
Science, Religion or Ideology?

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One of the most refreshing developments in contemporary intellectual life is the re-emergence of militant atheism. Authors such as Sam Harris (*The End of Faith*) and Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*) argue that not some but all religions are fundamentalist. All human discourse is said to be corrupted when it moves beyond that which can be sustained by reason and experience. "Religion", says Harris, "is the only area of our discourse in which people are systematically protected from the demand to give evidence in defence of their strongly held beliefs".

These arguments take us to the heart of a modern dilemma. How does religion shape up against the other major contenders for our intellectual, emotional and spiritual attention - science and ideology? This is a hard argument to handle because the connections between these paradigms are often as important as the separations we make when observing and contrasting them from afar. Right from the outset, then, I acknowledge the over-simplification that can result from abstraction.

Arguments about these matters are as explosive and politically important today as they were in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when the scientific outlook and Enlightenment thought generally challenged the orthodoxies of the day. Today the challenge is going the other way with science and enlightenment under attack from the politics of faith just as they often were from the politics of ideology in the twentieth century.

The problem, of course, is that a good deal of what passes for "science" these days is narrow and limited in its view of reality. As the Abbott of the Bodhinyana Monastery in Perth, Ajahn Brahm, pointed out to me recently: "Scientists are indeed sceptical fellows that is sceptical about everything apart from their chosen field." All too often our scientists forget that just because something is difficult to find doesn't mean we should abandon the quest and just because something can be done doesn't mean it should be done.

For science to be effective it needs to be genuinely agnostic. This point was made by T.H. Huxley and has more recently been taken up in Stephen Batchelor's brilliant tract *Buddhism Without Beliefs*. He described Huxley's agnostic approach in the following way:

He expressed this principle positively as: "Follow your reason as far as it will take you", and negatively as: "Do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable."

What he is describing is not just a way of thinking but a way of living and relating to the world of nature and society.

According to these tests the foundations for much that passes as religion or ideology collapses. That this is strongly disputed by True Believers is just as evident. Note, for example, how the language of science has been appropriated to give legitimacy to faith (religion) and commitment (ideology). On the one side we are presented with "Natural Law", on the other with "The Laws of

History". The logic of fundamentalist belief is similar in both cases. For example, in structure and intent, if not in content, the culture wars being fought by the New Right today are unnervingly similar to those fought by the New Left in the 1960s and 70s.

Ours is a human condition that involves suffering, uncertainty in the face of death and contradiction in the journey of life. Somehow our needs always seem to be more complex than our capacity to understand and manage them. We have no choice but to live with the consequences of what we do. Human beings are always asking: "Surely there is a better way?"

Religion offers consolation and hope. Ideology offers commitment and utopia. When the two join together the results are either inspirational (or potentially liberating) or dangerous (and potentially enslaving). Some of the great campaigns in human history – the anti-slavery movement, Gandhi's satyagraha and the Civil Rights Movement in the USA – are examples of the former. Examples of the latter are, unfortunately, easier to find and give credence to the view that the joining of religion and politics can produce nasty results, as indeed can ideology when left to its own devices.

Herein lies the most important contradiction of all. Whilst religion speaks of God's plan for humanity it is haunted by the prospect of a future in Hell. Whilst ideology points to the realization of our human nature it too is haunted by images of dystopia and hellish oppression. Could it be that the very nature of religion and ideology creates its own demons? In asking too much of the human intellect or expecting too much of the human will they have created surplus tensions and brought an apocalyptic dimension to that which is more prosaic and mundane - the everyday activities of human beings in making a living, forming communities and creating law and government. It is not just implausible to reduce our personal or collective histories to a struggle between God and Satan or a battle between Good and evil, it can be a dangerous and self-fulfilling prophecy. How many souls have been destroyed and how many people killed on the altar of religion and in the courtrooms of ideology?

Isn't the point here that our benchmark should be human life and happiness? Science can co-operate with religion that is coupled with doubt or ideology that is tempered with humility. More to the point science needs each of the others to be relevant and useful. Religion properly takes us to the mystery of the Universe but all too often completes the picture and closes the door with "God" from which all originate and to which all return for Judgement. Ideology properly takes us to the potentiality of human nature but like religion completes the picture and closes the door with "Utopia" in relation to which all history is judged and towards which all history is moving.

It's more than coincidence that religion, particularly eastern religion, has prompted much contemplative science and that ideology has been linked to a serious study of the moral, political and social sciences. Science ought not to be self-enclosed and narrowly empiricist but deeply reflective and hungry for new knowledge about the human condition. We see progress when science, religion and ideology feed off and learn from each other.

A study of history and human nature also tells us is that hope is not illusory and change is possible. There aren't any laws but there are lessons. To see life as a learning process is to imagine that knowledge is always provisional and to believe that differences ought to be respected. This is surely a better way to live. The challenge for all of us who defend the values associated with liberty, science and the enlightenment is to defend our way of life without falling

into the fundamentalist trap set by religion and ideology. As I often find when reflecting on matters like this the last word goes to Gandhi: ·

I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.