Religion and Science: Compatible or Incompatible?

by Elijah Levy

Let’s begin by defining religion as an institution with sociological and psychological functions. I am not writing a persuasive paper, assuming a position for or against religion or science. Just read with an open, expansive mind. So, let’s start with a definition of religion. In sociological terms, religion is an institution that provides meaning to our lives through adherence to beliefs, morals, rituals, and practices. Now some of these things are treated as sacred. It appears that these beliefs and practices were created by human beings in response to social forces that they could not comprehend. It was mostly about believing in a reality beyond the perceptible facts in our ordinary life and human experience. I call it a sort of intuitive knowledge or faith because it cannot be verified by conducting an experiment leading to empirical evidence. Emile Durkheim, one of the founders of sociology defined religion as:

"a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, … which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those that adhere to them."

I suspect that humans created the institution of religion, much like the institution of family, out of a need to experience meaning in their life. If enough mysteries exist in our lives, we need to respond to this unknowable reality. So, religion provides us with ways for dealing with the unknown, invisible reality. Religion can create a sense of certainty in an otherwise uncertain reality. The uncertain reality could be things in our lives we cannot explain, such as the untimely loss of loved ones and the certainty of death. Religion also enables us to give up our despair, fear, and anxiety to a transcendental supernatural deity. This understanding ultimately contributes to our life orientation, or faith consisting of a world beyond what we can see. I call this the ineffable.

Now, let’s examine what science does for us. The realistic, objective assessment of our reality is what science so nicely provides for humanity. Science, as an enterprise, allows us to achieve a great understanding of the physical world, the world we can all see, touch and smell. As a model for creating predictability in our lives, science is wonderful. Science is the practice of gathering objective data and facts and generating theories to help us control and predict the outcome of our lives, and the occurrence of social events. Science is an experimental process, a rational, methodical practice for understanding the mysteries of the world. I believe that what we do not understand suggests that there are limits to science or limits to man’s intelligence. It’s that ineffable thing again. With regard to science and religion, I think this matter needs to be approached in a way that harmonizes both disciplines. In other words, the compelling thing is to assume a view that accommodates revelation and science. Now wouldn’t that be a real nice goal? I think some will resist integrating both because we have a need to polarize things in the world; meaning it has to be one or the other. In our culture some individuals rely less on religion to create meaning in life while science and rationalism makes great discoveries in our world. Let me summarize this issue with the following: science teaches and explains how the world works and religion teaches us how to act, how to be moral, kind and loving human beings, how to determine what is and isn’t important and what to pray for in the world.

I suspect that all religions, from the Western to the Eastern world represent man’s search for meaning in life. The majority of the world’s faiths attempt to understand a new spiritual reality which they named G-d, Allah or any other sacred name. I like the theory that the creation of religion is a universal phenomenon. An anthropologist named Bronislaw Malinowski, about 80 years ago studied the tribal customs of the Trobriand Islanders, in addition to other tribes on a South Pacific Island. He noticed that different religious activities were performed by the tribes. For example, one tribe practiced lots of magical rituals while others performed little magic. Malinowski realized that one of the tribes was near a calm lagoon where lots of fish were caught. So, his explanation for why this tribe performed fewer magical rituals was because of the plentiful fish and there was no need for rituals to protect the fishermen when they went out to sea. The other tribe, sadly enough, sent out their fishermen only to return with no fish. Malinowski concluded that the tribe having difficulty catching fish performed magical rituals to help them gain some control over uncertain natural forces. So, what’s all of this interesting stuff supposed to mean for us? I think it suggests that when life is safe and predictable we are less anxious, fearful and there is less of a need for magic. In other words, as humans become more knowledgeable and develop and master skills to predict the outcome of their life, there is less reliance on magic. So, it looks like religion or faith provides humans with ways of dealing with the unknown. Do you think religion is essential for human survival? Think about it now. Think about the functions of religion again. The most important ones are the social conformity and identity functions. Social conformity refers to honoring norms, values and morals of society. You know, the virtuous behaviors like not lying, stealing and harming others. I think research demonstrates that individuals who are religious are less likely to violate laws. In other words, they are not likely to commit crimes and get into trouble with the law because religion encourages it’s followers to be kind, moral and to obey the Golden Rule. The identity function enables us to feel connected to a faith that defines who we are as people united by common, shared beliefs and values. The identity function is a real important one because in today’s modern society you can easily be identityless. I made up that word. Everyone needs an identity that they can strongly connect with to draw inspiration, meaning and purpose in life. Now there is a supportive function religion plays in our lives. This type of support refers to the consolation, and relief from fear and anxiety at times in our lives. I notice that I become less worrisome and anxious when I pray. How about you? I hope this article enriched your understanding about the functions of religion and science, and how they can be harmonized rather than polarized. As a discipline, science has enabled us to enjoy great advances in medicine, technology and various other fields. In addition, science lets us exercise increased control and predictability in our lives. Religion is just as essential as science for human survival, providing us with purpose and meaning in life, in addition to obligating us to adhere to beliefs and morals to create a more loving and kind world.