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Science and Religion

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In certain circles it is believed that science trumps religion. The idea is simple and uncompromising: Religion cannot stand up to science. The hard facts of science ultimately render faith untenable. Coupled with this is the idea that faith and religion sustain themselves by naiveté and lack of courage, that is, if one ever looked at the hard facts with enough intellectual courage, he or she would be forced to admit that faith and religion go against the evidence of science.

Ironically, this conception finds itself most at home within the most arrogant circles of science and the most fundamentalist circles of religion. These groups may hate each other but they have this in common, both believe that science and religion are incompatible.

What's wrong with that notion? Good science and good religion both suggest the opposite. Many respected scientists have religious faith and see no incompatibility between what they see through their empirical research and what they profess in their churches. Conversely many deeply religious people know, trust, and respect the insights of science and see nothing there that frightens them in terms of what they hold dear religiously. What's best in science affirms clearly and humbly that what we can say about the world through empirical research in no way rules out or weighs against what can be said about the world through the prism of faith and religion. What's best in religion returns the favor. Good religion cedes science its proper place, just as good science cedes faith its proper place.

Moreover, the idea that science trumps religion is generally based upon a misreading of the seeming conflict between the two. Charles Taylor, in his mammoth work, *A Secular Age*, suggests that people mostly abandon religion in the name of science not because science is more believable than religion (though that is what they may believe). Rather what they are abandoning is a "whole package", one whole way of understanding God, of understanding the world, of understanding meaning, and of understanding our relationship to our religious past. They aren't simply exchanging naiveté (religion) for maturity (science). They are exchanging one whole way of viewing life for another. And both options take faith.

What's meant by this? Quite simply that it is as much of an act of faith to believe that God doesn't exist as it is to believe that God does exist and to assert that one doesn't believe because of science involves a lot of things that have little to do with science.

To say: I believe or I don't believe involves a lot of things not derived from empirical evidence. What things?

First of all, a certain concept of God. Most atheism is, as Michael Buckley asserts, a parasite off bad theism. The God that most atheists reject should indeed be rejected since that God holds little in common with the God of Jesus Christ. The same holds true for many people who reject religion. What's being rejected is self-serving religion, not true religion.

Then there is the question of how we conceive of God's ways. Scripture assures us that "God's ways are not our ways", a truth Roman Catholics have tried to express philosophically with the notion of the analogy of Being and Protestants have tried to safeguard through emphasis on God's otherness. When religion is rejected in the name of science, invariably the religion that is being rejected does not safeguard God's otherness and has, however unintentionally, reduced God to something that can be grasped through human categories. Stripped of genuine divinity and mystery, such a God will inevitably not stand the test of hard human questioning.

Next, humility and arrogance also play into the tension between science and religion and their proclivity to reject each other. Unhealthy arrogance and unhealthy humility feed off each other to create illicit dichotomies that force people into false choices.

As well, faith and doubt are tied to moral integrity. Scripture tells us that we can only see God through purity of heart. Hence our moral lives will either help clarify or muddy our awareness of God. Sin affects our eyesight, as does virtue. Arrogance is an obstacle to genuflection, sin to a vision of God. This is a sensitive point. Doubt and unbelief may not simplistically be equated with arrogance, insincerity, or a bad moral life. All of us know wonderful persons who struggle with unbelief. Yet this still needs to be in the equation. All of us too know persons who are too proud and arrogant to see straight.

Finally there is also the question of our relationship to our religious past. When faith and religion are seen as childish and naïve more things go into that judgment than have to do with empirical evidence. In virtually every case, that judgment is colored and weighted by how one feels about his or her religious past.

Science doesn't trump religion and religion doesn't trump science since one God is author of all that is good, both inside of science and inside of religion.

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