Letters to the Editor

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To the Editor:

In the December issue of Bridgewater Review, Milton Boyle's interesting article on the relationship of science and religion presents this relationship from the perspective of a religionist. I believe that some of his conclusions seriously misrepresent the basic nature of scientific inquiry. In particular when five astrophysical assumptions are listed and it is then claimed that "these basic assumptions, accepted by the world's most renowned astrophysicists are their statements of faith."

For a scientist an assumption is nothing more than a working hypothesis which the scientist is constantly questioning, refining, and eager to discard if evidence contradicts it. On the other hand a statement of faith for a religionist can sometimes be refined, but never discarded. It is the acceptance of absolute articles of faith which cannot be abandoned that distinguishes religion from other human activities. This is a fundamental difference. It renders science and religion forever irreconcilable in spite of Professor Boyle's best wishes to the contrary.

The author dismisses the creationists' attempts at trying to portray religion as scientific. However he is guilty of a similar simplification in trying to portray science as religionlike. Instead of scientific creationism he is proposing religious astrophysics! Rather than trying to reconcile religion and science, their different roles should be emphasized and appreciated.

In conclusion, I would like to paraphrase the author when he refers to scientists and theologians climbing opposite sides of a mountain:

They will eventually meet at the top, having arrived thus at the same point. Some seriously scientific person will surely be there to ask, "Where have you been? I have been waiting for you."

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Professor Boyle responds:

My esteemed colleague, Professor Hugo D'Alarcao beautifully demonstrates the "stereotypical" thinking my article challenges. Assumptions for the scientist, just as for the religionist, are far more than working hypotheses and can be just as passionately defended in the face of contrary evidence as any religious tenet. Isaac Newton, I am sure, would be vehemently defending his theories and challenging Einstein should they both be alive today. The steady-state theorist still adamantly defends his creation-theory in spite of the almost absolute lack of evidence to support it and in the face of convincing evidence for the Big Bang theory. Religionists, on the other hand, do sometimes discard their assumptions -- conversions occur all the time. I do not think either side is ever "eager to discard" its set theories, assumptions, statements of faith. I especially know no scientist who is willing (let alone eager) to discard his most basic assumption of all -- that the scientific method, i.e., empirical proof, is the only way to be sure of anything. No religionist holds any belief more tenaciously!

Therein, however, lies the crux of our problem. The basic difference between the scientist and the religionist is that the latter refuses to believe that only empirically demonstrated statements can be true. The former acknowledges that there may be truths for which there can be no tangible or sensuous evidence, and is willing to bet his life on it. The point of my article is to show that the scientist now has to accept and build upon assumptions that can never be empirically proven. He may not like it but he must face it.

A further point to my article is this: while the religionist's prime concern is meaning, the scientist seldom concerns himself with it. He feels free to inquire anywhere and seeks to discover truths no matter the cost. For him meaning is beyond empiricism and thus cannot be dealt with. Now, I aver, the scientist must no longer afford himself the luxury of research without raising questions of meaning philosophically and/or religiously. I am surely proposing religious astrophysics, religious biology, religious science, as legitimate avenues of inquiry!

I readily admit my article is presented from the point of view of the religionist, but I am also a scientist and had space permitted, I should like to have written for the scientist in me. Religion needs to become more aware of the sciences, their immeasurable contributions to the discovery of truth and of the value of the "scientific method." Next time.

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