

SCIENCE AND RELIGION: ISSUES OF CONVERGENCE*

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1. Our topic is "issues of convergence." My judgment is that there is no more fundamental issue of convergence than the issue of how convergence itself is to be conceived.

2. In general, there have been two main approaches to settling the alleged conflict between science and religion. On one of them, one argues that there is not even the possibility of such conflict, since the uses of religious utterances are sufficiently different from those of scientific utterances to constitute them a distinct logical type. Thus, if religion appears to conflict with science, either this is merely an appearance, or else one of them, at least, is also performing the function of the other, in which case their conflict is properly described not as a conflict between science and religion, but, rather, as either a scientific conflict or a religious conflict. In no case, however, can the truth of a scientific utterance be any reason for inferring the falsity of a religious utterance, and much less can it be any reason for entertaining doubts about whether a religious utterance is logically proper. On the other approach, by contrast, the burden of the argument is not that religion and science are different in principle but that they are similar in fact. Although there certainly is the possibility of their conflict, since in essentials, at least, their utterances belong to the same logical type, there are no good reasons for supposing their conflict to be necessary. Of course, particular religious claims may conflict with those of science, and this may well be a reason for inferring their falsity. But, in principle, one

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may just as well infer the falsity of a scientific claim from the truth of a religious one. More important, on this approach there is as little reason to doubt the propriety of religious utterances as to doubt whether the utterances of science are logically proper. If certain religious utterances prove to be unfalsifiable, or beyond the reach of empirical demonstration, this proves to be equally true of certain scientific utterances, which, significantly, are foundational for the whole activity of scientific inquiry. In short, because religion and science are on logically the same footing, conflict between them, however possible, is certainly not necessary; and because both are directed toward achieving something like the same kind of understanding, to be committed to either is to have good reason to be committed to the other as well.

3. Now it may well be that these two approaches do not exhaust the possibilities of conceiving the convergence of science and religion. Perhaps there is yet another way--maybe, even more than one way--of conceiving such convergence that would mediate, as it were, between these two more extreme approaches. Even so, the basic logical issue between them is rock-bottom fundamental; and in the lectures and discussions of the Isthmus Institute last year, this issue seemed to me to have been raised again and again, but without being adequately clarified. Thus if I argued in my response to Ilya Prigogine that religious inquiry is essentially, because logically, different from scientific inquiry, thereby more nearly agreeing with the first main approach, Roger Sperry and B. D. Josephson both argued, even if in somewhat different ways, for a "fusion," "union," or "synthesis" of religion and science, thereby more nearly siding with the second main approach.

4. If I now seek to clarify this issue by arguing further for my own way of approaching it, I do so to advance our discussion of the issue, not simply to defend my own position on it. I've found, as I have reflected on the question of religion and science, that my position has not remained fixed and unchanging. So I'm in no way closed against its becoming even more different than it once was. On the other hand, I do seem to see certain things that make it impossible for me to hold one of the positions that can be taken on this issue, and, in fact, was taken last year with admirable clarity and forthrightness by Roger Sperry. My hope is that, by trying to articulate my main reservation about his kind of position, I can provoke all of us to think about the issue itself more clearly.

5. With this goal in mind, I wish to begin by making clear what I take to be important common ground between our two kinds of positions. Even if one holds, as I do, that science and religion are logically different, and, therefore, sufficiently different to make speaking of their possible convergence as a "fusion," "union," or "synthesis" seriously misleading, even then, one may believe, as I also do, that both enterprises are very much alike in being, first of all and most fundamentally, modes of inquiry to be ~~even~~^{every} continued rather than sets of answers to be simply transmitted. "Religion," Whitehead remarks, "will not regain its old power until it can face change in the same spirit as does science. Its principles may be eternal, but the expression of those principles requires continual development" (SMW: 270). In other words, in religion even as in science any answer can be called into question and, in fact, is called into question by any contrary or contradictory answer; and in this event one is

forced back on the process of religious questioning as always more fundamental than any of the answers that may be produced by this process. In religion just as much as in science, answers are not and cannot be as fundamental as questions. This means that, for all of their logical difference, religion and science are in important respects alike, and, without question, "the dogmatic fallacy" is as much to be avoided in the one as in the other.

6. The other thing that I take to be common ground between the two positions is that the fact of convergence between science and religion is not in question. My problem with the approach to settling the alleged conflict between science and religion to which I feel the closest--namely, the one that takes them to be different in principle --is that it seems simply to deny that they could ever converge. So far as I can see, however, even if science and religion are as logically different as I take them to be, they nevertheless both have implications--metaphysical and moral--where they in principle converge and, as I argued last year, also converge in fact, insofar as we take our bearings from the most exciting recent developments in both areas of concern. The issue as I see it, then, is not whether convergence, but how to understand and talk about the convergence that undoubtedly exists both in principle and in fact.

7. Now like everyone else, I have my own reasons for being concerned with this issue. As it happens, my reasons for being concerned with it arise out of my preoccupations, professional as well as personal, with religion generally and with the Christian religion in particular. I am a Christian believer and, by vocation, a Christian minister who has assumed the special responsibility of the academic theologian and student of

religion. Thus when I think about science and religion and their possible convergence, I do so from the standpoint indicated by these pre-occupations with religion. And what has always struck me from this standpoint is not so much that science and religion are similar in fact as that they are different in principle. Why? Well, because religion, radically unlike science, has to do, above all, with the strictly ultimate reality that in the Christian religion, as in theistic religions ~~more~~ generally, is called "God." To be sure, religion has often had to do with this strictly ultimate reality in terms that obscure its radical otherness from everything else. In fact, it is the very nature of myth, which is, at it were, the mother tongue of all religion, that it thinks and speaks of this strictly ultimate reality in concepts and symbols that properly refer to the things and events in the everyday world. Thus the transcendence of God, for example, is expressed in myth by speaking of God's being in heaven spatially distant from the earth, or by God's reign being a future reign, more or less remote from the present in time. But once religions develop beyond a properly mythical stage, as was certainly true of the development of radical monotheism in Judaism and Christianity, God is thought and spoken about even with the use of mythical concepts and symbols, as strictly ultimate and, therefore, as in principle beyond the reach of science, strictly and properly understood. As the one strictly universal individual, whose field of interaction with others is unrestricted, God exists necessarily as the sole primal source and the only final end of all things, actual as well as possible. Thus God is not the world, either in its individual parts ^{or as the entire collection thereof,} but is other than the world and transcendent of it even while also being immanent within it.

8. Now my main reservation about such proposals of a "fusion" or "union" of science and religion as Roger Sperry put before us last year is that they simply surrender this radically monotheistic understanding of God in favor of some form or other of pantheism in which God is equated with the laws and forces of the world, however reconceived from the world of an earlier reductionistic, deterministic, materialistic kind of science. Please don't misunderstand me: I've been called a pantheist myself often enough to realize that it is usually simply a cuss word, whose lack of precise meaning makes it ideally suited to dismiss any religious or theological view that is sufficiently different from one's own. The point, however, is not the words by which positions are identified. Whatever we call them--and "pantheism" is the word that Roger Sperry ^{himself} used to identify his ^{own} position--there are absolutely fundamental differences between a position for which God is the one universal individual, who alone exists necessarily as the primal source and final end of all contingent things, and another position for which the word "God" refers to nothing other than certain of these contingent things themselves, or certain of their more or less abstract properties. Of course, I can only welcome Sperry's antimaterialistic, antidualistic "monistic mentalism," since, if I am correct, ^{this kind of materialism} ~~it~~ is necessarily implied by what I take to be a proper radically monotheistic concept of God. Likewise, I have no more interest than he does in giving aid and comfort to the kind of dualistic, supernaturalist, and otherworldly religion which implicitly denies the ultimate significance of our life in this world and keeps us from taking proper responsibility for it by diverting our attention to some other life in some other world; for, once again, if I am correct, faith in God, properly conceived, precludes any such dualism

and other worldliness as seriously misguided. But as much as I thus find myself sharing many of Sperry's intentions and concerns, I frankly find the union of science and religion that he proposes to involve sacrificing the one thing in religion that I take to be of its essence--namely, the reality of God as infinitely other and more than anything that science as such may reasonably make the object of its concern. If such sacrifice is the price of science's and religion's being fused or united, then, so far as I am concerned, it's preferable that they should remain separated or divided.

9. But what is this, you may ask, if not to fall back on the same kind of dogmatic defense of religion that I have affected to reject? Surely, the fact that Sperry's proposal calls for abandoning a particular form of religious belief does not mean that it calls for abandoning religion altogether. And why shouldn't we abandon a prescientific form of religion, if we are really free to pursue religious inquiry whithersoever it may lead? My answer is that we have every reason to abandon any form of religion, provided we have some more adequate form of religion to replace it^{with}--just as, contrariwise, we have no reason to cling to any form of religion unless it is more adequate than all of the other forms that we might possibly accept instead. The point, however, is that the relative adequacy of a form of religion has to be decided by reference to the religious question and the human interest lying behind it, not by reference to the very different question of science and the correspondingly different human interest that lies behind it. Thus the fact, if it be a fact, that the kind of religious view that Sperry proposed is incompatible with the view implied by the radical monotheism of Christianity and Judaism is not

what explains my reservation about it. I am sceptical about his view because, like any other purely naturalistic or humanistic religion, it seems to me to be religiously shallow relative to the religious profundity of radical monotheism. This is particularly apparent, I believe, when one considers what he has to say about "after-life alternatives." Precisely if one accepts his conclusion from mind-brain science that "the conscious self, as we ordinarily experience it, does not survive brain death" (30), one can hardly escape the question, which I take to be one of the more important ways of formulating the religious question, of the ultimate aim of a life that so inescapably ends in death. I fear that to this question the little that Sperry has to say about "ways in which the highest aspect or form of the conscious experiences of each individual can realistically be extended . . . to exist beyond death of the neural ^{substrate} ~~substate~~ that originally sustained it" doesn't offer much of an answer. Perhaps it is true that "the essence of the very best of the conscious self of Beethoven, of Shakespeare, Michelangelo, etc. are [sic] still with us." But I fail to see what it could mean to say this if the likes of minds like yours and mine are the only measure of the essence of those who have gone before us. Surely, if we alone are the measure of their essence, they are by and large not still with us, having long since slipped into the oblivion from which ^{our poor minds} ~~we~~ are powerless to redeem them. On the contrary, if among the lives for which we each live is the strictly universal and everlasting life of God, then whatever the forgetfulness of all the others who come after us, we can look to the never-fading memory of God as the adequate measure of all that we have ever been. But is it not clear that anything other or less than God so understood leaves the

question that death raises unanswered--or, at best, merely implicitly answered by our continuing to live, notwithstanding the fact that we have to die.[?]

10. My point, I trust, is clear. The only convergence of science and religion that is worth thinking and talking about is one in which each remains fully itself, being strengthened rather than weakened by its convergence with the other. The issue of convergence I have sought to raise, then, should be equally clear: How exactly are we to understand and express such a convergence and the necessary conditions of its possibility?