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### **The New War Between Science and Religion**

*By Mano Singham*

There is a new war between science and religion, rising from the ashes of the old one, which ended with the defeat of the anti-evolution forces in the 2005 "intelligent design" trial. The new war concerns questions that are more profound than whether or not to teach evolution. Unlike the old science-religion war, this battle is going to be fought not in the courts but in the arena of public opinion. The new war pits those who argue that science and "moderate" forms of religion are compatible worldviews against those who think they are not.

The former group, known as accommodationists, seeks to carve out areas of knowledge that are off-limits to science, arguing that certain fundamental features of the world—such as the Heisenberg uncertainty principle and the origin of the universe—allow for God to act in ways that cannot be detected using the methods of science. Some accommodationists, including Francis Collins, head of the National Institutes of Health, suggest that there are deeply mysterious, spiritual domains of human experience, such as morality, mind, and consciousness, for which only religion can provide deep insights.

Prestigious organizations like the National Academy of Sciences have come down squarely on the side of the accommodationists. On March 25, the NAS let the John Templeton Foundation use its venue to announce that the biologist (and accommodationist) Francisco Ayala had been awarded its Templeton Prize, with the NAS president himself, Ralph Cicerone, having nominated him. The foundation has in recent years awarded its prize to scientists and philosophers who are accommodationists, though it used to give it to more overtly religious figures, like Mother Teresa and Billy Graham. Critics are disturbed at the NAS's so closely identifying itself with the accommodationist position. As the physicist Sean Carroll said, "Templeton has a fairly overt agenda that some scientists are comfortable with, but very many are not. In my opinion, for a prestigious scientific organization to work with

them sends the wrong message."

In a 2008 publication titled *Science, Evolution, and Creationism*, the NAS stated: "Science and religion are based on different aspects of human experience. ... Because they are not a part of nature, supernatural entities cannot be investigated by science. In this sense, science and religion are separate and address aspects of human understanding in different ways. Attempts to pit science and religion against each other create controversy where none needs to exist. ... Many religious beliefs involve entities or ideas that currently are not within the domain of science. Thus, it would be false to assume that *all* religious beliefs can be challenged by scientific findings."

Those of us who disagree—sometimes called "new atheists"—point out that historically, the scope of science has always expanded, steadily replacing supernatural explanations with scientific ones. Science will continue this inexorable march, making it highly likely that the accommodationists' strategy will fail. After all, there is no evidence that consciousness and mind arise from anything other than the workings of the physical brain, and so those phenomena are well within the scope of scientific investigation. What's more, because the powerful appeal of religion comes precisely from its claims that the deity intervenes in the physical world, in response to prayers and such, religious claims, too, fall well within the domain of science. The only deity that science can say nothing about is a deity who does nothing at all.

In support of its position, the National Academy of Sciences makes a spurious argument: "Newspaper and television stories sometimes make it seem as though evolution and religion are incompatible, but that is not true. Many scientists and theologians have written about how one can accept both faith and the validity of biological evolution. Many past and current scientists who have made major contributions to our understanding of the world have been devoutly religious. ... Many scientists have written eloquently about how their scientific studies have increased their awe and understanding of a creator. The study of science need not lessen or compromise faith."

But the fact that some scientists are religious is not evidence of the compatibility of science and religion. As Michael Shermer, founder and editor of *Skeptic* magazine, says in his book *Why People Believe Weird Things* (A.W.H. Freeman/Owl Book, 2002), "Smart

people believe weird things because they are skilled at defending beliefs they arrived at for non-smart reasons." Jerry Coyne, a professor in the department of ecology and evolution at the University of Chicago, notes, "True, there are religious scientists and Darwinian churchgoers. But this does not mean that faith and science are compatible, except in the trivial sense that both attitudes can be simultaneously embraced by a single human mind."

Accommodationists are alarmed that their position has been challenged by a recent flurry of best-selling books, widely read articles, and blogs. In Britain an open letter expressing this concern was signed by two Church of England bishops; a spokesman for the Muslim Council of Britain; a member of the Evangelical Alliance; Professor Lord Winston, a fertility pioneer; Professor Sir Martin Evans, a winner of the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine; and others. The letter said, "We respectfully ask those contemporary Darwinians who seem intent on using Darwin's theory as a vehicle for promoting an anti-theistic agenda to desist from doing so as they are, albeit unintentionally, turning people away from the theory."

Such solicitousness for the sensitivities of so-called religious moderates is not new. During the run-up to the Scopes trial, in 1925, the accommodationists of that era were similarly uneasy about Clarence Darrow's defending John T. Scopes because they felt that his openly expressed scorn for religious beliefs might alienate potential religious allies. But Darrow's performance in that trial is now viewed as one of the high points in opposing the imposition of religious indoctrination in public schools. "Few Americans have ever done so much for their country in a whole lifetime as Darrow did in two hours," H.L. Mencken wrote after Darrow's withering questioning of William Jennings Bryan.

Accommodationists frequently brand us new atheists as "extreme," "uncivil," "rude," and responsible for setting a "bad tone." However, those accusations are rarely accompanied by concrete examples of such impolite speech. Behind the charges seems to lie the assumption that it is rude to even question religious beliefs or to challenge the point of view of the accommodationists. Apparently the polite thing to do is keep quiet.

Mencken rightly deplored that undue deference to religious beliefs. He wrote in the immediate aftermath of the Scopes trial, "Even a superstitious man has certain inalienable rights," but he "has no

right to be protected against the free criticism of those who do not hold them. He has no right to demand that they be treated as sacred. ... The meaning of religious freedom, I fear, is sometimes greatly misapprehended. It is taken to be a sort of immunity, not merely from governmental control but also from public opinion."

Why have organizations like the National Academy of Sciences sided with the accommodationists even though there is no imperative to take a position? After all, it would be perfectly acceptable to simply advocate for good science and stay out of this particular fray.

One has to suspect that tactical considerations are at play here. The majority of Americans subscribe to some form of faith tradition. Some scientists may fear that if science is viewed as antithetical to religion, then even moderate believers may turn away from science and join the fundamentalists.

But political considerations should not be used to silence honest critical inquiry. Richard Dawkins has challenged the accommodationist strategy, calling it "a cowardly cop-out. I think it's an attempt to woo the sophisticated theological lobby and to get them into our camp and put the creationists into another camp. It's good politics. But it's intellectually disreputable."

Evolution, and science in general, will ultimately flourish or die on its scientific merits, not because of any political strategy. Good science is an invaluable tool in humanity's progress and survival, and it cannot be ignored or suppressed for long. The public may turn against this or that theory in the short run but will eventually have to accept evolution, just as it had to accept the Copernican heliocentric system.

It is strange that the phrase "respect for religion" has come to mean that religious beliefs should be exempt from the close scrutiny that other beliefs are subjected to. Such an attitude infantilizes religious believers, suggesting that their views cannot be defended and can be preserved only by silencing those who disagree.

Mencken said of Bryan's religious beliefs, "Not only are they not supported by the known facts; they are in direct contravention of the known facts. No man whose information is sound and whose mind functions normally can conceivably credit them. ... What should be a civilized man's attitude toward such superstitions? It seems to me that the only attitude possible to him is one of

contempt. If he admits that they have any intellectual dignity whatever, he admits that he himself has none. If he pretends to a respect for those who believe in them, he pretends falsely, and sinks almost to their level. When he is challenged he must answer honestly, regardless of tender feelings."

While Mencken's use of the word "contempt" is perhaps too harsh, he makes a valid point: that no beliefs should be exempt from scrutiny simply because many people have held them for a long time. It is time to remove the veil that has protected religious beliefs for so long. After all, if we concede without argument that mainstream religious beliefs are compatible with science, how can we argue that witchcraft and astrology are not?

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