Making Sense of Bioethics
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Are Science and Religion Really Enemies?

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One subject I often end up discussing with friends and acquaintances is the apparent conflict between religion and science. A surprising number of people believe these two powerful forces in our society are incompatible with each other. Some even claim there is an "inherent conflict" between them.

When people learn that I am a scientist and a Catholic priest, a common response is, "Wow, how do you do it?" Although it may appear to a casual observer that science and religion make competing claims over the same questions, in reality they do not.

Already back in the late 1500's a well-known churchman named Cardinal Baronius made the point that religion teaches us "the way to go to heaven, not the way the heavens go." Science, on the other hand, addresses the physical world and "how the heavens go." This simple but important distinction, which was later incorporated into the writings of Galileo, reminds us that science and religion are objectively compatible with each other since they have distinct and unique domains.

Yet even if they deal with different domains, science and religion can and must speak to each other. Albert Einstein already saw this when he made his now-famous remark: "Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind." Science and religion need each other and must work together. Pope John Paul II asserted this same fundamental point when he said: "Science can purify religion from error and superstition. Religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes."

This task of collaboration and purification, however, is not an easy one in an environment of mutual doubt, suspicion and hostility. One reason for such hostility is that religion often purifies science by insisting on the primacy of ethics. Yet many scientists seem to balk at the claim that scientific knowledge must be joined to a truthful conscience, or that the pursuit of science needs to attenuated through the filter of ethics.

In fact, the much-hyped conflict between religion and science turns out to be largely a conflict between men of science and men of religion, rather than between science itself and religion itself. Ultimately, some scientists may become uncomfortable when they perceive that science cannot adequately address value questions or provide answers to the ultimate questions that religion

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addresses. Some men of faith may similarly feel threatened when they finally have to acknowledge that the Bible is not, in fact, a scientific textbook.

A further explanation for the suspicion between scientists and men of faith can be the ill will generated by a vocal minority of scientists who suggest that religion has a "softening influence on the brain," or that men and women of faith are "spared the trouble of thinking" when they live by religious dogma and strong ethical principles. Quite the opposite is actually the case. True religion, like good science, promotes a more measured rationality, and a more ordered thoughtfulness as we consider the created world we are a part of. Absolute religious dogmas and invariable ethical principles do not stifle thinking any more than absolute definitions and unalterable geometric postulates stifle the thinking of the student of geometry. The rules of geometry do not "spare us the trouble of thinking" but rather help us to think in a structured way, providing us with the very categories we need in order to be able to enter more deeply into this branch of mathematics. Similarly, religious dogma and sound ethical teaching afford us the essential categories we need to enter reasonably into a discussion of the ultimate questions that every person faces, questions of purpose, morality and human destiny. Religion, in the words of G. K. Chesterton, is never "an arrest of thought, but a fertile basis and constant provocation of thought."

Moving past the mutual suspicion that has arisen between scientists and men of faith is thus a critical first step in seeing how religion and science are not, in fact, enemies at all. The two are able not only to co-exist peaceably, but within the person of the scientist, religion and science can ultimately interconnect and strengthen one another. The pioneering astronomer and mathematician Johannes Kepler, who first calculated the elliptical orbits of the planets, perhaps put it best when he wrote:

> "The chief aim of all investigations of the external world should be to discover the rational order and harmony which has been imposed on it by God and which He revealed to us in the language of mathematics."

That source of rationality, which is God himself, should be a source of continual wonder for each of us, as it was for Einstein when he mused: "The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible."

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