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Feuds between theists and atheists

Abstract. *Addressing the issue of conflicts between believers and non-believers, the author makes the case for a conceptual separation of two realities--material structure and spiritual superstructure. Methods of validation of claims differ for these two realms of understanding.*

Keywords: *Atheism, Theism, conflicts, cooperation, Gould, Russell, NOMA, Reform Judaism, Steinsaltz*

Introduction

An interesting article about the philosopher Baruch Spinoza appeared in The New York Times, written by a professor of philosophy.¹ It generated a large number of online comments. A growing number of Americans seem to be interested in God-related topics. The same is probably true in many other countries. A reader, RMC, wrote:

I know many Christians and Jews who practice their religious traditions although their own beliefs are secular. They make no secret of their sentiments. Spinoza was excommunicated during a time of religious orthodoxy and in that respect his experience is much like Galileo's. When the Catholic Church repudiated its treatment of Galileo, it was not merely saying that the earth revolves around the sun. It was saying that punishing the members of its congregation for thinking for themselves, including about church dogma, was parochial and destructive.

¹ S. Nadler, *Judging Spinoza*, „The New York Times”, Opinion Pages, May 25, 2014.

Futile conflicts between theists and atheists, often amounting to “we are better than you” confrontations, are common, as one can verify by browsing the Internet. Those who promote such poisonous conflicts are usually neither scientists nor theologians. Is it desirable to end such confrontations? Is it possible to end them? If yes, then how? Randomly selected Internet posts on these issues, plus the replies and comments, are shown in the Appendix. Contributions of this kind motivated the author to write this article. He is a scientist, not a theologian.²

As a university student in Poland in the 1950’s, he was an aggressive atheist and became a member of the communist party. Now he is a theist, believing in God and attending a synagogue. Missing an earlier introduction to God, he is very different from other theists, as described in his online autobiography.³ Criticizing Stalinism, both publicly and privately, he often states that his anticommunist propaganda is „a moral obligation, to parents, and to millions of other victims of Stalinism. The victims are dead but I was definitely with them when I was writing. What can be a better confirmation that many of us live in two different environments, material and spiritual?”

1. Methods of Validation of Claims

In “Bridging Science and Religion: Why It Must Be Done,” theologian Robert John Russell says that the path toward a world without aggressive confrontations is in cooperation between theologians and scientists.⁴ The author of this article tends to disagree. Cooperation may or may not develop in the distant future; what should be done first is conceptual separation.

The first step toward mutual respect between theists and atheists should be the recognition that most people on earth are surrounded by material structure and by spiritual superstructure. People investigating these aspects of our environment are scientists and theologians. Methods of validation of claims made by theologians are very different from those used by scientists. God is not a material entity, and attempts to refute God’s existence by performing scientific experiments are not appropriate. The same is true for attempts to refute scientific claims, such as the age of the earth, on the basis of disagreements with holy books.

² Ludwik Kowalski’s publications: http://csam.montclair.edu/~kowalski/LK_publications.html [20.10.2016].

³ Ludwik Kowalski, *Diary of a Former Communist: Thoughts, Feelings, Reality*, <http://csam.montclair.edu/~kowalski/life/intro.html> [20.10.2016], also available in Polish at http://merlin.pl/Pamietnik-bylego-komunisty_Ludwik-Kowalski/download/product/223,1336182.html [20.10.2016].

⁴ R.J. Russell, *Bridging Science and Religion: Why it Must be Done*, http://www.ctns.org/about_history.html [20.10.2016].

Theology is like mathematics, not science. Mathematicians start with axioms (initially accepted truths) and use logical derivation to justify consecutive claims, called theorems. Once proven, a theorem cannot be rejected, unless a logical error is found in the derivation. Science is very different. Here, claims are justified, in the final analysis, by experimental observations, not by pure logic. A scientific claim becomes valid after it is confirmed in reproducible experiments. Furthermore, scientific validations are always tentative; scientists know that future experiments might result in rejection, or partial rejection, of what has already been accepted. Scientific truth is not claimed to be eternal.

The methods of validation and refutation used by scientists and theologians are sufficiently different to justify separation rather than cooperation. Separation will allow theists and atheists to rethink and reformulate basic ideas and methodologies. Until this happens, scientists should not participate in debates about the spiritual environment, unless they happen to also be theologians. Likewise, theologians should not participate in debates about the material environment, unless they happen to also be scientists. Debates about ways to eliminate existing conflicts might last decades, if not centuries. They are likely to be more productive if conducted separately.

2. Two Magisteria

The idea that theism and science are two “non-overlapping magisteria (NOMA)” was formulated by Stephen Jay Gould. He wrote:

Our minds tend to work by dichotomy – that is, by conceptualizing complex issues as “either/or” pairs, dictating a choice of one extreme or the other, with no middle ground (or golden mean) available for any alternative resolution. [...] Thus, when we must make sense of the relationship between two disparate subjects (science and religion in this case) – especially when both seem to raise similar questions at the core of our most vital concerns about life and meaning – we assume that one of two extreme solutions must apply: either science and religion must battle to the death, with one victorious and the other defeated...⁵

He also wrote: “The net of science covers the empirical universe: what is it made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The net of religion extends over questions of moral meaning and value. These two magisteria do not overlap, nor do they encompass all inquiry (consider, for starters, the magisterium of art and the meaning of beauty).”⁶ Informal cooperation between the two camps will always exist; many scientists are also theologians and many theologians are also

⁵ S.J. Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, The Library of Contemporary Thought, published by Ballantine Publishing Company Group 1999.

⁶ S.J. Gould, *Nonoverlapping Magisteria*, *Natural History* 106/(1997), March, pp. 16-22. Also at www.stephenjaygould.org/library/gould_noma.html [20.10.2016].

scientists. They will certainly know which methodology of validation is appropriate in each of the two environments, material and spiritual.

As stated earlier, holy books contain pronouncements about the physical world. Such pronouncements are rooted in the beliefs of our ancestors, who lived when faith and science were not yet separate intellectual disciplines. The story of creation, the world being created in one week, for example, is no longer taken literally, even by many theologians.⁷ A formal unambiguous recognition of this by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in the Vatican would be a tremendously important step toward the elimination of futile debates. Commenting on relations between science and mathematics, one person wrote that “science would be a shadow of itself if not for the math, and math wouldn’t be anywhere as significant if not for the science.”

Will theology also become a partner of science, as Russell expects? It is too early to speculate about this. One fact is undeniable: many professional theologians and scientists respect each other. And they know which methodology of validation is applicable in each field. The NOMA approach would probably be accepted at once by scientists, as soon as theologians accept it; most scientists never attempted to actively criticize the spiritual environment of God, gods, souls and angels, except when attacked. But acceptance of NOMA by theologians is likely to encounter some difficulties. Why is it so? Because scientists are a uniform group; all of them accept the scientific method of studying our material surroundings. Theologians, on the other hand, do not share a common doctrine. Furthermore, most of them believe that changes in our material structure can result from what happens in our spiritual superstructure – prayers, divine interventions, etc.

How should the term “non-overlapping” in the NOMA acronym be interpreted? Does it mean that scientists, according to Gould, should not investigate spiritual phenomena, and that theologians should not investigate physical phenomena? The author of this article thinks that such an interpretation is not appropriate. Our two environments, material and spiritual, belong to the same reality and no one should be excluded from studying it, using appropriate conceptual tools.

It should also be noted that even within each realm there are grounds for disagreement. Many people think that controversies about beliefs exist only among theologians, and among uneducated people. Controversies between highly qualified scientists, they think, are rapidly resolved. But such is not the case. Controversies in science continue to occur, for example, the so-called “Cold Fusion,” episode.⁸ Disagreements between liberal and orthodox believers are widely known.

⁷ When people say that they believe “God is metaphor” [...] that means that they don’t really believe in God; they’re actually atheists cloaking themselves in religious language. On the other hand, if there really is a Creator of infinite power and wisdom who designed the Universe, it makes sense that he would be beyond our capability to grasp. We can say what God is not, but we cannot understand him in any positive way except by making metaphors. Precisely because we Christians believe that God exists, we have to resort to metaphors in order to describe him.

⁸ Ludwik Kowalski, webpage: <http://www.ludkow.info/cf/> [20.10.2016].

3. Liberal Judaism

Judaism is not the only theology in which there are several interpretations of God, ranging from traditional to modern. Some Orthodox Jews probably think that Reform and Conservative Jews are atheists. They believe that the Bible was written by God, rather than by ancient sages. Most disagreements about God's existence result from the absence of a common definition of God. Suppose that X and Y have different definitions of God; X believes in his own God but not in the God of Y; and vice versa. Then they accuse each other of atheism. A feud about existence or nonexistence of God is impossible unless we agree on God's attributes. Debates between atheists and theists are usually frustrating because one side often refers to literal interpretations of the Biblical God while another side sticks to metaphorical and allegorical interpretations.

Here is a prayer often collectively recited in a typical Jewish reform temple: "You are our King, delivering us from the hands of oppressors, saving us from the fist of tyrants, doing wonders without number, marvels that pass our understanding. You give us our life; with Your help our people has survived all our oppressors. You did wonders for us in the land of Egypt, miracles and marvels in the land of Pharaoh." Similar prayers can probably be found in most Christian, Muslim and other prayer books. How many theologians are ready to start saying that Biblical statements are metaphorical, that they should not be interpreted literally?

Attempts to modify traditional Jewish theologies are described in.⁹ Most of them are still being debated. A famous theologian-reformer, Baruch Spinoza, excommunicated as a heretic by his contemporaries (in 17th century Holland), wrote: "By God's direction I mean the fixed and unchanging order of Nature [...] so it is the same thing whether we say that all things happen according to Nature's laws or that they are regulated by God's decree and direction." Why was such a philosophical position considered heretical? Probably because it implied that God is not as omnipotent as described in the Bible.

Modern Reform Judaism is rooted in the nineteenth-century question "is the Torah history or legend?"¹⁰ The German Rabbi Abraham Geiger asked: "How much longer can we continue this deceit [...] presenting stories from the Bible as if they were actual historical happenings?" He was probably referring to the stories of creation of the world in seven days, Jewish slaves in Egypt, the Golden Calf, etc. We value such stories because they represent beliefs of our ancestors.

Addressing Geiger, another German rabbi asked, "would you deny the Torah?" The answer was simple: "I do not deny the Torah. But [...] all laws and all prayers

⁹ B.L. Schwartz, *Judaism's Great Debates: Timeless Controversies from Abraham to Herzl*, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia 2012 (Part 3, Modern Judaism).

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

that are unworthy or irrelevant should be eliminated [from our books].” Why is it unlikely that only a small fraction of contemporary theologians would be willing to follow such advice? Because Biblical stories are intertwined with recommended rules of morality. God, according to most preachers, records all our transgressions, and punishes those who disobey.

Many Christians believe in hell and heaven; many Jews believe in exclusion and inclusion in the “world to come.” Do we have a more efficient method to impose desirable rules of social behavior on millions of uneducated people? This is far from obvious. The challenge facing progressive theologians is to make old doctrines compatible with NOMA. This will not be an easy task. But is it possible?

A widely used Reform Judaism prayer book (10) contains the following:

Pray as if everything depended on God. Act as if everything depended on you. Prayer invites God’s presence to suffuse our spirits, God’s will to prevail in our lives. Prayer may not bring water to parched fields, nor mend a broken bridge, nor rebuilt a ruined city. But prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, rebuilt a weakened will.

Water, fields, bridges and cities belong to our material structure. But arid souls, broken hearts and weakened wills belong to our spiritual superstructures. By influencing us spiritually, God helps us to be effective in dealing with our material surroundings. We pray as if we were able to produce miracles (events conflicting with laws of nature). Can one say that the above advice given to believers is consistent with NOMA? Such questions are worth debating, especially in houses of worship and in academia.

4. Theories are Models of Reality

According to Wikipedia, understanding “is a psychological process related to an abstract or physical object, such as a person, situation, or message whereby one is able to think about it and use concepts to deal adequately with that object.” An investigator understanding something is usually able to predict what will happen to it under different conditions, and to solve associated problems. The number of conditions influencing an outcome is practically unlimited. That is why our understanding is always partial.

A theory, as defined above by Gould, is an explanation of facts. Both scientists and theologians use theories, often called models. Predictions of solar eclipses, for example, are possible because we understand the solar system, using Newton’s theory of universal gravitation. Abstract concepts used by scientists and engineers, such as force, energy and temperature, are not material objects. How do they differ from abstract concepts used by theologians, such as God, soul and sin?

One difference is that scientific theories are quantitative while theological theories are qualitative. The most important difference, however, is in the methods of validation of claims, as described above.

Referring to the spiritual side of our existence Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz¹¹ wrote that it consists of “all things we relate to through our minds. This includes our thoughts and emotions, love, hate, and envy, the ability to read, to enjoy music, or to solve equations, to know that we exist, and relate to others. All of these are intangible – they cannot be touched or weighed.” But they are certainly real. Religion has been part of human existence since prehistoric times. Some people say that God created humans in his image, others say the opposite – humans created God, and gods, in their own image. “Is the spiritual world real? It is in the same way that everything which exists is real. It cannot be touched, just as a scent or a magnetic field cannot be touched; it cannot be seen, just as the sound of a trumpet is invisible. Yet it can be perceived and measured, checked and defined by its own tools of perception and measurement.”

Appendix: Gathered Internet Statements

1. I don't mind coexistence with religion, but religious people seriously need to practice religion in their bedrooms only. As soon as you theists cross over the line and try to interfere with my life through politics, law, and lifestyle, then you can... expect no mercy from me.

2. Organized religions are often guilty of trying to convert atheists and other non-believers; this is not good. Atheists, calling themselves intellectuals, are not better. They also often try to convert believers.

3. The focus on belief or non-belief is counterproductive for both sides of the equation. The corrosive element to the rhetoric of some modern atheists is pure arrogance, matched only by that of some theists.

4. I am opposed to peaceful coexistence [with theists]. One does not halt a boxing match for fear of losing.

5. God is much more than the old man in the sky, rewarding the good and punishing the bad like a cosmic Santa Claus. And He is not what proselytizers tell us, or what tells terrorists to bomb buildings and trains.

6. When most of us hear the word “metaphor,” we think about a literary device where one thing is described by juxtaposing it with something else: for example, “laughter is the mind sneezing.”

7. When people say that they believe “God is metaphor” [...] that means that they don't really believe in God; they're actually atheists cloaking themselves in religious language. On the other hand, if there really is a Creator of infinite power

¹¹ A. Steinsaltz, *Simple Words*, published by Simon & Schuster, New York 1999.

and wisdom who designed the Universe, it makes sense that he would be beyond our capability to grasp. We can say what God is not, but we cannot understand him in any positive way except by making metaphors. Precisely because we Christians believe that God exists, we have to resort to metaphors in order to describe him.

8. There was a time when it was not believed that science could tell us where we came from, or where the universe came from, and religion stepped in to answer those questions. But science now CAN tackle those questions, and religion must retreat further into the shadows.

9. Whether we evolved from ape-like creatures or not, it does not tell us where we came from or what we're here for!

10. Many people feel that that work is a moral issue; that able-bodied people who do not work should not be given sustenance. This was a reasonable view in the past, but now that robots are making rapid progress it is gradually becoming unreasonable. We need to adjust morality to fit the technology of our time. What is moral in one era may not be in the next.

11. My basic assumption is that scientific attitude toward our material world, and belief in God, can coexist peacefully. Neither believers nor nonbelievers should be ridiculed.

12. For most scientists, there is absolutely no problem with religion or spirituality. It really is only when religion tries to extend its influence beyond the sphere of spirituality into science that things begin to get contentious. For example, when young earth creationists suggest that the earth is 6000 years old, or that Noah really brought 2 of every species onto the ark (including dinosaurs), etc. [...] that scientists begin to have a problem with religion.

13. Personal spirituality is really even something that most scientists think about. In fact, there are many leading scientists, mathematicians, etc... who have a very strong spiritual base but continue to do outstanding scientific work – without letting their religious doctrine influence the evidence. If you would like a good example of this... see Martin Gardner. Martin was really one of the fathers of the skeptical movement and kept very strong spiritual beliefs. His book, “Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science” is one of the best books on the topic of critical thinking. For Martin, his spiritual beliefs were something that he held very dear but separate and distinct from evidence based science. He realized that there were likely no rational scientific explanations for his beliefs... but that didn't matter, because they exist outside the realm of science.

14. Another example is the work that Eugenie Scott has done over the years bridging the gap between some Christians and the scientific method. So, to get back to your original question – I think that peaceful coexistence is entirely possible and is probably the default condition for most scientists. It is only when religion tries to over extend its influence with pseudoscientific ideas like YEC or intelligent design that scientists feel the need to fire back and clarify the scientific position.

15. If science and religion are so incompatible, perhaps someone should tell the Vatican Observatory, or the Pontifical Academy of Sciences which is by appointment and counts Nobel laureates, agnostics, and atheists on its membership.

16. The vast majority of working physicists and cosmologists today build their work around the 'Standard Model' of the Big Bang, a concept first proposed by a Belgian priest, Monsignor Georges Lemaitre. It is only when personal agendas are injected into the discussion that science and religion become incompatible. Both search for truth.

17. While it is not difficult to understand why scientists would reject Religion, it certainly is short sighted for people of a Religious core belief system to reject science. It is after all one of God's creations from the theist perspective and therefore worthy of exploration.

18. There is a distinction between those who want religion to rule and those who are interested in spiritual/theological/religious inquiry or experience. It is the latter that I understood the OP [original post?] to be considering. Given the fact that there will always be a substantial number of people in the world for whom spiritual/religious matters are important, coexistence between them and science is not only desirable, it is imperative.

19. Science and religion are often considered to be on different planes. One represents reality and the other represents fantasy. There is no way to combine logic and superstition. It's like comparing apples and oranges.

20. The borders are definitely breaking down and this change is coming from both sides. I read a physics book recently in which the authors argued that only with the help of spirituality can we bring the interpretation of our physical laws to a new level.

21. I believe in a creator God, Darwinian Evolution and the Big Bang. So do all the Christians I know. The Pope has stated officially that evolution is not just a theory. The bigger question for me is why do so many non-Christians presume most Christians think the world is 6000 years old and that they are biblical literalists?

22. In order for scientists to recognize that a metaphysical world exists, there must be empirical evidence that such a world exists, and (by definition) there is none.

23. I don't believe in the Bible. But I do believe in God. I am a natural theist.

24. Some scientist will tell you that the material evidence drives his work but he's forgotten the creative arts and the dreams that allowed him in the end to touch a material fact. A scientist not animated by spirit will discover nothing.

25. If however scientists could be "tolerant" of religion the way they are of mathematics, then we could achieve something greater. It would be a start at least! Achieve this, and then integrate it into society at large. Idealistic? Perhaps, but it is still worth trying.

26. Let me explain a little so we understand the difference between a theist and an atheist. Just because a blind man cannot see someone standing beside him, it does not mean that “that someone” does not exist. Every human being is made up of 3 entities – body, spirit and soul. God exists in the form of spirit (John 4:24) and therefore, one needs to see God through one’s spiritual eyes. The theist believe this by “faith.” Any amount of explanation cannot convince those (the Atheists) who seek physical evidence of God’s existence. One needs to experience and feel the presence of God in one’s inner being which comes by faith. Definition for faith – from Heb 11:1 “Faith is the substance of things hoped, the evidence of things not seen.”

27. I comprehend the world as partially organized around the universe’s Imagination. For me, “God” is not an imaginary being, but Imagination itself. When I hear someone say, “God told me to do it,” I translate it as “Imagination told me to do it.” The genesis story of creation becomes how the physical universe was imagined into existence. Which to me seems to capture the essence of a creator god. Without the existence of imagination there are no imaginary beings.