

SCIENCE AND RELIGION.

By

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Religion has been in decline for a considerable time in the West, while science has been growing and prospering. There is a widespread misconception that the two areas are fundamentally incompatible, i.e. that one cannot have both a truly scientific and a truly religious outlook. I do not accept this. As a scientist, I obviously believe in the value and the power of science. But I also believe in the value and power of a spiritual dimension. There has always been tension between science and religion, and this will continue. I believe this tension is mutually beneficial. As Einstein said - 'Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind'.

It is a basic characteristic of science that all scientific knowledge is revisable, i.e. subject to revision in the light of new compelling evidence. Thus, Newton worked out the basic physical laws of motion and of gravity in the seventeenth century. Later, in the twentieth century, Einstein and others showed that Newton's laws apply precisely only to objects of the size we encounter in our everyday world and moving at speeds we are familiar with in the ordinary world. Modification must be introduced to describe movements of the very small (atoms) and the very large (astronomical), and movements at speeds approaching the speed of light.

Does science interpret Einstein's advance as a defeat of Newton's ideas and an embarrassment to science? Quite the contrary. Newton continues to be revered as possibly the greatest scientist of all time. Newton's main rival for that title is Einstein. Einstein's work is seen as enlarging and advancing on Newton's work, providing us with a glorious new vision. Science is full of examples where new research corrects, expands, or completely overthrows older ideas. All such changes are seen as victories for science, not defeats. In this regard, religion should take a leaf out of science's book.

Mankind has always sought to know God, and there seems little reason to doubt that this will always be true. Religion is the by-product of this search for God. In religion there are elements that are timeless, the principles as enunciated by the great teachers. Then there is the interpretation of the principles in terms of specific mechanisms and applications. This interpretation should be an evolving thing that matures and sharpens as humankind develops. Religion keeps getting into trouble because of its reluctance to allow interpretation of principle evolve in line with developments in scholarship, science and culture. Take the Christian churches and evolution as an example.

A literal interpretation of Genesis tells us that every species of life we know today was created separately by God. This was widely accepted by scientist and non-scientist alike until the announcement of the theory of evolution in 1858. The weight of the evidence produced by Darwin to show that species are not immutable, and that present species have slowly arisen from pre-existing species, was overwhelming.

The churches were shocked and staunchly resisted the new theory of evolution. However, in light of the weight of the evidence, the mainline churches gradually accommodated the new theory. The fundamentalist traditions staunchly reject evolution to this day. The mainline churches have a sufficiently rich intellectual tradition to accept evolution. The fundamentalist traditions, particularly American, stand largely bereft of an intellectual tradition, and have beached themselves on the rocky shore of literalism.

Despite the fact that the mainline Christian churches largely accept evolution, this scientific advance is seen as a defeat for religion, not an advance - a defeat of magic by rationality. Even mainline religion subconsciously sees it in this light, and is demoralised. In fact, quite a contrary view should be taken, something such as:- 'Evolution shows that the story in Genesis is not to be taken literally and should be studied for its moral and symbolic meaning. In doing this, science has rendered the Judaeo-Christian tradition a great service.'

Let us return to the overall scheme of timeless principle and understanding of specifics as it applies to the evolution case. The principle is that the world exists and operates by the will of God. The interpretation of principle is our understanding at any given time of how the world works in concrete and specific terms. Prior to the theory of evolution the interpretation regarding the biological world was that God created each species separately in an immutable form. After evolution our understanding is that God's scheme allows species to arise and evolve in a natural fashion. The understanding changed, the principle remains.

So, if Genesis is to be seen purely as a story bearing a moral message, what does this message mean? Genesis I, in summary, tells the following story. God first created light and *saw it was good*. He then created land and *saw that it was good*. He then separated the land and water and *saw it was good*. And so, he created the plants and animals and *seeing that they were good*, he went on to create human beings. M. Scott Peck makes some interesting suggestions as to the moral messages in Genesis in his book 'Further Along the Road Less Travelled' (Pocket Books, 1997). Peck suggests that at least part of the moral of Genesis I is that creativity is intimately connected with the impulse to do good.

Genesis 3 tells the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This can be interpreted as a description of the evolution of consciousness. With the evolution of consciousness and self-consciousness came a sense of separation from nature, shyness, and, most importantly, the awareness of good and evil and consequent choice. Only when we became conscious were we faced with the choice of choosing the truth or the lie. Good and evil sprang into existence, since without choice you cannot have evil. Gone was the cosy unconscious security of The Garden of Eden. From now on man prospered or withered as a consequence of consciously choosing good or evil.

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