

The Overlap of Science and Faith

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March 7, 2020

The traditional view of science popular from the seventeenth to mid-twentieth centuries held that the scientist could collect and organize data free of all prejudices, thereby guaranteeing objectivity.¹ Most who hold this view typically see no role to be played by religious belief in the internal working of science. However, as Del Ratzsch points out, there are three possible positions one could take as to the influence religious belief should have upon science: “that there is no influence, strong influence or partial influence.”² Within each category lie more specific approaches, but upon examination only a limited complementarity approach fits with both reason and practice.

Those who believe there is no room for influence contend that science and religion inhabit separate domains, one material and the other spiritual. The late Stephen Jay Gould stated,

I do not see how science and religion could be unified, or even synthesized, under any common scheme of explanation or analysis; but I also do not understand why the two enterprises should experience any conflict. Science tries to document the factual character of the natural world, and to develop theories that coordinate and explain these facts. Religion, on the other hand, operates in the equally important, but utterly different, realm of human purposes, meanings and values – subjects that the factual domain of science might illuminate, but can never resolve.³

Gould refers to this idea as “the Principle of NOMA, or Non-Overlapping Magisteria.”⁴

¹ Del Ratzsch, *Science & Its Limits: The Natural Sciences in Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 18.

² *Ibid.*, 143.

³ Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballentine, 1999), 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

Such attempts at separation are misguided. As Ratzsch observes, “It’s not really clear how the respective realms are to be divided. In fact, religious statements and scientific statements are often about some of the same subjects.”⁵ John Polkinghorne launches similar objections.

Not only is NOMA contrary to actual experience; its approach is rationally flawed. To maintain its asserted separation it needs to appeal to highly dubious dichotomies, such as the notion that science deals only with public facts and religion only with private opinions. Both halves of this statement are in error. There are no interesting scientific facts that are not already interpreted facts.⁶

If science and religion cannot be so neatly separated as Gould claimed, then there must be some degree of overlap between them. Those who recognize this fact, yet still wish to maintain a firm distinction between the disciplines, may claim complementarity. Perhaps science and religion address the same objects but offer different types of explanations and address separate categories pertaining to those objects. They speak at different levels, and as such describe things in complementary rather than conflicting terms.

A strict complementarist argues that there is no common ground between the levels on which science and religion speak, and therefore no opportunity for conflict between them. As Ratzsch describes this view,

since religious and scientific explanations are on different levels and are independent of one another, both can be *complete* on their respective levels. Thus, neither religion nor science can invade the other because their concepts, descriptions and explanations are of different logical types.⁷

⁵ Ratzsch, *Science & Its Limits*, 144.

⁶ John Polkinghorne, “The Continuing Interaction of Science and Religion,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science* 40, no. 1 (2005): 45.

⁷ Ratzsch, *Science & Its Limits*, 145.

However, strict complementarity is inconsistent with the necessary observation that scientific explanations can never be truly complete. The entire scientific enterprise rests on certain necessary presuppositions, such as the uniformity and comprehensibility of the universe. These presuppositions cannot be justified by science itself. Furthermore, science requires the existence of certain physical conditions before it can operate. Thus, it can say nothing of the initial physical conditions of the universe. If scientific explanations by definition cannot be complete, then strict complementarity cannot be true.

Some philosophers of science, recognizing the impossibility of completely separating the realms of science and religion in any meaningful sense, have swung the pendulum to the opposite extreme and claimed that the two disciplines are inextricably bound to such a degree that a believer and unbeliever cannot even mean the same thing by the statement “ $2 = 2 = 4$.” Again, Ratzsch explains, “the believer will hold that belief as part of a total system that contains belief in God and commitment to him, while the unbeliever will hold the corresponding belief as part of a total system which does not contain that belief in God or that commitment.”⁸ However, this does not bear out in practice. Theistic and atheistic scientists have successfully worked together, adequately communicated with one another and agreed upon scientific conclusions.

If complete separation is inappropriate and inseparable blending is equally untrue, then the relationship between faith and science must fall somewhere in the middle. Limited complementarity agrees with the complementarian notion that objects can be described from both religious and scientific perspectives, but denies that either such description is, in and of itself, complete. For example, a deist may argue that the necessary scientific presuppositions and

⁸ Ibid., 148.

the initial conditions of the universe must be described in theological terms, but everything thereafter (as regards the religious and the scientific) is distinct.

Of course, this will not be satisfactory for Christians who believe God has been actively involved in His creation many times after His initial creative act, most significantly in the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, a Christian scientist may still adopt a form of limited complementarity in which, as described by Ratzsch, “many, *but not all*, phenomena coming after the start of creation are capable of complementary descriptions and explanations.”⁹ The acknowledgement that at times God intervenes miraculously into His creation does not prevent us from studying what occurs in the general uniformity and consistency of that creation. In fact, it is precisely on the presupposition that the universe is a *creation* that we can reasonably expect it to be uniform and consistent.

Thus, NOMA fails on both experiential and rational grounds. It is neither consistent with what we observe nor with what is reasonable. Strict complementarism is inadequate due to its insistence on scientific and religious explanations being complete in their own right, whereas scientific explanations clearly cannot be complete. Only limited complementarity, and specifically that of a variety that permits the intervention of God after creation, is consistent with observed reality, logical rationality and God’s revelation.

⁹ Ibid., 151.