

Science versus Religion: Some Historical Points

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Modern intellectuals tend to be skeptical of religion, thinking it to be an unscientific or pre-modern way of dealing with the world and no longer of relevance. Science and religion are thus often viewed to be in conflict, or at best, irrelevant to each other. This viewpoint is in marked contrast with that of the Bahá'í Faith, which holds that religion and science are both of great importance:

Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism [1].

Thus, the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith strongly emphasize the need for both science and religion. This also was the case for most of the early European pioneers of modern scientific thought [2]. In this talk, I will briefly explore the roots of the modern intellectual skepticism towards religion.

Modern science began to emerge, about 500 years ago, from a European Christian intellectual tradition that had been exposed to Islamic learning [3]. At that time, European intellectual activities were pursued almost exclusively by scholars affiliated with and supported by religious institutions (indeed, few outside the Church could even read). For example, almost all of the schools and universities were founded and administered by a religious institutions. Thus it would be surprising if early modern science, developed and advanced by scholars supported by and active in religious institutions, were to be opposed to religion. The evidence is that it was not. For example, two influential early proponents of science were Roger Bacon (1214-94) and Francis Bacon (1561-1626). Both were clergymen who argued that science was completely advantageous to religion [2]. Prominent early scientists, such as Isaac Newton (1642-1727) and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), moved easily between scientific and religious studies, seeing no difference between the two. Even Galileo Galilei, often portrayed as heroically struggling against the Church, saw no conflict between science and Catholicism. His own difficulties with the Church he apparently thought due to academic rivals [2].

Europe at the time of the development of modern science was experiencing political and social changes that eventually led to the emergence of modern national states. Religion, politics and social life were inextricably intertwined, and when change exploded into violence in the wars of the Protestant revolution, it did so in the name of religion. Warfare and persecution, carried out in the name of religion, but usually political in nature, swept across Europe from 1520 to 1648, lapsing only for 20 years [4]. This warfare and persecution resulted in a tremendous number of deaths and casualties, leaving many millions of Europeans angry, embittered, and full of hatred towards religious institutions and all that they stood for. One significant casualty of these wars was religious intellectualism. Many church intellectuals participated in the fray, supporting this faction or damning that faction, with the consequence that the prestige of religious thought was irretrievably damaged. The sciences, however, emerged with greatly enhanced prestige. This was due in part to their tremendous successes

in explaining the nature of the world. For example, Newtonian physics had succeeded in providing a simple and unified picture of both the planetary and the terrestrial laws of mechanics. Of equal importance for the prestige of science was its pursuit of universal truths - truths with which all learned men could agree. Thus, science emerged as the unifying factor that religion once had been.

During and after the wars of religion, the European states became increasingly centralized due to improvements in communications, transportation, and economic life brought about by technological development and the resulting increased trade. Religion became increasingly identified with conservative forces opposed to change. This, plus the often bitter hatred of the Church and the social and political institutions that it represented, caused political and social reformers to promote a number of theories critical of religion and the Church [2,3]. These included deism, agnosticism, atheism, materialism, and latter, communism. Very often, these theories were promoted as being scientific in nature, as the prestige of the sciences helped to win their acceptance. Much of our modern intellectual heritage outside of scientific thinking stems from these theories.

With regard to the supposedly scientific social and political theories, several points are in order. These theories were not put forward by scientists, so there rarely is much that is scientific about them, although their supporters vociferously argued the opposite. The vague connections to scientific theories that did exist were in the spirit of drawing conclusions about social or spiritual aspects of life on the basis of the theories that explained simple mechanical or biological phenomena. Typically, such social and political theories tended to support national and/or class interests. Thus, they reinforced tendencies towards violent conflict and exploitation, without a doubt contributing to the unimaginably destructive wars of nationalism in the twentieth century.

With the increase of European power and wealth, and the emergence of successful science-based technologies, new professional classes emerged with a strongly secular orientation. These new classes were in competition with the older religious intelligentsia for employment in the scholarly, teaching, government and administrative professions. It was in their best interest to be perceived as the winner of a competition between science and religion. This competition quite naturally extended to issues of worldview, such as the creation of life and the nature of the universe. This is well illustrated by the development of Darwinism as a fashionable philosophy. Darwin, a well-to-do gentleman-scientist, originally pursued the religious-inspired ideas of the day concerning biology, only to find that they did not bear up under his investigations. After much hesitation, he advanced his own views concerning the origins of life and the emergence of man and the animals and these views were readily accepted by the secular intellectuals, very few who had the expertise in biology to correctly judge their technical points. It seems highly likely that Darwin's ideas were so readily accepted not only because of his genius, but also in large part because they were in strong accord with the professional interests of the secular intellectuals. Some of his Darwin's supporters, most notably Thomas Henry Huxley, portrayed opposition to Darwin's views as mere stupidity to discredit his religious opponents [2].

Nonetheless, intellectuals had a very strong reason to prefer science to religion - the claim to universality of science was much stronger than that of the European Christianity that they knew. Clearly, science addresses certain types of questions in a way that gives answers that are universally true. Modern supporters of religion, on the other hand, are almost always sectarian, often unwilling to even consider the claims of competing sects of their own religion, much less the claims of other religions. Educated travelers encountered entirely different and sometimes enormously successful systems of thought in distant lands (consider the great

power and wealth of China relative to the rest of the world two hundred years ago). Confronted with new religious and philosophical systems, they could not but question their own native religion's claims to universality.

There are several implications to these points. First, the perception of a conflict between science and religion originated in the political and social change accompanying the collapse of a unifying Christianity in Europe and the emergence of secular European culture. This suggests that there is conflict not between science and religion per se, but rather between a newly emerging social order and a sectarian and reactionary religious establishment. Consider the impact of scientific thought such as that of Darwin. The ideas contradicted by Darwinism were myths peculiar to western European Christianity, and were not universal religious ideas. Second, as noted before, science developed methods that produced answers that were universally true, whereas the European religion of the time was sectarian and arbitrary. Thus, science provided answers that were universal while the religion with which most people were familiar did not.

An unfortunate aspect of modern non-scientific intellectualism, with its skepticism of religion, is that it too, like the European religious thinking that it replaced, is becoming outmoded, its institutions and monuments ignored and hated, the nationalism and communism that it engendered a source of wars much more intense than the wars of religion of 400 years ago. Also, it has become clear that science can not give universal moral visions, which humanity needs if it is to address the vast needs of mankind. Increasingly, science itself is coming under attack, as its truths have been used to fabricate weapons of immense destructive power and as science-based technologies threaten to destroy our environment.

The direction forward, according to the Bahá'í teachings, is to use the scientific method to investigate and determine the universally true moral aspects of life, the true foundation of religion. The source of knowledge of these truths, Bahá'ís believe, is to be found in the Bahá'í Revelation. The ancient truths are restated therein, but with much greater depth and breadth than before as a result of mankind's increased capacity. New truths, necessary for mankind's step into maturity, are also to be found there. Modern thought is halfway through its development. It has cast off the old religious imitations and superstitions, has seen the failure of many of its own institutions, and is now ready to receive and embrace a much fuller truth.

References

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