

# Conflict or Cooperation?

From Galileo's trial to the present day, relations between science and religion have oscillated between coolness and open hostility. Nevertheless, appeals for this centuries-long conflict to be brought to an end, or at least mitigated, can be heard ever more strongly. It seems that the NOMA principle (non-overlapping magisteria), which holds that relations between religion and science should be based upon "respectful nonintervention" (Stephen Jay Gould), is gaining considerable popularity. Yet while recognizing this principle as a step in the right direction, I will now argue that it is an insufficient step.

I must begin by stating that I believe science and religion are only seemingly in conflict. The results of scientific research are, after all, entirely neutral with respect to the profoundest religious questions. It is only our attitude towards the knowledge so gleaned that ceases to be religiously indifferent. Faith might embrace science and develop through the contemplation science stimulates, or it might reject science and ossify, turning into ordinary fanaticism. Science can fall into a similar trap, when it takes on too much self-confidence. The scientific method of studying reality has proven itself a countless number of times, but... it is not omnipotent. For example, it will not give us an answer to a very old question, frequently called Leibniz's question: "Warum gibt es etwas, und nicht etwa nichts?" ("Why is there something rather than nothing?"). We will not learn how to do good, or why exactly it is good to do good. Of course, one can make one's way through life without asking oneself any of these questions. But once asked, they will come round again and again, laying science's innate limitations bare.

Unfortunately, we often do not perceive these limitations. This happens "when we mistake our vast successes in studying the world for a solution of man's existential problems. The temptation to expand the scientific method to all human domains is very strong. But this temptation will falter hopelessly against such human experiences as suffering, death, seeking the meaning of life, and choosing between good and evil" (Michał Heller). Due to the disappointment that stems from this faltering, many of us begin to doubt our civilization and suspect that the science it rests upon is the source of more harm than good. But let's not delude ourselves: we will not improve our fate by banning the pursuit of science, or even just restricting it. The problem is not that science seems to be developing too quickly, nor that it is discovering things we do not know how to cope with. Our real problem is that in order to lead full lives we require something that arises externally to science. What we call it is not important: faith, metaphysics, spirituality, or other-

wise. What is important is for this to be of truly high caliber and to develop us spiritually - instead, as is sometimes the case today, of leaving us prey to astrologists and occultists. "We are all seeking an all-explanatory idea of the world and we need to be certain that we are living correctly... People need - and have always needed - to have faith that the world can be not just mastered, but also comprehended. This need, it seems, constitutes one of the component elements of humanity" (Leszek Kołakowski). Can existing religious systems satisfy this need? I believe that possibly so, yet with a certain caveat. "In every religion there are two levels. The first, specific level, speaks of God as an omnipotent being or, as in Buddhism, of Nirvana and the continuity of life in the cycle of deaths and rebirths. On the second, general level, all religions speak of the need for kindness and being good... with the same message: be a kind person" (Tenzin Gyatso). It seems to be completely obvious which of these levels should be ascribed greater, and which lesser import.

Yes, just as science forms models of the world (because, after all, the world of scientific description is only a certain simplified model of the real world), so faith creates models of God. A true believer is not someone who goes cutting others down, literally or figuratively, to defend the superiority of their model - but rather someone who strives for spiritual excellence, in harmony with their own tradition and their own religious practice. Churches and religions must recognize this, because otherwise they will never come to terms with each other - to the obvious detriment of us all. Science can help overcome the differences that divide them. Does the "image of the world developed by modern science not suggest new interpretations of traditional religious truths?"... After all, "even dogmas, in their interpretative layer, undergo evolution - one of the most powerful elements of which involves confronting religious convictions with convictions about the world and how it functions, a confrontation that takes place constantly and independently of the will of theologians." (Michał Heller). However, if science is supposed to encourage religion to reflect, and religion to teach science humility, then those who want to boil the relations between them down to nonintervention, even nonintervention full of mutual respect, are obviously in error. Whether we like it or not, these two currents of human activity flow through our insides, shaping our views and attitudes. Cooperation between them can only serve us well.



The scientific method is powerful, but not omnipotent

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