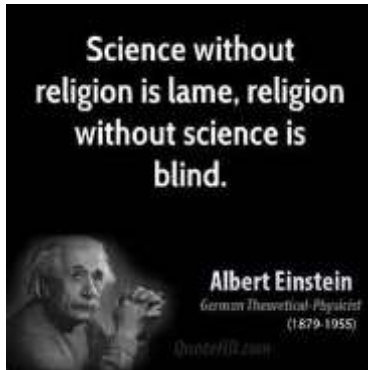


Religion and Science: The Emerging Relationship

Part I



The purpose of this series is to explore the relationship between religion and science. We looked at this question three years ago but I believe we need to revisit this discussion as we prepare to more thoroughly engage the *mission of the new evangelization*. It is important that we have the capacity to dialogue with the culture around us in order to craft our mission and message in a manner that has the greatest effect. We cannot accomplish this unless the message and praxis of the Gospel is understood in the context of our culture. This is the only way that we can also reshape the culture in the light of the Gospel. We bring the message and praxis of the Gospel in to a *post-modern culture* that often denies that there is objective truth, where people no longer trust institutional authority like they once did, and where many seek truth only from within their limited view of reality. Religion and science are based on the belief that there are objective truths to be known and lived in the world. For religion it is based on the experience and belief that God has given human beings the capacity to receive God's self-disclosure to us in history. Science is based on the belief that the universe is comprehensible. Today, the materialistic reductionism of the 19th century in science has collapsed, with a new vision of the central role of consciousness. Such a development raises important religious questions that we will explore in this series.

This series on religion and science is meant to help us to reflect on the relatedness of the religious and scientific world views, where they differ, and how can they be mutually critical and supportive of one another. We will also explore the fallacy that in order to be a good scientist that one must be an atheist as the *new atheists* contend. Clearly, science and its discoveries reach into the very fabric and understanding of our lives. Science has contributed to the promotion of human dignity and a higher standard of living for many people on the planet; yet, it has also contributed to building the *doomsday machine* that could obliterate all human civilization and much of life on the planet earth.

Religion, offers a comprehensive and ultimate explanation for existence, and summons forth ethical behavior that bears witness to the sanctity of life and creation.

Therefore, it behooves the deacon to learn and reflect upon this relationship between religion and science. This is essential for any deacon in order to proclaim the gospel in an effective and convincing manner, especially in the technologically advanced nations.

In the *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons, 1998* from the Congregation for the Clergy states:

The deacon....should be conversant with the contemporary cultures and with the aspirations and problems of his times. In this context, indeed, he is called to be the living sign of Christ the Servant and to assume the Church's responsibility of reading the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, so that, in language intelligible to every generation, he may be able to answer the ever recurring questions which men ask about this present life and of the life to come and how one is related to the other. (#43)

Since the dawn of the scientific age in the West, beginning in the 16th century, the life views of religion and science have had a strained and sometimes hostile relationship. Ironically, some of the greatest scientists have believed in God, e.g., Galileo Galilee, Sir Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, Erwin Schrodinger, Werner Heisenberg and many others. With the advance of scientific knowledge in physics, astrophysics, human consciousness studies, and other areas of science the relationship between religion and science is undergoing a major shift. The noted scientist and theologian, Ian Barbour in his book entitled, *Religion in an Age of Science*, offers four models for understanding the ways that religion and science have interacted and are interacting with each other.



(Ian Barbour)

These models that Barbour proposes are as follows: *Conflict, Separation, Dialogue, and Integration*.¹ He notes that these four models are helpful in understanding how people, scientists, and theologians approach issues of religion and science. While Ian Barbour is not the only person discussing these issues; indeed, there has been an explosion of books and articles on these issues, his four models serve the purpose of helping clarify the present state of the relationship between the two approaches to understanding reality.

The *Conflict* model presumes that the approaches to reality by religion and science are in constant and permanent conflict. One must choose either religion or science as the worldview by which one comes to truth. In this model religion and science

have nothing in common. The model will manifest itself in a religious view characterized by fundamentalism and rigid dogmatism. In a scientific view it will manifest in a rigid and often reductionist materialism that may subscribe to an agnostic or atheistic view of reality.²



(Keith Ward)

The theologian and philosopher, Keith Ward, of Oxford University puts it this way:

Regrettably, a form of materialism which is entirely hostile to religion, and which mocks any idea of objective purpose and value in the universe, has become fashionable in recent years. Good scientists such as Francis Crick, Carl Sagan, Stephen Hawking, Richard Dawkins, Jacques Monod and Peter Atkins have published books that openly deride religious beliefs, and claim the authority of their own scientific works for their attacks. Their claims are seriously misplaced. Their properly scientific work has no relevance to the truth or falsity of most religious assertions. When they do stray into the fields of philosophy, they ignore both the history and the diversity of philosophical viewpoints, pretending that materialist views are almost universally held, when, in fact, they are held by only a fairly small minority of philosophers (“theologian”, of course, is for them only a term of abuse). The form of materialism they espouse is open to very strong, and standard, criticism, particularly in respect to its virtual total inability to account for the facts of consciousness and for the importance of ideas of truth and virtue.³

The characteristics of the relationship between religion and science according to the *conflict* model are:

- Both believe there are serious conflicts between contemporary science and classical religious beliefs.
- Both seek knowledge with a sure foundation— that of infallible and literal scriptural understanding and dogmatism, and the other that of logic and sense data open to verification and falsification.
- They both claim that science and religion make rival statements about the same domain so that people must choose one or the other.

Barbour's response to this model is that both positions fail to observe the proper boundaries of each approach. The scientific materialist starts from science but ends by making broad philosophical claims. The biblical literalist moves from theology to make claims about scientific matters. In both schools of belief the difference between the two approaches to understanding reality are not adequately respected. **4**

Those who advance the conflict model between the two approaches to understanding reality are locked into a model of the world that has since moved to a new paradigm of understanding to be explored in future articles in this series.

Notes

1 Ian Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science, Vol. I* (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1990), pp. 4-30.

2 Barbour, p. 4

3 Keith Ward, *God, Chance, and Necessity* (Oxford, 1996), p. 11ff.

4 Barbour, p. 4

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