P-ISSN: 2709-6254	Journal of Development and Social Sciences	April-June 2022,Vol. 3, No. 2
O-ISSN:2709-6262	http://dx.doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2022(3-II)103	[1162-1170]

Journal of Development and Social Sciences
www.jdss.org.pk

RESEARCH PAPER

Religion-Science Discourse: A Western Perspective

Ahmad Hussain Bukhari

PhD Scholar, Department of Philosophy, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

PAPER INFO

Received:
March 26, 2022
Accepted:
June 25, 2022
Online:
June 27, 2022
Keywords:
Conflict of ideas
Reconciliation,
Religion and Science,
Scientific Inquiry
***Corresponding Author:**
Sabukhari1969@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The present study is a brief overview of the intellectual debate in the western world concerning the mutuality of religion and science. Conflict and reconciliation are two prevailing views concerning this discourse. The conflict thesis is the result of modernity, emphasizing the separation of two domains. Religion has had an established plausibility for centuries; it has been there since the dawn of humanity, and the belief in a grand existence, beyond the domain of the observable, has become a part of the way human beings think and feel. On the other hand, science has an equally ancient beginning, and its proponents believe that logical thinking and empirical observation and testing are the only way to approach the truth. Nevertheless, it has been found that despite an ongoing intellectual debate, a balanced coherence between science and religion still needs to be worked out to meet the civilizational challenges of the present day.

Introduction

Religion and science have constantly searched for the meaning and significance of nature and God. Sometimes they have worked as synonyms, mainly when these terms try to solve the enigma of evolution. The idea that there is an intricate underlying pattern in the universe has always taken man's fancy. The duo of religion and science have come up with their explication of this universal phenomenon. The religion-science debate has almost turned into a philosophy of its own, and "moral implications" of modern science, particularly in cosmology and quantum mechanics, are a regular intellectual discourse. Richard Dawkins, a believer in conflict theses, holds that impartial scientific inquiry is impossible if we keep ourselves to the *belief system.* On the other hand, the reconciliation thesis is considered conservative and traditional and believed to revive itself in contemporary academic research. The believers of the reconciliation perspective do not find any conflict and believe that science and religion can co-exist. This approach substantiates that a man can do scientific research without suspending his belief and vice versa. McGrath refers to the idea that 18th-century thinkers in Europe believed that God's creation was only a one-time phenomenon, and it was left to the fate of the scientific mind to discover it and answer its related questions. To support this theory, he refers to Alexander Pope's famous epitaph of Newton that reads:

Nature and nature's laws lay hid in Night
God said, let Newton be, and all was light.

This 'Deism' ruled the minds of western philosophers for decades and centuries. This view challenged the continuous role of God and religion in the human world. To the question of how God acted in the world, this ideology answered that God did not work in the universe any longer. According to William Palley, God was like a watchmaker who had provided a self-sustaining mechanism or phenomenon to the world and did not need to

assert his existence anymore. This way, the deists could establish God's presence and the necessary absence (McGrath, 1999, p. 103). Giving the details of the historical account of "Religion" and "Science", Peter Harrison corroborates that religion and science have not conflicted when utilised in the service of human evolution. Instead, it was initiated by Western Modernity. He further states that the terms *Religion* and *Science* are "concepts of relatively recent coinage." (Harrison, 2011, p. 67) However, this division had a substantial role in determining how people had witnessed life and how the modernity narrative evolved. Although it is considered natural, seeing nature from the perspective of religion or science is not realistic. It depends upon the approach we adopt to observe life. Considering religion or science, one opts to believe in a fraction of a story of an independent narrative. In this narrative, neither science nor religion discard nor complement each other. Hence, Ian Barbour supports the independence thesis as he states: "Each has its distinctive domain …" and "each must tend to its own business and not meddle in the affairs of the other" (Barbour, 2007, p. 84).

Literature Review

The research of Bernard Lightman reveals that the world of science shows us only those realities which promote the socio-political scheme of encouraging only a specific kind of modern discourse. The contemporary scholarship does not endorse the agenda of modern science projects alone. That is why Wesley Wildman refers to The Divine Action Project that constituted multi-year research comprising conferences and publications starting In 1988 and concluding inconclusively in 2003 in which all experts in the field of Religion and Science like Ian Barbour, John Polkinghorne, Robert Russell, Nancey Murphy and others tried to understand and propagate the dimensions of divine action in the world, i.e. answering the question whether God intervenes directly or indirectly in the affairs of the world. According to Arthur Peacock, God acts through manipulation of the micro-events, i.e., atomic, subatomic or other quantum levels and thereby initiates "fluctuations" that manifest at the macroscopic levels (Plantinga, 2011, p. 80).

With the emergence of energy science and the question of exploiting new energy resources in the service of human beings, religion's response was quite positive as Brett M. Grainger has presented an interesting debate in his book, "*Church in the Wild",* with regards to religion and science relationship. Grainger highlights serious attempts to reconcile the world of religion, which is supernatural in its very nature, and the world of natural science. This metaphysical implication of electricity and light can be a bridge for the reconciliation between science and religion. But the never-ending manipulation of natural resources for the development of science unchecked by religion can also be counter-productive. It has variously been noted that the development of science is directly proportional to the innate human need and tendency to face irresistible natural forces like droughts, plagues, earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions etc. But each time one of these physical tsunamis strikes and mocks human efforts, recourse to religion and metaphysics avowedly help in many ways.

The western mind has always tried to balance reason and faith. It is as complicated and intricate as the equation between the material body and the metaphysical soul or between our mind and the heart that are respectively taken as the seats of knowledge and belief manifest our created cognitive nature (Plantinga, 2011, p.134). This is supported by Scott Atran, who believes that religious and non-religious (scientific) beliefs and practices involve the same cognitive and affective structures (Atran, 2002, p. 4). This opens the door for a continued dialogue between science and religion, about which Einstein had once said, "Science without religion is lame, and religion without science is blind." He talks about the significance of man's religious feelings that amaze him at the harmony of nature and natural laws. He warns against the excessive influence of an education that encourages knowledge

and suppresses belief. He believes that extreme rationalism blurs the mind rather than expands it. Scientific knowledge deals with facts and cannot go beyond "*what is*", whereas religion opens the door to "*what should be*". Modern knowledge, i.e., objective knowledge, provides us with solid tools and instruments to deal with certain ends, but the ultimate goal and the way to reach it should come from elsewhere. The scientific demonstration cannot take the place of revelation (Einstein, 1954, p. 63).

Belief System and The Advent Of Science

According to Thomas Dixon, June 22, 1633, was a momentous day in the history of western debate on science and religion as it was the day when the 70 years Old Italian scientist Galileo Galilee was sentenced by a court of Inquisition to punishment for presenting a heliocentric view of the world in contradiction to the geocentric biblical conception. Reportedly Galileo had to undergo both imprisonment and penance while cursing himself for his "errors and heresies" (Dixon, 2008, p. 1). Alister E. McGrath refers to yet another dimension of the debate when he refers to the idea of "natural theology" that refers to the regular harmony of the world systems vis a viz the divine design of nature. Newtonian view of the mechanically explicable universe and the Darwinian theory of evolution tried to do away with the need for God. But these were soon challenged by 19th-century philosophers, poets and naturalists. Opposing the 'evolution of species', Carolus Linnaeus wrote vehemently about the 'fixity of species' (McGrath, 1999, p. 21). According to William Pollard, God acts in the universe at the quantum level, i.e., he works out little happenings at the microcosmic level in everyday life and makes them grow into macrocosmic and dramatic dimensions without direct intervention. Polkinghorn has questioned the indeterminacy of quantum dimensions concerning God's actions. He concludes that the providential agency has an episodic occurrence in the natural order of things (Plantinga, 2011, p. 91).

The western mind continuously tries to find a reasonable basis to accommodate faith and science. It, therefore, does not seem surprising that some people live a pleased life while simultaneously believing in God and accepting scientific facts. Hence, in some instances, most people enjoy a contented life even in the presence of their inconsistent religio-scientific beliefs. History shows that science and religion can co-exist if not seen through a nationalistic, communal, or sectarian lens. Thales, "on discovering his famous theorem, is said to have sacrificed an ox" (Barbour, 2007, p. 24). It is imperative to mention that with the advent of modern science, it was emphasised to make the world progress and enlightened in the truest sense of the word. It is also worth mentioning that modernity made the world independent of ancient spiritual and metaphysical beliefs of the medieval age. Therefore, truth is modernity, or modernity is the only truth. According to this argument, modernity is the most cherished destination of a modern man. This argument has an essential role to play concerning the conflict between science and religion. Since science values only objective truths, faith, in response, should surrender its claims to reach truth when interpreting reality. From the historical perspective, it is usually believed that the modern era came into being as a result of the clash between science and religion. In reality, every human progress is the result of collective wisdom.

Contemporary society cannot be taken as an independent phenomenon. The difference between modern and ancient man is natural. Hence, it seems irrational to see no relation between science and religion other than conflicts and clashes, as Michael J. Shank demystifies the myth that religion was hostile to science. Furthermore, he states that instead of being an enemy of science, Christianity was quite friendly to it and played its role in the progress of modern science. Besides demystifying the myth that religions in the medieval period checked the advancement of science, Shank puts forward that the institution of University was initiated under the command of papal authority- The Church-

under whose supervision a large number of students started studying non-religious disciplines such as "logic, natural philosophy, and the mathematical sciences", in the medieval period. (Shank, 2010, p. 22) Hence, the church did not force anybody to study religion, contrary to what is assumed in the modern scientific era.

It is an overstatement that there was a clash between science and the church, and the church did not create any hurdles in developing science. Such arguments were built on the conflict thesis; therefore, it should be kept in mind just like extremism and terrorism has nothing to do with Islam, so the rejection of science was local, and the whole of Christianity cannot be blamed for it. Every rational being comes across a question of whether it is justified to blame the Hindu religion for the RSS activities endorsed by a group of people in Indian political offices. Of course, not. It would be highly irrational to ignore the history of adaptability and tolerance manifested in Indian culture for so long. Therefore, it is unjust to call the church an agent of rejection of science that "affected only a minuscule fraction of the population, and usually not for long." It is like believing that all Muslims are terrorists or that all Hindus encourage RSS ideology. Correspondingly, the narrative of the Christian right that it is the church only that generated modern science seems exaggerated. The idea becomes so problematic when Rodney Stark states, "the entire world would be about where non-Europeans were in, say, 1800" had Christianity not initiated the modern Western Civilization. History does not support the idea that non-Europeans lacked universities, factories, pianos, and chimneys. It is an egotistical and chauvinist approach when interpreting history. The actual story is quite different. For instance, when the British Empire colonized India, "India's share of the world economy was 23 per cent, as large as all of Europe put together. By the time the British departed from India, it had dropped to just over 3 per cent. The reason was simple: India was governed for the benefit of Britain." (Tharoor, 2016, p. 23) Hence, the British Empire extracted economic resources from India for the vested interests of Britain. This sums up the philosophical basis of the 'conflict thesis.

Continuing the above theme, Noah J. Efron has initiated a more balanced interpretation when he demystifies the myth supported by Christian rights that Christianity originated in modern science. Instead, Efron substantiates that different philosophical and cultural traditions have contributed to the development of contemporary science. Islam and Christianity paved the way for the modern age's revival back in the medieval ages. History shows that Muslims took inspiration from the Greeks; the former translated and interpreted the Greek philosophical tradition and later passed it on to the European nations. Efron admits the conclusive contribution of Muslims when he states that "it was in Muslim lands that natural philosophy received the most careful and creative attention from the seventh to the twelfth century." (Efron, 2010, p. 83) The Christian Philosophers appreciated and welcomed the original contributions of the Muslims as Muslims had acknowledged Greeks and most probably Greeks owed to Egyptians or the Chinese.

Another problem that needs to be addressed in the Religion-Science discourse is that only remodelled and modernised versions of religion can be accommodated in the domains of modernity. Otherwise, it would be conservative and problematic. Buddhism's *colonial encounter* manifests this kind of problematic tendency. The British scholars who defined Buddhism had never travelled to the parts of the world where Buddhism was being preached and practised as a religion. However, the orientalists dug out the lost Buddha to cater to the demands of modern science. Consequently, Buddhism was considered the most *science-friendly* of all ancient religious traditions. It was a colonial encounter that made Buddhism pro-science. Besides Buddhism, most of the prehistoric religions were measured as anti-science. Modernity affirms that religions and beliefs that are inflexible to the progress of science and natural philosophy should be abandoned. But it is not a logical approach that reason or rationality is the sole attribute of science alone. As witnessed in

early Judaism, "Talmud sages considered observation and reason as (sometimes, at least) more reliable sources of authority than text and tradition" (Efron, 2011, p. 24).

According to Bertrand Russell, revelation as a source of knowledge has long been criticised by the scientific-minded group, but there is a visible challenge to the scientific methodology. So it is that the people who have claimed the faculty of revelation have been honest in all their difficulties of life and have professed the same kind of certainty concerning their findings as those who deal with the objects of sense (Russell, 1974, p. 174). Rationality or reason urges us to learn that there can be more than one way of approaching reality. Mythology, theism, mysticism, philosophy, and science are various dimensions of knowledge to resolve the riddles of existence. The growth of any dimension of knowledge depends upon differences in thoughts and not on agreeing with every emerging idea. So, religion is not inhospitable to science and vice-versa. Differences will always prevail as they contribute to the body of knowledge.

It is evident that ancient philosophers knew this, so they better engaged themselves with different discourses that later promoted the concept of dialogue. However, there were also differences among them regarding the religion-science independent dialogue. For example, St. Augustine thought that all knowledge is useless except that which caters to the needs of Christianity. Furthermore, he asserts that any knowledge, whether philosophical or scientific, should only be used for the benefit of religion (Harrison, 2011, p. 70). Factually, science cannot be an instrument to support Holy Scriptures and their interpretations; instead, it should work as an instrument to understand the reality of nature. The pre-colonial era in India formed "a blend of religious and rational medicine" in *Ayurveda* (Subarayappa, 2011, p. 198). People used to take inspiration and guidance from natural philosophy. Hence, they tried to discover truths by blending spiritual healing and scientific medicine and exploring ways to improve them.

Modernity and Religion-Science Dialogue

Modernity restructures our perception of traditional sources of knowledge and categorize religion and science by putting both into separate domains. Science prefers itself over faith as an authentic source of knowledge. In addition, as Bernard Lightman states, it is imperative to mention that it is the "unbelief" on which modern science builds its argument. Richard Dawkins, a scientist, initiated the "unbelief" argument. He declared that "unbelief is the most enlightened position to embrace." Most leading contemporary scientists believe that without adopting the status of no belief or unbelief, any scientific inquiry will be considered a useless activity. Quite interestingly, Isaac Newton had a contrary position concerning this approach. As Bernard Lightman contends, "the existence of natural law led (Newton) to the recognition that a creative deity had provided an order to nature." Newton believes that atheism is ridiculous and has damaging effects on the human spirit. One may not be surprised by the presence of such revealing truths because modern science endorses scientific knowledge as a discourse of an independent domain that has nothing to do with religion. According to modern science, a scientist should be either an atheist or have an agnostic approach. But it would be illegitimate to ignore the point that most of the celebrated scientists considered theology to be the authentic discourse of knowledge and tried their utmost to relate science to theology. Surprisingly, even Newton "infused his theories with theistic concepts" (Lightman, 2011, p. 252).

Galileo believed that Bible preferred other forms of knowledge as far as salvation was concerned. In other matters of worldly wisdom, including that of the natural world, if there were contradictions, the words of the Bible needed to be reinterpreted. This was not a falsification of religion but in line with St. Augustine's approach to scripture (Dixon, 2008, p. 27). According to Newton, the planets' surprisingly harmonious movement could not

occur without divine power. This is a matter of belief based on rational observation and judgement. His understanding is a case of theistic science based on a macrocosmic view of things. A century later, with the advent of atomic theory, newer possibilities about the scope and limitations of science emerged. From the galactic super-structures, human thought converged to micro-structures and fundamental units of existence which were supposed to be molecules and atoms. It was sufficient evidence that what the eye sees and calculates is constantly changing and open to reinterpretation. What they believed to be even the fundamental particles proved to be further made up of nucleons, which were found to be constituted by quarks. While this opened the chapter on quantum mechanics, it also started a predominantly scientific debate on the universe's origin and the nature of time that is directly linked with the nature of God and the multiverse instead of a knowable universe (Clayton, 2009, p. 152).

Conclusion

There is a close connection between science and religion. Of all scientific fields, according to Russell, psychology poses a natural challenge to modern philosophy of the duo, religion and science. The word 'psychology' means the study or the theory of the soul. But the soul is strictly not scientific as far as science's known definitions and limitations are concerned. The scientific community, therefore, refers to the discipline of psychology as the science of mental processes. There arises a question that can we compare these processes with the mechanical functions of the Newtonian worldview? The answer is problematic as the fundamental psychological questions take us into philosophical uncertainty where exact experimental data and results are lacking (Russell, 1974, p. 110). Either the soul needs to be redefined to accommodate the scientific certainties and falsifiability, or the faith in religion needs to be restored as an augment to science.

The recent openness that religion has shown towards science is a positive sign. We witness no conflict between technology and religion; one can enjoy the fruits of technology and religious beliefs and practices. Hence, the conflict thesis is not much seen in the life of an ordinary person. However, since it was an urgent demand to make the world modern, irrespective of the cost humanity had to pay, science could not materialize its agenda without religion's help, especially when energy science was developing. Therefore, the conflict thesis or irreconcilability argument seems false. It is merely an assumption that today, science has become the sole authority, and religion has nothing to do with developments in science and technology. An altruistic sense of life and its sustainable dimensions require that the modern man trust the equitable importance of religion and science.

The know ability of knowledge cannot be based solely upon the fallible faculties like the five senses and logical reasoning. Human powers of perception are limited and are mostly reduced to the tiny world of human needs. This can reduce the scope of science to a great extent. Religion claims that the ultimate knowledge rests with God, and human knowledge and all its machinations are meant to explore that knowledge. Revelation thus becomes an essential and potential source of knowledge. The testimony of many religious practitioners about facts beyond the scientific sphere of the known, across time and space, is also significant proof that the spiritual dimension of knowledge is indispensable. Even for Einstein, science does not go beyond methodical thinking toward regulative and causative connections and thus promises progress, but in the absence of a value system that teaches the demarcation between the right and the wrong, the very purpose of education fails. Religion not only demarcates the scope and use of science but also helps fulfil humanity's moral and aesthetic needs that call for recognizing the importance of sympathy in human affairs and a cardinal principle in maintaining world peace. While science is

futuristic and believes in grappling with future challenges, religion is primitive and relates us to our history.

Modern western philosophers and sociologists have started noticing the need for this anthropological balance, and their academics have insisted that this debate, however it may remain inconclusive, should be an integral part of university education and research. Without this religious anthropology, the limits of social constructionism would collapse, and humanity would be reduced to "laboratory life" in a capitalist marketplace (Clayton, 2009. p. 275). As a part of the postmodern naturalistic enigma, anything shown to be a part of human nature or 'natural' tends to become legal and ethical. While politics often give in to popular demands and overlooks ethicality and morality, religion tends to continuously observe the difference between normalcy and deviance, thereby restraining unnatural tendencies. Western scholars, particularly those who have studied and explored the history of ideas, have become conscious of the cultural mistake their society had allowed when science became exceedingly liberated from the influence of religion in recent years. The present-day dialogue between religion and science and the related scholarship in this area is a manifestation that this lost connection is being felt, and research is again underway to reach credible and practical solutions.

References

Atran, Scott. (2002). *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Barbour, Ian G. (2007). *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

Clayton, Philip; Simpson, Zachary. (2009). *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Coyne, Jerry A. (2015). *Faith Vs Fact: Why Science and Religion are Incompatible.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Daggett, Cara New. (2019). *The Birth of Energy: Fossil Fuels, Thermodynamics, and the Politics of Work*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Davis, Edward B. (2010). "Myth 9: That Isaac Newton's Mechanistic Cosmology Eliminated the Need for God." *Galileo Goes to Jail: and Other Myths about Science and Religion*, Harvard: Harvard University Press.

Dixon, Thomas. (2008). *Science and Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Efron, Noah. (2011). "Early Judaism." *Science and Religion around the World*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Efron, Noah J. (2010). "Myth 9: That Christianity Gave Birth to Modern Science." *Galileo Goes to Jail: and Other Myths about Science and Religion*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

Einstein, Albert. (1954). "Science and Religion." in *Ideas and Opinions:* New York: Crown.

Grainger, Brett. (2019). *Church in the Wild: Evangelicals in Antebellum America*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Harrison, Peter; David C. Lindberg. (2011). "Early Christianity." *Science and Religion around the World*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Harrison, Peter. (2015). *The Territories of Science and Religion*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Lightman, Bernard. (2011). "Unbelief." *Science and Religion around the World*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lopez Jr., Donald S. (2011). "Buddhism." *Science and Religion around the World*. New York: Oxford University Press.

McGrath, Alister E. (1999). *Science and Religion: An Introduction.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Plantinga, Alvin. (2011). *Where the Conflict Really Lies.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Russell, Bertrand. (1974). *Religion and Science.* London: Oxford University Press.

Stark, Rodney. (2004). *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Shank, Michael J. (2010). Myth 2: That the Medieval Church Suppressed the Growth of Science." *Galileo Goes to Jail: and Other Myths about Science and Religion.* Harvard: Harvard University Press.

Subbarayappa, B. V. (2011). Indic Religions. *Science and Religion around the World*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Tharoor, Shashi. (2016). *An Era of Darkness the British Empire in India*. New Delhi: Aleph Book Company.