The Odd Couple

Why Science and Religion Shouldn’t Cohabit

Jerry A. Coyne
2012 Bale Boone Symposium
The University of Kentucky
The problem

Accomodationism:

The widespread view that science and faith are compatible, harmonious, and even mutually reinforcing
Accommodationism is rife
The sponsors of many of these state and local proposals seem to believe that evolution and religion conflict. This is unfortunate. They need not be incompatible. Science and religion ask fundamentally different questions about the world. Many religious leaders have affirmed that they see no conflict between evolution and religion. We and the overwhelming majority of scientists share this view.

American Association for the Advancement of Science
If there’s no incompatibility, why do we have these?

72% of scientists at “elite” American universities are agnostic or atheists

93% of members of the National Academy of Sciences are agnostic or atheist

Only 16% of the American public are in this class
If science found a fact that contradicted the tenets of your faith, what would you do?

64% of Americans would reject the fact in favor of their faith!
More conflict: creationism in America

78%

40%
Why is this happening now?
“Religions can put up with all kinds of particular scientific ideas so long as these ideas do not contradict the sense that the whole scheme of things is meaningful. Religions can survive the news that Earth is not the center of the universe, that humans are descended from simian ancestors and even that the universe is fifteen billion years old. What they cannot abide, however, is the conviction that the universe and life are pointless.”

—John Haught, Deeper than Darwin

The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.

—Steven Weinberg, Dreams of a Final Theory
Terms of engagement

Science

Religion

Compatibility
Based on repeatable observations, experiments, replication, falsifiability

The first principle is that you must not fool yourself—and you are the easiest person to fool. So you have to be very careful about that.
—Richard Feynman

Knowledge changes based on confirmed or falsified hypothesis involving observations and experiments
RELIGION

Based on dogma, authority, and revelation

“Now science is the assurance of things that exist, hoped for or not, the conviction of things seen.”

—J. Coyne (Hebrew)

Religious ideas change in response not to increasing understanding of God or his ways, but to scientific advances (evolution) and changes in secular morality (treatment of women and gays)
In science, faith is a **vice**

In religion, faith is a **virtue**

In science, you have ways of knowing that you’re wrong

In religion, there is *no way of knowing if you’re wrong* or fooling yourself (unless science tells you).
Isn’t it easy to show compatibility between science and faith?

There are religious scientists and religious people who embrace science.

Francis Collins

Kenneth Miller
INCOMPATIBILITY

Methodological

Philosophical

Religion and science reach incompatible conclusions about the universe.
Incompatibility of *results*:

Religious methods of investigation (or Scripture) *could* have come up with truths identical to those found out by religion, but they don’t

- Special creation
- Existence of a soul
- Adam and Eve
- Great Flood
- Efficacy of prayer
- Virgin birth, resurrection
“But the Bible is not not a textbook of science!”

HISTORY

theistic religions do make assertions about real world

God works in the world in certain ways

And... some of scripture stories are true rather than mere metaphors

FALSIFIED CLAIMS

SCIENCE DISCARDED!

RELIGION BECOMES METAPHOR!
“On the contrary, religion is about the deepest of all realities. . . . Religion, to anyone who takes it seriously, is about what is Most Real.”
—John Haught, *Deeper than Darwin*

**Reality**: Real existence; what is real rather than imagined or desired; the aggregate of real things or existences.

—*The Oxford English Dictionary*
THE NICENE CREED: A METAPHOR?

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made. Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

And I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.
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Does religion PRODUCE truth?

Of course not!

Over thousands of years, religious inquiry has not produced a single truth about the universe

Theological knowledge does not expand
“It is the main business of religion to answer the big questions. . .

What’s going on in the universe?
Is there any point to it all?
Why are we here?
How should we live?
Does God exist?
Where did the universe come from?
Why does anything exist at all?
Why is there so much suffering?
Why do we die?
Do we live on after death?
How can we find release from suffering and sadness?
What can we hope for?”

--John Haught

*Deeper than Darwin*, p. 133
“The transience and expected death of the cosmos defy our attempts to state clearly what the ‘point’ of it all may be.”

—John Haught, *Deeper than Darwin*
Six ways that theology behaves unscientifically when it deals with science

• The assertion that the Bible doesn’t really say what it seems to say, especially if science says otherwise.

• The fact that theology (despite the assertions of its practitioners) doesn’t involve an honest search for truth, but a rationalization of things that you already believe to be true (or want to be true) from revelation or church dogma.

• Gross fabrication of arguments from whole cloth, i.e., making stuff up.

• Rationalizing every new observation as comporting with God’s plan.

• Unfounded claims to understand the nature and intention of God.

• Faiths not agreeing with theologians’ claims are deemed “incorrect”
The Bible doesn’t say what it seems to say

Adam and Eve

Refutation should breed increasing skepticism about ALL scripture!
In any case, were I try to elicit scientific evidence of immortality I would just be capitulating to the narrower empiricism that underlies naturalistic belief. What I will say, though, is that the hope for some form of subjective survival is a favorable disposition for nurturing trust in the desire to know.

John Haught, *The Promise of Nature*

“The assurance of things hoped for . . .
MAKING STUFF UP: WHY IS GOD HIDDEN?

“It is essential to religious experience, after all, that ultimate reality be beyond our grasp. If we could grasp it, it would not be ultimate.”


"The invisible and the non-existent look very much alike."

—Delos McKown
RATIONALIZING EVERYTHING AS COMPORING WITH GOD’S PLAN: WHY DOES EVOLUTION ENTAIL SUFFERING?

Nature’s contingencies and evolution’s randomness are not indicative of a divine impotence, but of a God caring and self-effacing enough to wait for the genuine emergence of what is truly other than God, with all the risk, tragedy, and adventure this patience entails.

John Haught, *Deeper than Darwin*
As actors to an audience are we to the gods;
They watch us for their sport.
EVERY POSSIBLE OBSERVATION CAN BE COMPORTED WITH RELIGION: EVOLUTION

The idea that secondary causes [evolution], rather than direct divine intervention, can account for the evolution of life may even be said to enhance rather than diminish the doctrine of divine creativity. Isn’t it a tribute to God that the world is not just passive putty in the Creator’s hands but instead an inherently active and self-creative process, one that can evolve and produce new life on its own?

—John Haught, Deeper than Darwin
UNFOUNDED CLAIMS TO UNDERSTAND THE NATURE AND INTENTION OF GOD

Without in any way rejecting evolutionary theory, theology may plausibly claim that biodiversity exists ultimately because of an extravagant divine generosity that provides the enabling conditions that invite the universe to become as interesting, various, and hence beautiful as possible.

—John Haught, Making Sense of Evolution
Can there be constructive “dialogue” between science and faith?
Can science contribute to faith?

YES, by disproving its assertions about the world

Can faith contribute to science?

NO, for we have no need of supernaturalist hypotheses

Ergo, science has greater authority than theology
Why does it matter?

Because religion is rarely a purely personal matter: if people didn’t think that religion was a reliable way to attain truth, they wouldn’t enforce those truths on others.
Destructive positions of the Catholic Church

• Opposition to birth control (also to prevent AIDS)
• Total opposition to abortion
• Opposition to divorce
• Opposition to homosexuality
• Control of people’s sex lives
• Making women second-class citizens
• Instillation of fear and guilt in children
• Protection of priests who abuse children
Real truth comes only from empirical investigation and analysis (science broadly construed)

What can be asserted without evidence can also be dismissed without evidence.
―Christopher Hitchens

Science will win because it works.
―Stephen Hawking