

II. CUESTIONES  
FUNDAMENTALESTHE FUTURE OF THE SCIENCE-RELIGION  
DIALOGUE AND THE DANGER OF SCIENTISM\*

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**ABSTRACT:**

In this essay I focus on some conditions of importance for the development of a fruitful science-religion dialogue; conditions that are not always recognized. One of them is that we must acknowledge much more explicitly that this world is much bigger than the world of science. There are many beliefs – besides religious ones – that we human beings hold which are not scientific beliefs, but which nevertheless are rational, justified, and might even constitute knowledge. It would be a fatal mistake to focus solely on science and religion in the science-religion dialogue and forget about the rest, because it would then be easy to convey the impression that religious belief is unique in being non-scientific, and to promote unintentionally a scientistic attitude or the hegemony of science.

**Key-words:** Scientism – worldview – humanities - life-world - religion.

**RESUMEN:**

En este artículo, yo me concentro sobre algunas condiciones de importancia para el desarrollo de un diálogo ciencia-religión que pueda ser fructífero; se trata de condiciones que no siempre son reconocidas. Una de ellas consiste en que debemos reconocer en forma mucho más explícita que este mundo es mucho más grande que el mundo de la ciencia. Existen muchas creencias, además de religiosas, que tenemos los seres humanos, y que no son creencias científicas, pero que sin embargo son racionales, justificadas e incluso pueden constituir conocimiento. Sería un error fatal, en el diálogo ciencia-religión, concentrarse únicamente sobre la ciencia y la religión y olvidarse del resto, porque de este modo se podría transmitir la impresión de que la creencia religiosa es la única que no es científica y, de este modo, promover involuntariamente una actitud científicista o la idea de la hegemonía de la ciencia.

**Palabras clave:** Cientificismo – cosmovisión – humanidades – vida del mundo - religión.

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Many of us think that science and religion may be the two most powerful social forces in the world today, and that a fruitful dialogue between them is possible and necessary to safeguard the future of humanity and the world in which we live. Some of us also believe that both of them are crucial in our quest for truth, or for obtaining a comprehensive understanding of reality. Having said that, I nevertheless think that one fatal mistake is to focus solely on science and religion in the science-religion dialogue and forget to mention anything else, because it is then easy to convey the impression that religious belief is unique in being non-scientific and to promote unintentionally a scientific attitude in

society or the hegemony of science. It is only if we embrace scientism – whether explicitly or implicitly – that we would think there to be something problematic in principle about a group of beliefs which fall outside the purview of science. In this essay, I argue that a fruitful – critical and constructive – dialogue between science and religion requires not simply that we take into account that they are different sorts of activities or practices (and try not to transform one into the other or set up one of them as the standard that the other has to meet), but that we also take into account that the world is much bigger than the worlds of science or religion or both.

### A SCIENTISTIC VERSUS A NON-SCIENTISTIC WORLDVIEW

To see why this is so, it would be helpful to have a concept that we could use to refer to people's total way of looking at themselves and the world. Such an outlook could be religious or non-religious or secularistic, could give science a central role or almost no place at all, and so forth. I suggest that we use the term "worldview" and we might define it thus:

*A worldview is, roughly speaking, the constellation of attitudes, beliefs and values that people – consciously or unconsciously – hold which are of relevance for understanding who they really are, what the world is ultimately like and what their place is in it, what they should do to live a satisfying or good*

*life, and what they can say, know and rationally believe about these things.*

So two things, among others, that a worldview encompasses are our ontology – what (ultimately) exists and how these things are related to one another and what properties they have, and our epistemology – what we can know and rationally believe about these things, properties and relationships. Let me leave religion aside for the moment and identify three other aspects or parts of people's worldviews.

A crucial part of a person's worldview is their *everyday-life world* or *commonsense world*. I am thinking here about our beliefs in our own existence, in other people, animals and plants, artwork, cars, restau-

rants, carpenters, teachers, odors, colors, sound, music; that we can think and express different emotions, that we can talk to each other, that people can express their intentions, communicate through language, that we can do good or evil things, act selfishly or unselfishly, care about other people, ignore them, and so on. These are the kinds of things and properties that abound in the world and that we all unavoidably contend with and care about. This is the world that we all encounter and interact with every day. For some people, their everyday-life world might constitute their entire worldview, but at least for those of us who participate in the science-religion dialogue it only constitutes one (admittedly central) part of our total worldview.

For most of us, the *sciences* also make an important contribution to our worldview. They tell us, for instance, that the universe came into existence through the Big Bang 15,000 million or so years ago, that the earth is one planet among several moving in elliptical orbits around the sun in our galaxy, which is one among a huge number of galaxies. They tell us that there are laws of nature, that life emerged out of a primitive soup of matter and developed through a process of evolution, that all living things on earth belong to the same tree of life, and so on.

As well as the research, we have on the natural world, we also have research on society and culture. So, for most of us the *humanities*, very broadly conceived, also give an important contribution to our worldview. They tell us that there have

been many civilizations in human history, that despite the existence of different languages it is possible to detect a grammatical structure in all languages, that for a long time an important power in Europe was the Roman empire, that there are different forms of government, that different countries have different legal systems underpinned by different theories of justice, that there are processes of globalization and secularization going on in the world today, and so forth.

When it comes to the relationship between our everyday-life world, the sciences and the humanities, many of us think (or just assume) that even if they sometimes come into conflict with each other, they each make their own important contribution to our worldview. We basically have what we might call a complementary understanding of these parts of our worldview. One way of expressing this *complementary view* would be to say that the sciences and the humanities do not tell us what exists, but tell us *what else* exists besides those things and properties we already know to exist through our everyday-life practices. So, for instance, I know I had breakfast this morning, that it tasted really good, and that breakfasts are a part of the furniture of the world. But, I don't need the sciences or the humanities to know these things; I need them to tell me what else exists besides such things and properties. On this account, the sciences and the humanities give us theories to explain or help us understand things that are not directly accessible to us in our everyday life.

Now, it is important to realize that not all of us share such an essentially complementary view of the relationship between our everyday-life world, the sciences and the humanities. Some people would rather say that even if our everyday-life world, the sciences and the humanities can sometimes be in harmony with each other, there is in fact a far-reaching tension or even conflict between what is held to be true in these three aspects of our worldview. We can, I suggest, see scientism from this perspective.<sup>1</sup> We can see it as the rejection of the complementary view and instead the espousal of a *science priority view* or *science default view*. This is a stance which entails an attitude of skepticism towards the other two elements of people's worldview. This follows since advocates of scientism or "scientizers" say things such as: "Science is the only way to understand the real world",<sup>2</sup> and "Being scientific just means treating science as our exclusive guide to reality, to nature – both our own nature and everything else's".<sup>3</sup> Since science is taken to be the arbiter of all reality, or at least all knowable reality, and since it is our exclusive guide to reality, a scientizer will indeed adopt an attitude of skepticism towards the other two elements of people's worldview. Ideas and views that can be justified by scientific methods are acceptable; ones which cannot be justified by such means should be dropped like the proverbial hot potato (or perhaps retained if thought valuable in some important sense, but seen only as useful fiction).

Let me exemplify. In his article "What are you?", Jan Westerhoff writes that "many

of our core beliefs about ourselves do not withstand [scientific] scrutiny. This presents a tremendous challenge for our everyday view of ourselves, as it suggests that in a very fundamental way we are not real. Instead, our self is comparable to an illusion – but without anybody there that experiences the illusion."<sup>4</sup> This sound like scientists have looked everywhere yet cannot find "the self" and on the presumption that there is nothing wrong with their methods – in that they have some essential limitations when it comes to this kind of question – the conclusion they draw is that we (ourselves) do not really exist!

But none of us ever walks into a room and says: "There is a thought here about problems with scientism. I wonder if it is my thought." When it *is* my thought, I know it; I know that it belongs to my self: I know that I am real and have real thoughts. The humanities, through philosophy, have identified a way of knowing things and identifying the self that is different from using the methods of the sciences. It is called *introspection* – reflection on one's own mental life. It is about the act of looking within oneself, to get to know what it's like to be Mikael Stenmark, to be that particular self. That is, seeing oneself from a first-person perspective and not from a third-person perspective. But if the sciences are construed as giving us the only kind of knowledge we can legitimately have, then there can be no introspective knowledge; and since there is now no introspective knowledge we have no way of identifying our selves. A remarkable gap has opened up (it appears) between, on the

one hand, our everyday-life world along with the humanities, and, on the other hand, the scientific worldview which some very influential people seem to accept.

What then is the relevance of this for the science-religion dialogue? After all, most people in that discussion certainly reject Dawkins' and Rosenberg's incompatibility view and instead embrace a *contact view* or *independence view*. This is true; but consider for instance the independence view of Stephen Jay Gould. His NOMA-principle states that "the net, or magisterium, of science covers the empirical realm: what is the universe made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The magisterium of religion extends over questions of ultimate meaning and moral value."<sup>5</sup> This sounds like the view that facts are discovered by science alone, and then there are values and meaning which religion might provide. But is it not a fact that I have a self, that I had breakfast this morning, that Anna loves me, that there are human institutions like the natural sciences, universities and courts, that there are structures of violence in society, that there is a grammatical structure in languages, that words and sentences can carry meaning, that beliefs can be true or false, and that people sometimes can be unreasonable, and this is so whether or not these facts can be discovered and justified by the sciences? These beliefs of everyday life and of the humanities are, if true, fact-stating, although they belong to different classes of facts than those which the sciences deal with. In short, there seem

to be many true propositions that do not line up neatly with any facts of the kind uncovered by the sciences.

Moreover, everyday beliefs are by far the largest domain of belief that we human beings have, and everyone must be able to form, sustain, and evaluate them to be able to function effectively in the kinds of situations encountered daily in ordinary life. They are also more fundamental than scientific beliefs in our belief system, because we *cannot* avoid believing them whilst at the same time functioning appropriately as human beings. These beliefs are a practical necessity for us, which is not the case with scientific beliefs. It seems perfectly possible to function normally as a person even without holding any scientific beliefs at all – consider, for instance, the Amish people.

For people in general – even scientists – most of their beliefs are everyday beliefs and most things they seem to know belong to this area of life and not to the realm of the sciences. I am in fact more certain that I had breakfast this morning than that the theory of evolution is true. I am no biologist, but I can imagine that this would be equally true for them (provided, of course, that they in fact did have breakfast this morning). Furthermore, it seems that scientists have to know how to get to their labs before they can even perform their physics, chemistry or biology. The sciences provide us with a good and important way of obtaining knowledge about the world, but it is not the only way, and not necessarily the best way, of knowing all aspects of

the world – sometimes the humanities can do a better job, and you don't have to drag religion into this in order to understand it.

Scientific knowledge might not even be the most important knowledge we have. I believe for instance that inter-personal knowledge is more important. To see this, think of the stereotypical scientist made fun of in TV comedies, who has quite a limited understanding of complex social relationships and tends to regard people

just as you would if your only resources were science and mathematics – treating them as objects and lacking the means to take into account that they are subjects too – and who therefore lacks an essential facility for navigating the social world. Of course, most scientists are not like this; but the reason they are not like the stereotype is precisely *because* in their social lives – whether they are aware of it or not – they rely on means to obtain knowledge other than those offered by the sciences.

### THE HUMANITIES AND PHILOSOPHY

We also need the humanities within the science-religion dialogue and this is for at least two reasons. The first is that there are numerous kinds of things and properties that do seem to exist but are not obviously within the purview of the sciences, such as values, purposes, beauty, evil, love, intentions, beliefs, reasons, responsibility, freedom, agency, consciousness, and social institutions such as marriage, laws, money, universities and countries. Perhaps you find it surprising that I have included social institutions and social facts, but one could argue that where we can see dollar bills, science can only see cellulose fibers with green and grey stains.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, where science can only see masses of metal in linear trajectories, we can see cars being driven along the road. Unreflectively, dollar bills and cars seem as natural to us as stones, water and trees, but they're not! Indeed, if anything, it is harder to see objects as *just* natural phenomena, stripped of their functional social roles. These

things are the bread and butter of the humanities. Methods and theories are developed within these disciplines which focus on and deal with values, reasons, meanings, and intentions.

For this reason one does not have to be astonished, as in some way the physicist Erwin Schrödinger seems to be, that “the scientific picture of the real world around me is very deficient. It gives a lot of factual information, puts all our experiences in a magnificently consistent order, but is ghastly silent about all and sundry that is really near to our heart, that really matters to us. It cannot tell us a word about red and blue, bitter and sweet, physical pain and physical delight; it knows nothing of beautiful and ugly, good or bad, God and eternity.”<sup>7</sup> But religions, certainly the Abrahamic religions which Schrödinger hints at, share with the humanities this emphasis on these kinds of things and properties. Mind or God (and God's agen-

cy, goodness and intentionality) lie at the root of everything. In Christian terminology: “in the beginning was the word.” This is the first reason we should not leave the humanities out of the picture in the science-religion dialogue.

The second reason is that, whether or not we realize it, what we are doing in the science-religion dialogue is to a large extent philosophy. I take *philosophy* to be an inquiry whose mission is to provide reasonable answers to our “big questions” regarding human beings, the world, and our place within the scheme of things – questions such as: What is the nature of reality, the purpose of the universe, and the meaning of life? Is there a God? Why am I here? Do I have a soul? What happens when we die? Do we have free will? Why should I be moral? What is morally right, and what is wrong? What can we know about these things? What are the limits of our knowledge, or of scientific knowledge? Part of this is conceptual analysis, but, in my view, philosophy can and should also strive to give us knowledge, or at least rationally justified beliefs, about the answers to our “big questions”.

This understanding of philosophy is not compatible with scientism or a scientific stance. If we think that only science can give us knowledge or rational belief, then philosophy can only be conceptual analysis and its mission beyond that is merely to unify and perhaps fill out the gaps between the theories of the sciences and thus to develop an ontology that goes beyond science as little as possible. Non-scientistic

or humanistic philosophy can, in contrast, also tap into all the ancient wisdom traditions and beliefs that lie at the very heart of our conception of ourselves as persons, and into our commonsense ways of thinking about the world, and into the knowledge obtained in the humanities. Philosophy can be seen as a bridge between science and religion, *and furthermore*, philosophy as a discipline belongs to the humanities.

Realizing and admitting that one is essentially doing philosophy when one is engaged in the science-religion dialogue is of course much more important when it comes to scientists than when it comes to religious believers, due to the prestige of science in our society. I think it would be a good thing if scientists were much more explicit on this point in the public debate, not just in the sense that scientists would then be speaking more honestly – because they are indeed entering into the halls of philosophy – but in that many religious believers who are now opposed to science would come to realize that it is not necessarily science proper, but rather some current philosophical add-ons to science, that they have reservations about. Science and philosophy as well as science and scientism need to be distinguished; and doing philosophy is nothing to be ashamed of!

So, to conclude the first section of this essay, we must always remember in the science-religion dialogue that the world is bigger than the world of science and that religion is not the unique part of this wider world beyond science. This is so-



something we should emphasize more often, since we must avoid giving the impression that religious belief is unique (and there-

fore perhaps questionable or suspect) in being non-scientific.

### THE DIFFERENT AIMS OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION OR THEIR DISTINCT JOB DESCRIPTIONS

Related to this is the obvious fact that science and religion are not the only activities that we as humans can be engaged in (or for that matter choose not to be engaged in). Besides science and religion, we have politics, law, the arts, sport, and you name it, and typically these activities do not compete with each other. You do not have to choose between science and sport, science and law, or between science and politics. Why? Simply, because we understand that these activities have different aims.<sup>8</sup> They are not doing the same job in human life. That is not to say that there cannot be contact and sometimes conflict between these different activities. There is a contact between, for instance, science and politics. Science can shape political beliefs or vice versa, but science is not politics, nor does one have to choose between being engaged in science or in politics.

Roughly speaking, the goal of science is to increase the body of knowledge or justified belief we have about the natural world. People value science because it helps us understand, control, predict and alter the world. Religion is a more disparate phenomenon. But we could perhaps say that the goal of religion is to offer salvation, liberation and flourishing. Theistic religions maintain that this goal can only be obtai-

ned by acknowledging and entering into a relationship with God. So people value religion because it offers us healing, reconciliation, transformation and flourishing. Religion has primarily a soteriological goal. Hence, the goal of science is to explain and predict events in nature, whereas the goal of religion is rather to transform people's lives in response to an encounter with a divine reality. Religions contain both a description and a diagnosis of the human predicament and offer a solution to the challenge. They offer a system of salvation, liberation or enlightenment.

At least three things follow. First, if we want to compare and relate science and religion we must never forget that they have different aims. Second, if we want to assess religion we need norms or criteria that are appropriate to it, and since science has a different aim, the norms or criteria of the two are probably not the same. Third, science can never replace religion. Religion can only be replaced by some practice that fulfills the same or at least a similar role in people's lives. Secular humanism, naturalism, atheism and agnosticism are alternatives to religion, but the sciences are not.



## TRUTH AND ITS DIFFERENT RAMIFICATION IN SCIENCE AND RELIGION

So what about truth, if science and religion have different aims? I would say that both science and religion (and many of the other activities we are engaged in) are in the business of truth-telling or, at least, of aiming at the truth. That is to say, they have at least as a *part* of their overall aim, an epistemic goal. But I want to stress that the epistemic goal of religion is heavily shaped by its soteriological goal.

I think that we can see this if we pay attention to the phenomenology of religious truth. Consider, for instance, what Mahatma Gandhi says: "Nothing is or exists in reality except Truth. That is why *Sat* or Truth is perhaps the most important name of God."<sup>9</sup> And St. John writes: "But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deed may be manifested as having been wrought in God."<sup>10</sup> According to St. John, only those who *do* the truth will be enlightened by it. John Dupré claims that this way of thinking about truth is common to all religions: "Despite their substantial differences, all religious traditions agree in stressing the ontological and moral qualities of truth over the purely cognitive ones. Truth refers to *being*, rather than to knowledge."<sup>11</sup>

Now if this is an accurate characterization of the use of the notion of truth in religion, we can see why truth is understood in such a way. It is in concordance with what a religion is all about. Religious believers stress the ontological and moral qualities of truth over the purely cognitive ones

because of the aims of religious practice. The aim of religious practice is not only to make reality intelligible but also – and primarily – to regulate or guide people's actual way of living. So a religion can only be really true when it can successfully guide believers in their lives, helping them to overcome spiritual and moral constraints and to obtain salvation, liberation and flourishing.

However, despite these differences I think that the uses of truth in the sciences, in the humanities and in religions are compatible. The difference is mainly that "truth" in religion is a *richer notion* since it includes more than the cognitive dimension. Religious truth is not reducible to correct beliefs or a set of true theories because truth is also something to be done, to be lived. Therefore, cognitive or epistemic truth might be a necessary condition for religious truth, but it is clearly not a sufficient condition.

This also gives us a clue to why persons such as Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed are considered to be of such importance for religious people. Alasdair MacIntyre, when discussing modern society, expresses a certain indignation when he notes that people "put their trust in persons rather than in arguments."<sup>12</sup> But this is quite an understandable, even a rational, way of behaving, at least in a religious context, when we take into account that what we are asking for is first of all how we should live our lives and how we

should overcome spiritual and moral limitations in order to obtain salvation, liberation or fullness. This is not something that can be solved in abstract theory (by argumentation), the solution most prove itself in practice. Therefore, figures such as Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed are of the utmost importance when it comes to holding on to or accepting a religious world-

view, since they embody the religious way of living and dealing with spiritual and moral constraints. People look not only at what these religious leaders said but also at how they lived, because they exemplify what it is to *be* a Buddhist, a Christian, or a Muslim and show how to *live* a Buddhist, a Christian, or a Muslim life.<sup>13</sup>

### SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

To sum up, I have tried to draw attention to some conditions that are important for the development of a fruitful science-religion dialogue; conditions that are not always recognized. The first is that we must acknowledge much more explicitly that this world is much bigger than the world of science. There are many beliefs – besides religious ones – that we human beings hold which are not scientific beliefs, but which nevertheless are rational, justified and even constitute knowledge. It would even be a fatal mistake to focus solely on science and religion in the science-religion dialogue and forget about the rest, because it would then be easy to convey the impression that religious belief is unique in being non-scientific, and to promote unintentionally a scientific attitude or the he-

gemony of science. The second condition, which I have not developed to the same degree as the first one, is that if we intend to compare science and religion we have to take into account that they have different aims, and that these differences have consequences for our assessment of the practice in question. We should not be tempted to model our understanding of religion on our understanding of science. Once again, a scientific attitude or tendency should be avoided. But not only do science and religion have different aims, truth seems to be a richer notion in religion than in science. Religious truth is not reducible to correct beliefs or a set of true theories because truth is also something to be done, to be lived.

### (ENDNOTES)

- 1 See Mikael Stenmark, *Scientism*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001, for an in-depth analysis of scientism.
- 2 Richard Dawkins, "Thoughts for the Millennium", in *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopaedia*, 2000.
- 3 Alex Rosenberg, *The Atheist's Guide to Reality*, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011, 8.
- 4 Jan Westerhoff, "What are you?", *New Scientist*, February (23) 2013, 37.

- 5 Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, New York: Ballantine, 1999, 6.
- 6 John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, New York: The Free Press, 1995, 4.
- 7 Erwin Schroedinger, *Nature and the Greeks and Science and Humanism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954, 95.
- 8 For a more thorough discussion of the aims of science and religion, see Mikael Stenmark, *How to Relate Science and Religion*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004, 16-51.
- 9 Mahatma Gandhi, quoted in John Dupré, "Reflection on the Truth of Religion", in *Faith and Philosophy*, 1989 (6), 260.
- 10 John 3:21 (New American Standard Bible).
- 11 Dupré, "Reflection on the Truth of Religion", 260.
- 12 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1988, 5.
- 13 This is also true in the context of moral traditions, where MacIntyre's remark is meant to apply. People may want to hold correct moral views, but primarily they want to know *how to live* a morally good life, and therefore persons who exemplify a way of living morally or a way of dealing with moral experiences of resistance matter greatly.

