A Short Summary of the Religion vs. Science Debate

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Abstract
The religion vs. science debate has intensified in the last few decades. A number of philosophers, scientist, and specialists in various fields have contributed to the debate over what constitutes religious belief and what constitutes empirical scientific fact. This paper seeks to provide a very short and concise overview of a few of the prominent opinions expressed in regards to this debate throughout the latter part of the twentieth century.

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"The dominance of either science or religion and the assumption that one must exclude the other have been in part products of the failure to analyze adequately the characteristics of diverse ways of knowing" (Barbour, p. 29). Ian Barbour's *Religion and Science* is an attempt to reframe the argument that religion and science have traditionally been hostile to one another. He makes a convincing case by presenting the discussion in light of not just the specific claims of religion and science themselves, but by presenting the argument through an examination of, as he says, diverse ways of knowing. Through his presentation of four models through which we can evaluate the relationship between religion and science (conflict, independence, dialogue, and integration), Barbour provides the reader with a unique vantage point from which to draw his or her own conclusions as to how we can reconcile the competing claims of these two seemingly irreconcilable disciplines.

Barbour's approach has changed my view on the relationship between religion and science. I had not encountered the view that the two schools of thought could be rationally viewed as having some attributes in common. In addition, his treatment of the historical relationship

between not only the study of science and the practice and religion, but the similarities between science as a rational study and religion as a spiritual practice is interesting and compelling. He presents his evidence in a clear and convincing fashion. His argument is well supported and he draws in a great deal of historical information to reinforce his thesis that "dialogue" and "integration" are in fact avenues that can and should be considered when evaluating the relationship between science and religion. The concepts of dialogue and integration set Barbour's argument apart from other scholarly treatises on the subject. I will briefly compare Barbour's work with three other works which had previously provided the majority of the foundation for my views on the relationship and conflict between religion and science. These works are C.P. Snow's *The Two Cultures*, Daniel Boorstin's *The Discoverers*, and Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern*.

My previous insights into the relationship between science and religion were more in accord with C.P Snow's thoughts that he presented in his book *The Two Cultures*. Snow presents the not very radical idea that over the course of the last few centuries, a genuine split has developed between the practitioners of the sciences on the one hand, and the literary world on the other. Snow identifies himself as "by training, a scientist, by vocation, a writer" (Snow, p. 1). While he presents himself as a scholar who immerses himself occasionally in both cultures as he defines them--namely, the literary and the scientific—he does not take this logic as far as Barbour by proclaiming that many of the participants in the religion vs. science debate have at various times found themselves on both sides of the divide. Evaluating the relationship between religion and science through the lens of individuals involved in the debate is an interesting and compelling new avenue of inquiry, and one which Barbour pursues in the early chapters of *Religion and Science.*

In any debate on the relationship between religion and science, Galileo and Newton are certainly pivotal figures. Barbour makes the point that while Galileo and Newton introduced ideas that challenged the existing authority of the Church, these men did not purposefully challenge the Church. Referring to Newton, Barbour states that "often, as in the case of Newton, scientific and religious ideas interacted in complex ways within the life of the same person" (Barbour 25). Even military

theoretician Carl von Clausewitz points to a similar phenomenon when he states that "moral values can only be perceived by the inner eye, which differs in each person, and is often different in the same person at different times" (Clausewitz, p. 137). The idea that individuals would be at all times completely devoted to the dictates of science or the faith inherent in a religious tradition without ever crossing the boundary into the other discipline, either academically or personally in their own meditative lives is one that Barbour dismisses. He goes on to attribute the same phenomenon to English theologian John Wesley, whose interest "lay in practical applications and the use of science to demonstrate God's wisdom" (Barbour, 42). Barbour's presentation of figures such as Newton and Wesley as members of both the scientific and religious communities is an interesting way to prepare the reader for the models of dialogue and integration that follow.

While C.P. Snow does present very interesting and well documented evidence that since the nineteenth century, a true emergence of two separate cultures has appeared, he does not provide the great deal of analysis and scholarly advice that Barbour does to reconcile this divide and offer some insight into the similarities between the two cultures themselves. This observation is not so much a critique of Snow, but rather should be seen as a compliment towards Barbour's treatment of the subject in an innovative and compelling style. Barbour has gone above and beyond C.P. Snow's argument; there is an interesting comparison to be made between Barbour's argument and the work of French philosopher Bruno Latour. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour outlines the parameters of what he calls science studies—a subset in the field of cultural analysis. Latour's thesis is that there is a fundamental disconnect between practitioners of what amounts to the hard and the soft sciences. He claims that the debate is not merely one between science and religion or between the literary and scientific cultures. His claim is more complicated; essentially that the modern intellect is truncated into three compartments, roughly equivalent in practice to analysis through the lens of nature, politics, or discourse (Latour, p. 3).

As a member of the French Left, it is imperative that Latour's argument be complex and difficult to understand to the casual reader. However, one can eventually discern that Latour is addressing the nature of the

modern mind. His approach differs from Barbour's but there are some similarities. While Barbour provides four models for transcending the divide between science and religion, Latour only offers what amounts to a single remedy, namely that through dialogue between the three compartmented disciplines, "retying the Gordian knot" that has been cut through the truncation of the modern intellect might lead us back to a unified lens through which to view the events that shape the world (Latour, p. 3). Latour offers a much more pessimistic view of the future, while Barbour's four models provide the reader with some optimism regarding the future of the relationship between science and religion.

One aspect that Ian Barbour could have elaborated upon in *Religion and Science* is the nature of the debate outside the West. Barbour addresses religion and science in the Islamic world and in China, but only in a cursory manner. His task is monumental enough illustrating the argument from a Eurocentric point of view, and he should not be faulted for focusing primarily on this area. He does state that the modern science developed in the West, and few historians would argue against this. Perhaps one would be best to look to Daniel Boorstin's *The Discoverers* to fill in this gap. Boorstin has provided a thorough, albeit not a scholarly, review of the history of the many discoveries from a variety of disciplines that have shaped the world as we know it today. Boorstin presents much the same historical narrative that Barbour provides, and as such he focuses on the accomplishments of individuals such as Galileo and Newton, as well as on the many discoveries that took place in other places such as China and the Islamic world. However, like Barbour, Boorstin has his task cut out for him in attempting to present the reader with a review of the historical narrative of the major discoveries that have shaped the modern world. As Boorstin notes, "In Newton converged and climaxed the forces advancing science" (Boorstin, p. 402). While he is correct to identify Newton as one of the leading advocates of the field of science, he does not elaborate on any of the overlap between Newton's scientific discoveries and his attachment to the Christian faith as Barbour convincingly does in *Religion and Science.* Again, of all the scholarly and historical narratives relating to the subject, Barbour appears to be one of the few to convincingly identify major participants in the debate between science and religion as at times adhering to the intellectual dictates of both fields.

Boorstin's lengthy and entertaining journey through history that he presents in *The Discoverer's* is aimed at a different audience than *Religion and Science*, but nonetheless readers will come away with the common impression that the study of science and the practice of religion are two irreconcilable fields. Boorstin is not interested in trying to reconcile these subjects, and so to compare his work to Barbour's may be a bit unfair. However, while C.P. Snow, Bruno Latour, and Daniel Boorstin all present compelling treatises on their chosen subjects, when compared to Barbour's treatment of the relationship between religion and science, they do not provide the level of depth and analysis, and most importantly they do not provide the roadmap for considering possible reconciliation between the two fields.

Barbour's roadmap for reconciling the fields of religion and science consists in four models, which as stated are conflict, independence, dialogue and integration. The first two models are fairly self explanatory, and perhaps it is fair to say that the most commonly viewed model through which this relationship is viewed is that of conflict—the assertion that the fields conflict with each other in both theory and practice. The independence model is also a fairly self-explanatory view that holds that the fields of study should remain apart in both theory and practice. Barbour proposes that both the conflict model and the independence model can be overcome, and to this end he offers the models of dialogue and integration. Introducing the section of his book that deals with these models, he notes that "the first major challenge to religion in an age of science is the success of the methods of science" (Barbour, p. 77). He goes on to discuss the methods of science, and he convincingly draws some parallels to the methods of scientific study and practice, and the methods of religious study and practice, as well as to the methodology of historical interpretation itself.

Barbour refers on numerous occasions to Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. This major study in the field of the philosophy of science focuses on the nature of paradigm shifts that occur within the field of scientific study. While Kuhn does not specifically address the possible linkages between the scientific revolutions that he illustrates through his explanation of paradigm shifts and the possibility that similar paradigms and paradigm shifts may be found in other intellectual disciplines, he does say that "limitations of space have

drastically affected my treatment of the philosophical implications of this essay's historically oriented view of science" (Kuhn, p. x). One can assume that Kuhn may have been willing to admit to similarities between the paradigms in science and the paradigms that Barbour contends also exist in the field of religion. It is the claim that paradigms exist within the study of religion that sets Barbour's argument on a higher level than most discussions on this subject. Discussing what he describes as a paradigm shift that occurred in Christianity during the writing of the Pauline letters, Barbour makes the convincing case that "it was evident that Christianity could not be a sect of Judaism . . . and individuals had to choose one paradigm community or the other, focusing on either Christ or the Torah" (Barbour, p. 130). If this description of a paradigm shift in first-century Christianity does not compare to the paradigm shift that Kuhn explains occurred in science as a result of the work of Galileo and Newton, then perhaps the term "paradigm" needs to be redefined.

Barbour reinforces his argument with additional examinations of scholarly opinion. He has stated that it is through diverse ways of knowing that we can best hope to bridge the gap between religion and science. Discussing historical interpretation itself, he cites Carl Becker's explanation that history is portrayed differently through the generations. Barbour quotes Becker as saying that "The history of any event is never precisely the same to two different persons . . . and every generation writes the same history in a new way" (Barbour, p. 138). Barbour does not reference Hayden White, but White's *Metahistory* presents a very similar thesis. White explains that *Metahistory* is "meant to contribute to the current discussion of the *problem of historical knowledge*" (White, p. 1). White's work is therefore a complimentary piece to Barbour's *Religion and Science*, as Barbour is investigating diverse ways of knowing, and exploring diverse ways of addressing the divide between the relationship between science and religion, while White is presenting the reader with an examination of the diverse ways of knowing that exist in the field of the history of history itself. Establishing the idea that history itself is subject to diverse interpretations supports Barbour's claim that there should not be a single lens through which we view the conflict and the possible resolution of the conflict between religion and science. Relying on Kuhn to provide an example that can be used to evaluate the similarities

between the methods of science and religion, and relying on historians such as Becker to provide an account of various interpretations of historical study gives an impetus to Barbour's thesis that might otherwise be lacking.

In discussing the models of dialogue and integration, Barbour points to many scholars and theologians who have attempted to rise above the divide that has existed between the fields of religion and science. He mentions figures such as John Lovelock and Teilhard de Chardin, explaining that their views, which are rooted in natural theology, are a possible avenue towards realizing the integration model, even though their arguments may be controversial and not necessarily accepted in full by the scientific community at large (Barbour, p. 100). Barbour also explains that environmental studies and stewardship present another avenue for integration. While not specifically mentioning O.P Dwivedi and Stephanie Kaza, these Hindu and Buddhist writers respectively offer ideas which are congruent with the integration model; namely that religious belief coupled with scientific evidence can provide an avenue for better environmental practice and policy. It is the integration model which Barbour hopes can provide the most compelling avenue for bridging the divide between religion and science as it exists today. It is also the model in which he shows that diverse thinkers are most likely to be found.

Ian Barbour has presented a most compelling examination of the relationship between religion and science. My view of this relationship was previously influenced by the commonly accepted notion that these two disciplines were by nature incompatible and were best dealt with separately. C.P. Snow presents this general idea in *The Two Cultures*. Bruno Latour argues that the divide is deeper than that between only two disciplines, but generally he also supports the idea that as intellectual practices, science and religion are, or have progressively become, somewhat irreconcilable. Barbour transcends these arguments. He presents four ideas—conflict, independence, dialogue, and integration—and explains that through dialogue and especially through integration, the study of religion and science can be approached through an interdisciplinary manner, potentially closing the divide that has existed between them. By considering diverse ways of knowing, and by offering diverse solutions that transcend the differences that separate the

two fields, *Religion and Science* quite simply reframes the traditional argument in a convincing and well supported manner. It is likely that most readers will come away with a renewed appreciation for the possibility of bridging the divide that has existed for far too long between religion and science.

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