

# Philosophy, Religion, and Science: Friends or Foes?

Some Personal Observations and Opinions

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I have often wondered if the aliens from another planet were to actually arrive, would they have the bilateral symmetry of our species? Perhaps they may have the shape of a glob such as an amoeba or be small asymmetrical entities that by intercommunicating between their specialized brains possess an enormous total mental capacity. This question came to mind as I realized how we humans are almost programmed to think in terms of two opposites, such as left and right, Republican and Democrat, two brain halves, and so on. I have found attempting to draw clear and sharp lines between the three areas of philosophy, religion, and science is not quite as easy as putting a fence between just two areas. Religious denominations vary greatly as to creeds. Scientists tend to conform to the current paradigms, but delight in finding contrary evidence that may bring down today's paradigms. As for philosophers, are any two in complete agreement? I will make great use of sweeping generalities and stereotypes.

It is now fairly common practice for writers early on to disclose to the readers if a personal bias exists that may affect his or her article. For example, book reviewers may note the book being reviewed happens to be published by a firm owned by the newspaper in which the review appears. So in the interest of full disclosure, may I point out I do have a negative attitude toward religion in that I have been an atheist since age 16. I will leave it to you to decide if my presentation has been objective. Also, note that while I have read many books over the years, I am not a scholar. Except for the fact that I am a teetotaler, I like to think of myself as the average Joe Sixpack, but perhaps with more curiosity as to how society functions. Playing the role of the average man, I shall not attempt to impress you with quotes from John Rawls' *Theory of Justice*, or quotes from the works of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes or Spinoza. Nor shall I cite verses of the Christian Bible except when I feel someone may question "if the Bible actually says that." Nor will I cite quantum mechanics or the laws of thermodynamics. I will leave that up to the creationists who seem to have suddenly mastered those fields of knowledge

### **HISTORY**

If I were a scholarly type of person, I suppose I would begin by making historical review of philosophy, religion, and science. One of the difficulties of reviewing history, as often pointed out, is that history is written by the victors. People in each of these three areas may claim theirs is the oldest. Philosophers may claim primitive man had beliefs that helped their survival well before religion or science concepts were formed. A simple philosophy of life may have been to be always alert for certain animal sounds. A religious person may claim the presence of flowers in a Neanderthal grave indicates a belief in a journey to an afterlife. A scientist may claim the making of an arrowhead requires a logical mind.

## **DIAGRAMS**

Another scholarly approach is to use diagrams. A triangle is the obvious choice. But how much of the areas of the triangle belongs to each of philosophy, religion, or science? Some might assign equal areas to each, but historically they have seldom, if ever, been regarded as equals. A purist might claim that since a triangle is a two dimensional figure that it is not really suitable for describing a three dimensional relationship. Venn Diagrams or circles are often used to indicate the relationship of areas of knowledge. A philosopher may draw a large circle and place the religion and science circles as the small circles contained within the large circle called philosophy. The clergyman or scientist may insist theirs is the large circle. An observer claiming to be impartial may insist the three circles are largely separate, but do overlap in some areas. Historians may draw different relationships of circles to illustrate shifting historical patterns.

## **NAMES**

Some might argue philosophy, religion, and science are merely names we assign to human activities just as we assign water, snow, and ice to different states of water. However, while we may enjoy dumping a bucket of water on someone's head at the beach or engaging in a snow ball battle, it is not the same as being hit by a 10 pound cake of ice. The great physicist Richard Feynman delighted in telling how, as a child walking in the park, his father told him the name of a certain bird in a dozen languages. Then his father pointed out that even if he learned the dozen names, he actually knew no more about the bird itself.

## **TIME**

When you first meet someone, you can often tell a great deal about them by how they view time. Some quickly assure you that these are the worst of times and that the past was much better. Others delight in the present while others have great hope for the future. I view philosophers as concerned with how we should live our lives in the now, religionists as being anchored in the past, while scientists are concerned about the future. It may be said philosophy is concerned about "what," the clergyman about "why," and the scientist about "how." Some may theorize that at each point in time, era or age, a dominant influence appears. We may speak of an age of philosophy, age of religion, or an age of science. Some may suggest we currently live in an age that is a combination of these influences. Those with a strong imagination may suggest that in the future a fourth influence may arise and dominate the age. Like contemplating the fourth dimension, we may concede of it as a possibility, but most of us have trouble visualizing it. What will it be called and are there unrecognized signs of it in plain view today?

## **GURUS**

Cartoonists delight in drawing gurus seated on a mountain peak and being consulted by an average man. Perhaps this indicates the average man has more confidence in philosophers than the self-anointed ones of religion or in the abstract approach of science. Seeking knowledge from wise old men is common among many tribes. Such old men may be described as philosophers since they share their experience and knowledge with those who seek it. Many Christians claim all that needs to be known may be found in sacred works such as the Bible. Science admits much is not known, but that we will learn by the use of hypothesis and by conducting experiments to test the hypothesis.

## **CRIME**

One of the major social issues of our times, locally and nationally, is how to deal with

crime and what is the proper punishment. Philosophically, punishment should be proportional to the crime. While the Christian Bible speaks of love and compassion the Old Testament calls for the stoning to death of a son who is stubborn and rebellious (Deuteronomy 21:18-21) Oddly, the United States which is often cited as the most religious of the advanced nations, has the highest per capita rate of incarceration in the world. One out of 136 people are in prison! Some 4 million are on parole. Black Americans, 13 percent of our population, form half of our prison population. Racial bias in our legal system accounts for part of this over incarceration of blacks. Some, such as Orlando Patterson, a professor of sociology at Harvard, have suggested the basic cause is the “unstable relations among the sexes within poor families...” That is, the verbal and physical abuse of mothers by black fathers.(See Orlando Patterson’s book *The Ordeal of Integration, 1997.*) Prisons today convert delinquents into hardened criminals that perpetuate this cycle of abusive family life. Scientists believe more studies are needed, but a pessimist might note that despite some 40 years and 69 billion dollars spent on the “war on cancer” we have more cancer victims than 40 years ago. (See Devra Daves’s book *The Secret History of the War on Cancer, 2007.*)

### **ABORTION**

Another social issue, abortion, has generated much sound and fury in the United States for a generation. Philosophers may focus on where to draw the line between rights of individuals versus the rights of government to interfere with individual rights. Some Christian denominations insist abortion is just plain murder and would deal out severe penalties to doctors performing abortions. The question as to the proper punishment of women having an abortion is not often discussed. Scientists have been accused of favoring a eugenics approach, that is, approving abortions to terminate a fetus that is defective. Agreeing on a definition for defective is another area filled with sound and fury.

I find it interesting that, over the years, the term miscarriage has seemingly faded away. The common understanding of the term’s meaning was to lose the fetus through no fault of your own. Medically, a great number of miscarriages occur early on and the woman is not even aware that a miscarriage has occurred. What of a miscarriage that occurs later on? For example as due to an accident, such as falling off a bicycle. Fault of the woman? Act of God? Again, is civil punishment, imprisonment, justified? Perhaps some of the religious cannot bear holding God responsible. Far easier to hold sinful humans responsible.

### **RIGHT TO DIE**

Similar to the abortion debate is the right to die debate. Again, philosophers note the distinction of the rights of individuals versus the restrictions society places on that right. The question of whether it is moral to permit long term intense suffering to continue is often discussed. Some who are religious insist only God can terminate life and we cannot end suffering by terminating a life. Scientists are in a sense doubly troubled because modern science has often made it possible to maintain the life of an individual who is what is often called “brain dead.” That is when there is no possibility of the individual being restored to normality. A similar situation for United States doctors is that they may find themselves subject to the loss of license if morphine is used in what a federal agency considers a sufficient dosage to make a patient a drug addict. How elderly dying patients will become drug addicts has never been made clear.

Dr. Jack Kevorkian campaigned for years for the right of physicians to assist terminally ill patients to end their own lives. He served eight years in prison for poisoning a man suffering due

to Lou Gehrig's disease. According to a 2007 AP-Ipos poll of those who attend church weekly, only 34 percent think it should be legal for doctors to assist terminally ill patients to end their lives. However, 70 percent who never attend religious services thought it should be legal.

### **CLONING**

A relatively new social issue is whether cloning should be permitted. Some philosophers would permit it if needed, for example, to raise pigs to provide organs to save and extend human life. Some religious groups would absolutely prohibit it citing that only God can create life. Some scientists feel it is a tool for improving our understanding of reproduction and therefore it is an obligation to investigate cloning.

### **ECONOMIC INEQUALITY**

Yet another pressing social issue today is the growing economic inequality in the United States. Philosophically, inequality may be justified by citing the innate differences in intelligence and motivation of individuals. Vilfredo Pareto noted back in the 1800s that the distribution of wealth in nations tends to peak with 20% owning 80% of the nation's wealth. However, the problem today in the United States is that the distribution of wealth has exceeded this ratio and continues to grow ever more lopsided. Oddly, the Christian Bible cites this as the norm. Consider Mathew 25:29 "For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath."

Is it possible that a prime cause of becoming mired in the war in Iraq is that of income inequality? Iraq's vast oil income has not been shared and while the few build palaces and squander their wealth on adult toys, the rest of the nation lives in poverty. Their clergy has directed the poor to take out their frustrations on "Satan America." We tend to look at Mexico as an example of harmful wealth distribution, yet our top 10 percent of taxpayers have 44 percent of the nation's income which is about the same as Mexico's. Can American science ride to the rescue? Science, of course, is not just physics and chemistry; economics has been called a "dismal science." Some have noted economists have successfully predicted six of the last four recessions. On the other hand, like biology, another "soft science," economics has new tools that should give it a greater understanding of how the human brain operates. A new book by Jason Zwick, "*Your Money and Your Brain*," deals with the new science of neuroeconomics. Hopefully, we can prevent our nation from returning to the Robber Baron Era and the Great Depression.

### **WALL OF SEPARATION**

What is and what should be the relationship of philosophy, religion, and science to our republic? In recent years, many have questioned if the wall of separation between church and state is being undermined by the G. W. Bush Administration's catering to the wishes of evangelicals. Philosophically our nation was born during the period known as The Enlightenment. The philosophers Tom Paine and Thomas Jefferson tremendously influenced the writing of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Despite the fact that the words God and Jesus Christ do not appear in the Constitution, many evangelicals insist this is a "Christian nation."

Thomas Jefferson considered the God of the Old Testament "cruel, vindictive, capricious, and unjust." He did consider Jesus Christ a prophet. He cut up two Bibles and pasted up the verses he considered the true saying of Jesus Christ. This paste up version is known as the "Jefferson Bible." If you have never read it, you may find it interesting. As an atheist I do not agree with Jefferson's opinion of Jesus Christ. I view Jesus Christ as being illiterate, an alcoholic, a

charlatan, and as a terrorist. I regard atheism as the opposite of paganism. I define paganism as the worship of idols and idols as persons, places, or things. Four hundred years ago, I would have been burned at the stake for expressing this opinion. Being burned at the stake was not a figure of speech four hundred years ago. Michael Servetus was burned at the stake Oct. 2, 1553 with the approval of John Calvin. Execution by decapitation was first considered, but Calvin was persuaded that was "undue lenity." Incidentally, Servetus's crime was denying the belief in the trinity and infant baptism. Similarly, Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake Feb. 17, 1600. Among his numerous crimes was the claim that a plurality of worlds exist and have for eternity. As in the witch trials, the church (Pope Clement VIII) turned him over to civil authorities for the actual execution. The church must have no blood on its hands! The drive of some to recreate our nation as a theocracy worries some scientists who view religion as historically a foe of progress.

### **GOVERNED BY**

Another basic issue is who shall we be governed by? The philosophies of Jefferson and Madison mandated a government of reason, consent, and consensus. A religious based government, a theocracy, governs by dogma. Assuming a Christian leadership, whose principles would dominate? Not only are there a wide variety of beliefs, but we see a continual splitting off into new denominations over issues long held as fundamental. The current decline of membership in many mainline denominations and the rapid growth of new groups emphasizes the difficulty of finding common ground for forming a theocracy. Half humorously, one Catholic scholar has suggested that the second largest religious group in the United States today is the group of non-practicing Catholics. In the past 30, years evangelicals have gone from being "backwood bigots" to being regarded as almost equal compared to other religious groups with regard to wealth and education. The Bush administration has filled many offices with evangelicals. Their colleges' enrollments gained by 60 percent between 1990 and 2002. It will be interesting to see how the presidential election of 2008 will be affected by this rise in power, wealth, and education of the United States evangelicals

One alternative to a nation run by philosophers or clergyman is a nation run by scientists. A major difficulty here is that the general public is not composed of science literate people. Polls show many do not even grasp that the earth orbits the sun! In recent years, evangelicals have increased this illiteracy rate by railing against evolution and against accepting the basic tools of science such as theories, hypotheses, and just plain evidence.

### **WOMEN**

Another difficulty of forming a theocracy, especially a Christian theocracy, has been the wretched treatment of women historically, and some would argue to this very day. For example, way back in 477, the murder by monks of the philosopher-scientist Hypatia. One version claims the monks scraped her flesh from her bones with sea shells. Christianity is a male dominated religion. In the United States, women could not vote in a federal election until 1922. Surprisingly, very few women have been a force in philosophy. Until recent times, few women have had a place in physics, engineering, and astronomy. The failure of the Catholic church to install a woman priest let alone a woman bishop is causing more and more discussions by church members. Note that until recently, no woman has been a serious candidate for the United States presidency.

### **EVOLUTION**

Whenever we speak of progress, we most often imply an evolution toward a goal. That is,

philosophically speaking. To even use the word evolution raises the hackles of Christian fundamentalists. To them the whole world, as we know it, was created by their God some 6,000 years ago. The word evolution most often is used by scientists to designate Darwinian evolution. They accept it as a theory so well supported by evidence that for all practical purposes it may be regarded as an established fact by the general public. Many fundamentalists question the scientist's view that random mutations rather than a guiding hand directed the course of evolution. Some might argue that mankind's thinking processes have evolved from the philosophical to the religious stage and then to the science stage.

Three of the recent Republican candidates for president, when questioned as to if they believed in evolution, said they did not. They are Sam Brownback, Mike Huckabee, and Tom Tancredo. No wonder Europeans cannot fathom how our nation, a world leader in science, can possess so many people that are science illiterates. Some Americans also cannot fathom how the same Republican party claiming to be the party of fiscal responsibility can produce an administration capable of total fiscal irresponsibility.

Yet another example of the nation's science illiteracy, is the new 27 million dollar Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky. There, men and dinosaurs together enjoy their journey on Noah's Ark. The creationists are absolutely sure our world was created by a designer, but never ask who created the designer.

#### **STEM CELL**

With regard to evolution, have we evolved to the stage where we will control and direct it? Obviously, we have in a very real sense already had some influence. The modification of the wolf into an amazing variety of dogs is but one example. Luther Burbank improved plant life by careful selection. The present battle over stem cell research and its applications indicates a new level of control is being reached. How much of this battle will be influenced by philosophers and theologians remains to be seen. Scientists will argue it is vital research and will result in cures for diseases and cures for injuries never before thought possible. They note how in the years past vaccines were opposed for interfering with God's will. Ben Franklin's invention of the lightning rod was also said to interfere with God's will. In time, most churches installed lightning rods.

When a new technology appears on the scene, some embrace it as the greatest thing since sliced bread. Others are hostile and demand caution and warn of unintended consequences. Still others claim that because it does not conform to existing guidelines, it must not be rushed into.

#### **SUMMARY**

To summarize, it is as if there are three gurus, on three separate mountain tops, looking down into the very same valley, but they see three different valleys. The philosophical guru might say it is perfectly understandable that the other two have different descriptions of the valley and furthermore, it is the right of everyone to consult whichever guru they wish. The religious guru may insist his view is the only correct view and with time the other two gurus will come to agree with his view. The science guru may argue the valley is actually in a fog and with more government grants he can acquire the equipment that will enable him to see through the fog

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