BtSM 2009

Special Interest Group (SIG) — Science + Religion

Summary by Benjamin Olshin of group discussion on "Science and Religion Perspectives", moderated by Mohsen Tawfik

Cairo, Egypt
13 May 2009

Introduction
The discussion began with person introductions as to each participant's religious (and "spiritual") perspectives. Participants mentioned a wide variety of themes — interest in esoteric aspects of belief systems, problems with hypocrisy and ideology in Christianity, the writings of Rudolph Steiner, and so on.

Dr. Tawfik gave a person account of his "departure and return" to Islam. He also noted that in Islam, there is no contradiction between mind and spirit, a gesture towards moving the discussion towards the science-religion issue.

However, the discussion moved almost completely into a series of interlocutions about religion, belief, and spirituality, as well as some religious philosophy and philosophy of belief.

There was an examination of various "degrees" of Muslim belief, and then a number of participants talked about moving away from religion because of encounters with fundamentalism or fanaticism. One participant noted that in Egypt, both Coptic Christians and Muslims could be very dogmatic. Three participants raised the issue of women's rights and Islam.

The group was "biased" in the sense that most participants spoke in a way that suggested a (personal) lack of resolution in terms of their personal belief systems. No one in the group seemed to have a purely fixed or dogmatic set of beliefs. Several spoke in "exploratory" terms concerning belief.

Religious Ideas and History
One participant particularly critiqued the idea that Islam actually *gives* women rights; she said that this may have been true in the past, but was not the case now.

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The discussion moved on to the issue of fundamentalism, not only in Islam, but also in Judaism, and the problematic (if recent) conflation of Zionist ideals and religion, particularly as Israel was founded as a socialist — not religious — state.

In comparison, the example of Egypt was brought up, where religion and government *both* have roles in the constitution.

Religion, several participants noted, sought power, and that's what led to religion getting involved in governmental affairs, in many countries.

Religion, Science, and Critique

In terms of science and religion, someone pointed out that we should see why, in the past, Islam and science *could* co-exist — it was important to examine those historical/social conditions.

Another participant added that religion, unlike science, provides a "fixity", an unchanging certainty that people crave. This led to a discussion of the "basic principles" of Islam (*maqasid*, i.e., the ultimate goal or objective, or intention), as well as the apparent dissonance between Islam and the modern world. In reaction to this, another participant noted that it was important to look at the appropriateness of nations intervening in other nations' religious affairs.

Picking up on the theme of "fixity", it was pointed out that even in science, there was the question of why the universe appeared to be "ordered", and that this led some to conjecture that order implied purpose — thus leading to religious considerations.

Science has the capacity to constantly examine its conclusions, its theories, even some of its methods. One participant noted that one could talk about "open" versus "fundamentalist" systems in religion, and awareness of this as a way of creating a better dialogue between religious systems. Someone added that any religion has the capacity for self-critique.

There was debate, then, about the idea of "fixed points of reference" — in Islam, it was noted, the idea that the Quran is doctrinal was not always the case, historically speaking.

The Nature of Religion Itself

Another participant said, then, that perhaps it was time for religions to meet, and mentioned the "World Parliament of Religions". It was suggested that religions could meet, mix, and "see what they come up with": there may indeed be a "gnosis" or spirituality in *all* people, but with "plural expressions". Is there a "source", a "fundamental well of knowledge" that all religions are getting at? Can we get beyond, then, the binary logic of religious debate and rebuttal?

One participant made the important comment that perhaps religion is too highly dependent on external factors (culture, society, government, human nature, and so on) for us to talk about it constructively, or to really speak of a "pure religious system".

Another important and interesting comment was that "religion may be a dependent rather than independent variable". Moreover, this same participant noted, complex adaptive systems — such as religions — change over time. So at what point do they become new religions? The constant process of change may be part of the nature of religion, and thus fundamentalism may not, in fact, be "true" to the nature of actual religion. One participant phrased the idea thus: "Religion as a faith is absolute, but the practice may be relative and subject to examination..."

Religion, Science, and Ethics
Religion and culture seem to be deeply intertwined, and perhaps this is why at times in history religion seems to have supported scientific pursuits and at other times religion and science have simply co-existed — or been antithetical.

The discussion then turned to ethics, with a critique of science: If we, in contemporary society, view science *as a* religion, then it has the potential to operate in an unethical manner. Indeed, from where do ethics originate? Not from science, said one participant. Science should be within a larger ethical structure.

Could that structure be religion? Perhaps religion, properly understood, would actually encourage an environment of curiosity and investigation?

Where is the schism between science and religion, exactly? This was one of the final questions posed by the participants. In the past, there was less specialization, and perhaps our (excessive) specialization in modern culture is part of the problem — perhaps we need a "scholarship of integration". Specialization makes us "numb", said one participant.

Perhaps we also need a critique of the current fragmentation of knowledge, and a view of the world as "open and whole". Maybe we must move away from science as parsimony and asceticism?

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