

Science and Religion: In Conflict?

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Overview

- Provide an overview of the major views and approaches.
- Based on Bradley Sickler, "Conflicts Between Science and Religion," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
[www.iep.utm.edu/sci-rel]
- Cannot cover everything in the article.

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Outline

- Defining Science
- Defining Religion
- The Hostility Theory
 - Copernicus, Galileo, and Heliocentrism
 - Newton and Mechanism
 - Darwin and Evolution
 - A Common Core
 - A Case Study
- The Harmony Theory
- The Indifference Theory
 - Fact versus Faith?
- Conclusion

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Defining Science

- “Science aims at understanding the behavior of the natural world. Any propositions that are about supernatural objects, or abstract universals, or normative ethics, should not be considered scientific since they do not pertain to the study of natural, empirical objects.”

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Defining Science

- Not every scientific claim is directly about empirical objects.
- They are usually, at the very least, connected to or supportive of the investigation of nature and natural objects.
- Only a necessary condition, not a sufficient one.

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Defining Religion

- Religion can be understood in terms of either its **practice** or its **propositional** content.
- Practice: Easy to distinguish from science.
- Potential conflict lies in propositional content.

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Religious Propositions

- Difficult to distinguish from scientific propositions.
- Metaphysical vs. empirical?
- Religious claims are about ethics?

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The Hostility Theory

- Hostility model: Science and religion each make claims that the other side denies.
- If one is true, the denial is false.
- Often goes beyond that: The opponent is not simply incorrect, but operating under great and dangerous delusions.

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Science is Bad

- Speech given by the character Matthew Harrison Brady from *Inherit the Wind*, the movie about the famed Scopes trial:
- “I have been to their cities and I have seen the altars upon which they sacrifice the futures of their children to the gods of science. And what are their rewards? Confusion and self-destruction. New ways to kill each other in wars. I tell you, gentlemen, the way of science is the way of darkness.”

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Religion is Bad

- Isaac Asimov in the *Canadian Atheists Newsletter* in 1994:
- “Imagine the people who believe [that God exists] and who are not ashamed to ignore, totally, all the patient findings of thinking minds through all the centuries since the Bible was written. And it is these ignorant people, the most uneducated, the most unimaginative, the most unthinking among us, who would make themselves the guides and leaders of us all; who would force their feeble and childish beliefs on us; who would invade our schools and libraries and homes. I personally resent it bitterly....”

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Historical Flash Points

- Copernicus, Galileo, and Heliocentrism
- Newton and Mechanism
- Darwin and Evolution

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A Common Core

- Central issue: the explanation of data.
- Debate is not over what the data are, but what they mean.
- Duhem-Quine thesis: scientific hypotheses do not come free-floating.
- Also applies to sacred texts.

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A Case Study

- Creation-evolution debate: Same data, different conclusions.
- Example: Fossil record.
- Creationists: data refute Darwinism, and thereby evolutionary theory.
- Evolutionists: data refute Darwin's background assumption that evolution would take place slowly and gradually.

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The Harmony Theory

- Harmony model: Science and religion are not hostile to each other.
- Many examples of harmonization of science and religion: Descartes, Newton, Pascal, Boyle, Kepler, Gassendi, etc.
- Reformer John Calvin encouraged Christians to study nature through scientific investigation, because science was the study of God's handiwork.

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Harmony

- Francis Bacon in "Of Atheism":
- "God never wrought miracle to convince atheism, because His ordinary works convince it. It is true that a little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism; but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds about to religion: for while the mind of man looketh upon second causes scattered, it may sometimes rest in them, and go no farther; but when it beholdeth the chain of them confederate and linked together, it must needs fly to Providence and Deity. Nay, even that school which is most accused of atheism doth most demonstrate religion. For it is a thousand times more credible, that four mutable elements, and one immutable fifth essence duly and eternally placed, need no God; than that an army of infinite small portions, or seeds unplaced, should have produced this order and beauty without a divine Marshall."

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The Indifference Theory

- Indifference model: Science and religion make declarations that are completely unrelated to each other.
- Science: classification of empirical observations.
- Religion: ethics, ritual, and propositions (e.g., that a divine being exists) that have no empirical entailments.

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- Karl Barth in a letter to his niece:
- “Has no one explained to you in your seminar that one can as little compare the biblical creation story and a scientific theory like that of evolution as one can compare, shall we say, an organ and a vacuum-cleaner—that there can be as little question of harmony between as of contradiction?”

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Fact vs. Faith

- Common dichotomy:
 - Faith: Belief without evidence, or even belief in the presence of what should normally be taken as decisively refuting evidence.
 - Fact: Tangible and certain.
- Religion: Faith.
- Science: Fact.

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Fact vs. Faith

- This depiction is rife with difficulties.
- What is a *fact*?
- Attempts: “*F* is a fact” means
 - “*F* is true”
 - “*F* is true and obvious”
 - “*F* is true and experts believe that *F* is true”
 - “*F* is true and empirically verifiable”
- Science and fact? Religion and fact?

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Fact vs. Faith

- What is *faith*?
- Attempts: “*F* is a matter of faith” means
 - “*F* is not a fact”
 - “*F* is unsupported by evidence”
 - “*F* is insufficiently supported by evidence”
 - “*F* is not universally agreed upon”
- Religion and faith? Science and faith?
- Example of the Galileo affair.

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Conclusion

- Relationship between science and religion: frequently commented on but rarely understood with clarity.