

Homework: Religion and Science

This session focuses on the interplay of science and religion in our lives.

Despite the efforts of some to define away the problem, science and religion are in conflict. This state of affairs was of such concern to the late eminent evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould that he proposed a radical solution in his 1999 book *Rocks of Ages*, whereby the two fields of knowledge would be confined to separate realms, which he called *magisteria*. Religion would be restricted to dealing with matters of morality and possibly questions of ultimate meaning, while science would be left to empirical description of the material world. The important thing is that the magisteria not overlap. Each field should stick to its own domain. The problem with this idea is that many religionists have not given up on describing how the world works, and science is steadily moving into areas that religion thought it had covered—new areas of endeavor, such as studies of the evolution of ethics and morals, the psychology of religion, the genetic basis of belief in life after death, and the existence of an independent soul.

Multi-millionaire John Templeton has established a foundation dedicated to establishing better compatibility of science with religion. It gives an annual prize of \$ 1,000,000 to the best work helping to achieve this goal. The playing field is somewhat skewed because the term “religion,” as used here, seems to be oriented toward the Christian faith with a God who acts in the world and responds to petitionary prayer. An illustration of the mindset: We're just working with the tools God gave us. There is no reason that science and religion have to operate in an adversarial relationship. Both come from the same source, the only source of truth—the Creator.

—Joseph Murray, *Nobel Laureate, Medicine and Physiology*

In America, scientists are more resistant to the idea of a personal god than the general populace is. Recent polls show that on the order of 30 to 40 percent of all scientists believe in a personal god, whereas these numbers are more than doubled for the population at large.

It was, of course, a lie what you read about my religious convictions, a lie which is being systematically repeated. I do not believe in a personal God and I have never denied this but have expressed it clearly. If something is in me which can be called religious then it is the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it.

—Albert Einstein

I am a deeply religious nonbeliever. This is a somewhat new kind of religion.

—Albert Einstein

We can even see signs of moral, or protomoral behavior in animals. Vampire bats share food. Apes and monkeys comfort members of their group who are upset and work together to get food. Dolphins push sick members of a pod to the surface to get air. Whales will put themselves in harm's way to help a wounded member of their group. Elephants try their best to save injured members of their families. In these examples we glimpse the beginnings of the morality that advanced to higher levels with human evolution.

—Victor J. Stenger

The Bible is a blueprint of in-group morality, complete with instructions for genocide, enslavement of out-groups, and world domination. But the Bible is not evil by virtue of its objectives or even its glorification of murder, cruelty, and rape. Many ancient works do that—*The Iliad*, the Icelandic Sagas, the tales of the ancient Syrians and the inscriptions of the ancient Mayans, for example. But no one is selling *The Iliad* as a foundation for morality. Therein lies the problem. The Bible is sold, and bought, as a guide to how people should live their lives. And it is, by far, the world's all-time best-seller.

—John Hartung

The spectacle of what is called religion, or at any rate organized religion, in India and elsewhere, has filled me with horror and I have frequently condemned it and wished to make a clean sweep of it. Almost always it seemed to stand for blind belief and reaction, dogma and bigotry, superstition, exploitation and the preservation of vested interests.

—Jawaharlal Nehru, first prime minister of India

Questions to Ponder

- What are some of your earliest memories of learning about the sciences (such as astronomy, biology, chemistry, earth science, physics)? How did the experiences affect your thinking?
- To what extent can or should critical thinking be used in the same way for questions related to science and questions related to religion?
- What is the relationship, for you, between science and faith? Are they mutually exclusive?
- Is your life guided more by science or by religion? Do you use science and/or religion for different questions or aspects of your life? Do they overlap in any areas?
- What are the limits, if any, of scientific knowledge, as you understand it?