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Models of the Interaction of Science and Religion

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Models of the Interaction of Science and Religion

Abstract

"As Christians we are... immersed in this scientific culture and yet God's Word communicates to us from very different cultural contexts."

Posting about religion and science from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/models-of-the-interaction-of-science-and-religion/>

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Disciplines

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Comments

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Models of the Interaction of Science and Religion

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Tony Jelsma

This is post #1 of 1 in the series *“Religion and Science - A Reformed Perspective”*

A series exploring the interactions between religion and science.

We live in a scientific age. The impacts of science and technology are all around us, from the ubiquity of cell phones, to amazing progress in our understanding of the creation, to life-saving advances in medical treatments. As Christians we are also immersed in this scientific culture and yet God’s Word communicates to us from very different cultural contexts. As a result, it can be a challenge to connect what we know about God from his Word to our present scientific understanding.

A frequent perception held by the general public is that religion and science are at odds; that science has supplanted religion. However, this perception has not always been the case. The warfare model of “religion versus science” that is prevalent today was largely influenced by Andrew Dickson White’s 1896 [A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom](#). However, John Hedley Brooke’s more recent in-depth study [Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives](#) points to a much more complex array of interactions. Religion often had a cordial relationship with science, even stimulating scientific advances.

Ian Barbour, in his [Religion in an Age of Science](#), describes four types of interactions between religion and science. These types form a spectrum of increasingly favorable interactions between religion and science. While my experience has been that the interactions of religion and science do not always fit into neat categories, I do find them to be a helpful starting point.

Conflict

The Conflict model assumes that religion and science are incompatible and that only one of these is a legitimate source of knowledge. We are familiar with the militant atheist-types like Richard Dawkins, who deride any kind of religious sentiment. For them religion is a delusion and the only true knowledge is scientific knowledge, which is subject to testing and objective analysis. However, what Dawkins and others like him do not acknowledge is that everyone is religious in some way. Roy Clouser argues convincingly in [The Myth of Religious Neutrality](#) that anything that is assumed to be true without question is thereby religious. Thus, Dawkins’ naturalistic perspective is in itself religious.

It is easy to see how people like Dawkins hold to the conflict model of “science versus religion”, but Barbour argues that biblical literalists do the same. For them the Bible is the only source of truth, and scientific knowledge must be interpreted in light of what the Bible says. If there is any perceived conflict, Scripture trumps science. One might even quote Romans 3:4, “Let God be true and every human being a liar.”

Independence

The late paleontologist, evolutionary biologist, and historian of science Stephen Jay Gould, coined the term NOMA in his book [Rocks of Ages](#). NOMA stands for Non-Overlapping Magisteria, which argues that the domain of science is the study of objective facts, while the domain of religion is that of personal values. In other words, science deals with the “what” and religion deals with the “why.” Thus, they cannot conflict because they have different functions.

However, as Nancy Pearcey pointed out in her book [Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from its Cultural Captivity](#) consigning religion to the values domain strips it of any factual basis because it is only tied to an individual's personal beliefs. When they appear to be in conflict on a particular question, objective science will always win out over subjective religion, leaving religion with nothing to contribute.

Dialogue

The dialogue position is a modification of the independence view and holds that religion and science are mostly separate, but acknowledges that in some cases an explanation in one field will have implications for the other. Sometimes the two perspectives may inform each other, but there may also be conflicts. Perhaps these two examples will help illustrate this position.

While the Big Bang is understood to be a scientific theory of the origin of the universe, it has theological implications. A beginning suggests a Beginner and some (Christian apologists) argue that this is evidence for God. Others try to avert the theological implications of the Big Bang by postulating a Big Crunch, where the universe would collapse in on itself and subsequently produce a new Big Bang, meaning the world did not have a beginning after all.

Second, a miracle is a unique event that God uses for special purposes. As such, a miracle is religious in nature. However, if a miracle really did happen, then there could be "scientific" evidence that it occurred. While one should be careful in asserting that miracles can be scientifically studied, since by definition miracles are unique, miracles are also real events.

Integration

The final position that Barbour describes is an integration position. In this view, both religion and science have authority to reveal truth. Moreover, the two perspectives are inextricably intertwined. One's theological perspective shapes how one uses and interprets science, but science also influences how we view God and his revelation and actions in the world.

Each of these views has its merits, but also its drawbacks. Tomorrow, we will investigate those in more detail. For now, I just wanted to establish clear understandings of these four positions as a baseline for the rest of our conversation.