power (as well as vastly greater imagination and beauty). Meanwhile science continues to expand the realm of human knowledge with dazzling speed, and religion remains mired in the same old tired irrational silliness. Daniel Dennet believes there's no future in religion, and his belief is rooted in a conviction about human nature. 'Whatever we hold precious,' he writes, including our religious belief, 'we cannot protect it from our curiosity, because being who we are, one of the things we deem precious is the truth. Our love of truth is surely a central element in the meaning we find in our lives.'⁹ If he's right, and religious belief eventually succumbs to the human yearning for truth, it will represent the triumph of the best that is in us over the worst that is in us.

Notes

¹Stephen Jay Gould, 'Non-Overlapping Magisteria', *Skeptical Inquirer* vol. 23, no. 4, pp. 55-61 (1999), followed by a reply from Richard Dawkins, 'You Can't Have It Both Ways: Irreconcilable Differences?', *Skeptical Inquirer* vol. 23, no. 4 (1999), pp. 62-64. See also Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999).

²Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), p. 51.

³Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), p. 557.

⁴H. L. Mencken, *Treatise on the Gods*, second edition: corrected and rewritten (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1946), p. xi.

⁵Steven Weinberg, 'A Designer Universe?', *The New York Review of Books* vol. XLVI, no. 16 (October 21, 1999), pp. 46-68.

⁶Daniel Dennet, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p. 515.

⁷Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, new edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) pp. 330-331.

⁸Steven Weinberg, 'A Designer Universe?', *The New York Review of Books* vol. XLVI, no. 16 (October 21, 1999), pp. 46-68.

⁹Daniel Dennet, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p. 22.