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THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE: CONVERGING ON REALITY

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Among "new atheists" and others of the intelligentsia, it is dogma that Christianity is incompatible with science, religious belief is irrational, and science is the pinnacle of rationality. But as is often the case with the unassailable dogma of the enlightened, the belief doesn't stand up to careful examination.

The past two decades have seen a vast and growing flood of books and articles dealing with science and religion. This way of framing the discussion, however, often misses the point. The important issues revolve around the claims asserted: the theories and interpretations of science and the biblical and doctrinal claims of theology. Since we're not interested in comparative sociology of the laboratory and the church, our focus here is on the *truth claims of the two domains*, on the relation between scientific theories and theological conclusions.

SOME COMMON CONFUSION

Confusion lurks behind secularists' claims of Christianity's incompatibility with science. Critical thinkers seek to unpack false assumptions behind these points of confusion in order to get at the central issues in the relationship of science and theology. If any of these points of confusion cloud the discussion, a fruitful exchange of ideas is unlikely.

"Christianity Is Merely a Faith Tradition"

The disdain expressed toward Christianity is grounded in the notion that Christianity is merely a "faith tradition," not a knowledge tradition. It's assumed that Christian theology doesn't give knowledge of reality, and that its claims must be accepted on blind faith. Why should anyone take seriously what theology says about the natural world? A false dichotomy pervades most secular thinking concerning science and theology.

"Empiricism Is the Accepted Epistemology"

Most contemporary scientists and philosophers of science agree that empiricism is the "official epistemology" of science.[1] What is empiricism?

Empiricism is an epistemological theory that knowledge claims must be grounded in experience. If we can't directly experience something through our five senses, then we shouldn't believe claims about that thing. No claim is considered respectable unless it has empirical support—unless experimental methods and concrete physical evidence justify the claim. Claims not arrived at via the "scientific method" are either suspect or completely rejected. Hence, concerns about the morality of embryonic stem cells or human cloning are dismissed as religious or ideological interference in the "morally neutral" pursuit of scientific knowledge. Given empiricism, morality becomes mere personal opinion because it is not "scientific" and therefore not a domain of knowledge.

"Metaphysical Commitments Must Be Constrained by Science"

Terms that figure in the best available scientific theories are widely regarded as carrying ontological commitment (that is, they really exist in the world), whereas terms that are not part of scientific theories are relegated to the realm of fiction. Such things as neurophysiological descriptions of brain functions are real, while immaterial minds or souls are fictions. Quantum indeterminacy and Darwinian evolution are "fact," while the resurrection of Jesus, or the existence of angels are "myths." We are supposed to be realists about entities in scientific theories, but it is unreasonable to be realists about "metaphysical" (used pejoratively) entities such as essential human nature.

There are good arguments that show each of these points is based on false premises, but readers of the JOURNAL should readily see how to unmask the falsehoods.

MODELS OF THE RELATIONSHIP OF SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY

In thinking about how science and theology relate, it's common to speak in terms of "models." Think of a model as a coherent theoretical framework that guides our thinking about these matters.

While there are numerous models, almost all are variations on four basic models, three of which are ill-conceived and unhelpful.

Conflict

In the *Conflict* model, science and religion will always be adversaries. *Conflict* is the view of the science-theology relationship probably most widely held by the general public, is the model strongly pushed by the "new atheists," and is sometimes endorsed in Christian circles by some young-earth apologists.

Many scientists think that religion will always try to restrict legitimate scientific research, and will attempt to suppress any conclusion that disagrees with some group's theology. They seem to believe that freedom of research is always under threat of suppression by religious zealots.

Many religious people, on the other hand, feel science is largely practiced by a godless "elite" who scorn religion and have no use for biblical revelation. In their view, the divine truth of Scripture is under constant assault from atheistic, antireligious scientists.

Sometimes there are individual cases of conflict between theology and science. For example, different positions on issues such as the age of the universe and the age of the earth, the theory of evolution, and the existence of the soul as an immaterial substance, fuel hot debates. According to *Conflict*, either science or theology will always win in such disputes.

But *Conflict* has serious flaws, both historical and theological. The *Conflict* thesis seems to have originated with two nineteenth-century Americans, John William Draper and Andrew Dickson White. In 1874, Draper (a physician and amateur historian) published *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*, and in 1896, White (the first president of Cornell University) published *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*. These works had powerful influence on the thinking of many academics at the turn of the twentieth century, and *Conflict* became the "orthodox" view in most universities.[2] However, as is generally recognized by those familiar with the history of science, *Conflict* has not been the consistent pattern of relating science and theology.

The trial of Galileo is an iconic symbol of *Conflict*: the "ignorant church" persecuting an "enlightened scientist." That interpretation is bad history.[3]

Furthermore, *Conflict* is flawed theologically. A proper understanding of the early chapters of Genesis supports what is called the "cultural mandate": God's assignment to humankind was "to create cultures and build civilizations."[4] Fulfilling this mandate would be impossible without proper use of science, so there can be no conflict between science *per se* and theology. To the degree that we have reason to think that science gives us an increasingly accurate explanation of the world, it cannot conflict with theology, no matter the worldview of the scientist who articulates it.

Independence

The *Independence* model (sometimes called Complementarity) claims that science and theology are essentially distinct, nonoverlapping, and noninteracting. The *Independence* claim says that no proposition contradicting any proposition in the domain of science can be derived from any proposition in the domain of theology, and vice versa.

Perhaps the best-known version of *Independence* was proposed by Stephen Jay Gould, the late Harvard paleontologist. Gould called his model NOMA, for Non-Overlapping Magisteria (a magisterium is a domain of teaching authority). According to Gould, we need both science and theology to give a complete picture of reality. But the two magisteria describe such different domains of reality that propositions in one domain logically cannot be compared with propositions in the other.

There are serious problems with this model also. Acceptance of *Independence* leads directly to adopting the principle of "methodological naturalism," where no theological belief and no nonnatural entity are allowed to play a role in scientific theorizing. Science is limited to explaining the natural world solely in terms of natural processes. Allegedly, this principle is necessary so that science will be neutral regarding religious or other metaphysical claims. But this would mean that such historical events as the creation of the world, the parting of the Red Sea, or the resurrection of Jesus, must be given wholly naturalistic explanations.[5] Further, as Alvin Plantinga has shown, science isn't religiously neutral: often, religious considerations enter into determining what needs to be explained, and what sorts of explanations are acceptable.[6]

It's clear that certain terms have the same meanings (or referents) in theology and science, so in fact there is not a strict "independence." As an example: evolutionary biology claims that all life on earth had a common ancestor, while theology claims that God intervened in natural history to make "kinds" in a unique way. These claims are about the same thing, and are contradictory, so one claim must be false. Thus, while

many, if not most, propositions in science or theology do not entail propositions in the other domain, some do, and so *Independence* is not a viable model.

DIALOGUE

According to this model, even if science and theology do not overlap on substantive claims, they can learn from each other. Areas of dialogue range from "limit questions" (where does science end and theology begin?), to methodological parallels, to comparison of models.

Having been in a number of conferences where the *Dialogue* model is dominant,[7] I've learned interesting things about how different scientists view their respective fields, and how different religions look at science. But I have not seen much progress come out of such dialogue toward resolving apparent conflicts between science and theology. Dialogue is almost always preferable to rhetorical warfare, but by restricting the dialogue to nonsubstantive matters, *Dialogue* is unlikely to contribute much to understanding and resolving cases of apparent conflict between science and theology.

CONVERGENCE

Convergence is the best model for the science-theology relationship. According to this model, science and theology sometimes tell us different kinds of things, and sometimes the same kinds of things, about the natural world. When done ideally, they will not conflict but will converge on a unified description of reality. But we are not now at the point of a complete, ideal science or theology; conflict is possible due to incomplete or inaccurate theories, doctrines, descriptions, and interpretations in one or the other (or both). *Convergence* recognizes that conflict is a matter of *interpretation*, not a fundamental feature of the two disciplines.

When conflict occurs, theology may correct science, or science may correct theology, or judgment may be withheld, with decisions made on a case-by-case basis. But how do we go about adjudicating any particular conflict?

Let S be a statement of science, and T be a statement of theology. (S and T are both interpretations, and as such are *in principle* revisable.) I suggest we ask the following questions:

1. Are S and T actually contradictory, or are they contrary or complementary?

2. Does S violate any theological control beliefs? Does T violate any scientific control beliefs? (A control belief would be a belief that functions axiomatically in the discipline. For example, the belief that the laws of nature are uniform throughout most of cosmic history and across the observable universe is axiomatic for science.)
3. How deeply ingressed in science and theology are S and T respectively? (The degree of ingression may be measured by asking how dramatically the discipline would be changed if the belief were discarded. For example, the belief that Jesus was God incarnate is very deeply ingressed in Christianity; without this belief, arguably the result would not be Christian in any meaningful sense.)
4. What is the relative degree of independent support for S and T? (If only one set of observations, or exegesis of only one or two passages of scripture, supports a particular interpretation, then it has a lower degree of independent support than an interpretation supported by a number of different sorts of observations or texts.)
5. Is either S or T subject to significant internal problems? (An internal problem is one arising from recalcitrant data within the discipline. At present, the inadequacy of models of an inflationary Big Bang to account for dark energy weakens—but does not completely defeat—belief that we have the correct or complete physical theory of cosmogenesis.)
6. Is an antirealist interpretation of S or T preferable to a realist interpretation? Is an antirealist interpretation possible? (For example, the inability of theorists to integrate quantum mechanics and general relativity into a theory of quantum gravity raises questions as to whether either should be taken as a literal or realist theory.)
7. Is it possible to suspend judgment, or is a decision forced? (For example, it may not be at all necessary or important to decide whether the "Nephilim" of Genesis 6:4 were surviving Neanderthals or simply another tribe of *Homo sapiens*.)

The Christian worldview authorizes a division of labor; some are called to be theologians, others to be scientists (and still others to be philosophers or plumbers). But in God's plan, all are involved in furthering our understanding of our world and where possible, bringing substantial healing (in Francis Schaeffer's phrase). In this regard, the Christian vision of reality is deeply humane.

While theology naturally has more to say about our highest aspirations and our ultimate destiny, Christians cannot adopt a "gnostic" denial of the importance of our physical embodiment here and now, and doing science is crucial in that regard. The co-laboring and collaborating of science and theology can help us respond to creation responsibly.[8]

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NOTES

1 Alex Rosenberg, *Philosophy of Science: A Contemporary Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 88–89. Epistemology is the theory of knowledge, especially how we can be justified in claiming to know something.

2 Cf. Stephen Jay Gould's brief description in *Rocks of Ages* (New York: Ballantine, 1999), 99–103.

3 Even Gould, who certainly had no evangelical axe to grind, argued that the Galileo affair has been widely misinterpreted: *Rocks of Ages* 71–75. On other "myths" of the *Conflict* model, see Ronald L. Numbers, ed., *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths about Science and Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

4 Nancy Pearcy, *Total Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 47; see also the Fourth Stone Lecture (on Calvinism and Science), delivered by the Dutch theologian and politician, Abraham Kuyper in 1889, available at http://www.kuyper.org/main/publish/books_essays/article_17.shtml.

5 For more on this, see C. John Collins, *Science and Faith: Friends or Foes* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 40–42.

6 For more on methodological naturalism, see Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Naturalism and Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), esp. 170–78.

7 It's been my experience that *Dialogue* is the reigning model in seminars and conferences organized by the Templeton Foundation, which has funded significant science/religion discussion in the past several decades.

8 Adapted from chapter 10 of Garrett J. DeWeese, *Doing Philosophy as a Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), used by permission. My deep gratitude to Joe Gorra for help in condensing the chapter for this article.