

?Can Science Dispense with Religion

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What is your definition of science and of religion? .1

The question implies that science and religion cannot be defined with proximate genus and specific difference. How could we, who are dependent on religion and surrounded by the world of science, define the perimeters of science and religion? Naturally, we provide a description of science and religion. Some of the contemporary researchers are of the opinion that our understanding and comprehension is a function of the world in which we live, and that this world has paradigms and measures which guide science. I do not mean we do not know science and religion.

Understanding is one thing and describing is something else. Of course, if we are able to describe something, undoubtedly we know it. But, first, we do not know everything through descriptions. Second, the highest form of knowledge is about things that cannot be described such as God, truth and justice.

But there are people who are aware of God and those are supporters of truth and justice. Any man of religion is familiar with religion. Any man of science is dealing with science. But neither the man of religion nor the man of science know all of religion or science, and, hence, they are unable to define science or religion (and of course, if they are not philosophers, they would not even decide to define science and religion).

This difficulty arises more often in the case of religion, because science is related to reason. But reason is not able to understand the depth and mystery of religion, even though religion itself is not alien to reason.

It is clear that here we are not referring to science in its wider sense. What is meant here is a science through which the modern world has been distinguished from other worlds, and its precise example is found in mathematical physics. The positivists viewed this science as expressing constant and necessary relations among the phenomena.

In the neo-positivism, it was insisted that science is not a collection of propositions or theories whose correctness is confirmed or proven by experience. The first statement has the added advantage that indirectly it points out to the fact that science had an order. But the second statement is mostly the description of the work that the scientist does. Perhaps Feyerabend had this in mind when he said-and in his opinion one cannot put it any better than this-that science is that which the scientist does.

One can find fissures in these so-called definitions. For example, one can ask whether the constant relations among the phenomena are external relations, and that science recognizes the things and relations as they are, or as Kant used to say, these relations derive their constancy and necessity from the human understanding.

If through science one can understand the phenomena of nature, the understanding of each phenomenon depends on our faculty of perception. A phenomenon does not have an independent being. But when some say that science is composed of propositions which are either proved or refuted by experiment, they still have not defined science, but have tried to describe the features of a scientific proposition.

However, is it not true that if we know the description and nature of the statements and propositions of a science, then we know that science? But here the question does not revolve around the nature of the problem, but around the way in which the problems are proven or refuted. In effect, it would be as if it were said that science is a collection of propositions which can render themselves to scientific investigation.

Let us assume that we know the description of scientific propositions. For example, we accept that there are statements and propositions that are proven by experience, and scientific judgments are among these types.

In this case, have we found the essence of science? This is not a description of science; it is a brief account of a viewpoint and philosophical perception of science. What should be stressed here is that there is no common feature in the two aforementioned statements. But, how would it be possible then to define, with one or two statements, two things that do not mean the same thing and are not convertible to each other?

In the first statement, science or scientific judgment has been described on the basis of its subject matter, whereas in the second description, the subject matter and object of science have been completely ignored and the focus has been on the method and form. But a more difficult question in the second description is: Where does theory come from, and how is it constructed, and if the theory is not derived from experience, how can experience be the measure for the truth or falsity of scientific judgments? Can science have a measure outside of itself, a measure which would not be in the same category as science? Of course, method is very important in science.

It is so important that one could say that science is investigation, and investigation is applying a design on beings based on method. As we see in this definition, the status of technique in the nature of science has been duly recognized. However, we should not consider it as a definition of science. We cannot define science.

There are plenty of ambiguities and differences of opinion regarding the source, conditions, possibilities, exigencies and effects of science, as well as on the relationship between science, history, culture and metaphysics. How can one define science if it does not have a beginning, and its beginning dates back to man's prehistory, and its end cannot be predicted? Essentially the question about the nature of science is one which belongs to the domain of philosophy and in each philosophy a manifestation of science appears. Hence, it is possible that someone would say that science is the same as quantification, and still someone else might call science [a way of] forecasting.

It is possible that some experts would regard science as true because it fulfils our demands and needs. In the language of religion and metaphysics, science is defined in a different manner. For example, it is possible to say that science is among the manifestations of the majesty of the Lord, and, amazes man. Because the path to the Sacred passes through [the realm of] amazement, perhaps through science man can reach the Sacred dimension. The great philosopher of the Islamic world, Mulla Sadra, considered science as a manner of existence.

He viewed science as possessing analogical gradation. When anyone of us speaks of science, we intend a certain stage of it, and one cannot understand the truth and the stage without referring to the totality. If we are supposed to define particular science, this definition must be with a view to general science. Since in the contemporary philosophy of science, universal science is not discussed, it would be difficult and baseless to define science.

Now we must define religion. If science does not have a definition, how can one define religion? Religion is love. It is submission. It is servitude [to God]. It is submission [to the will of God]. It is a covenant. These are all true. But this is still not a definition. If we review, and describe, the religious statements and actions of the man of religion, we still cannot consider it a description of religion. Anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and philosophers usually look at religion from outside.

Each is trying in a special way to come up with general definitions of religion. It can be summarized, from what has been said in different disciplines that religion is belief in the Sacred, acting on the basis of religious decrees and required rites. But the difficulty is in understanding the meaning of the belief, especially the belief in the Sacred.

What is the Sacred? How do we understand the Sacred and the Transcendent and how do we believe in them? For instance, the understanding of the one who sees religion rooted in man's fear is quite different from that of the person who views man as a being who is by nature religious. Before defining religion, we must know what relations there are between man and

religion.

If man is connected as much with religion as he is with irreligion, and this relation has come about by accident, in effect these are two independent entities, and while man examines religion from the outside, he can understand religion to a degree. But if man's nature is mixed with religion, in that case, in the understanding of religion, the believer himself is involved as well; one cannot look at religion divorced from the outside world and in a vacuum. For the

moment, I decide against getting involved in these debates.

What I want to say is that man became man with the Covenant he made in time immemorial. The beginning of religion starts with the Covenant of the past. Whatever religion encompasses-laws, decrees, its decrees on what is prohibited or permissible, its rites and rituals-are the result of that Covenant.

But we have to be careful not to view this Covenant as a covenant between two independent entities. This is a special Covenant. We were asked, while we were only a potentiality, "Am I Not Your Lord?" and we responded positively to the question in the language of our potentiality. With this response, we became a human being, and carried the burden of that which has been entrusted to us. The emergence of man, the advent of religion and belief in religion was indeed an event.

Man became man after he made a Covenant, and his Covenant was of a religious nature. Some say that if religion had been innate in man, then all of the people would have been religious, and no one could have been able to reject religion.

These people do not understand that religion is a covenant and it is possible that one would forget or break a covenant, in which case they are covenant-breakers. With this statement, we have indeed admitted that religion does not belong to us; we have admitted that it is we who belong to religion, and how can a component of an entity define the entity to which it belongs?

2. Do you see any conflict between your definitions of these two concepts?

When providing a description, hardly any conflict arises between religion and science, and if there is a conflict, it is in the sub-principles and conclusions. In fact, there is no conflict between science and religion. No scientist can deny the existence of the sacred source by resorting to science, and view worshipping as a futile act. But sometimes there is a conflict between scientific research and religious absolutes.

Earlier thinkers used to say that if a conflict arises between the dictates of reason and the religious decrees, one must interpret the religious decree. This perception, especially in the past two centuries, has led to the interpretation of the religious statements in harmony with the

universally accepted scientific facts.

For example, some of the researchers and even some of the jurists have adjusted the account of the creation of man to the evolution theory. Perhaps these attempts are not that significant but they are not without justification either. If they view the language of religion and science as one, and if they divide the religious decrees to descriptive and prescriptive decrees, and view its descriptive decrees of the same type as the descriptive scientific propositions and subject to investigation based on the scientific method, they would have no choice but to take

the side of science in case there emerges a conflict between science and religion.

This is due to the fact that from the beginning they have understood the language of religion as similar to the language of science and have scientifically approached religion. If our yardstick is the language of science and scientific theories, and religious statement has to be interpreted such that it would go along with science, still the language of religion would be different from the language of science: The religious statement, once interpreted, does not mean the same thing as what it seems to say. If it were so, would there be any need for analogy and interpretation?

If we look closer, we realize that there is no conflict between science and religion. Actually, the conflict is between the theologians and scholars or between theology and some parts of the scientific theories or a specific interpretation of these theories. However, in educational textbooks or the like, and in the opinion of those who limit scientific judgments to investigation, research, refutation and proof or testability, and contend that scientific judgments could be either confirmed or approved, or investigated and refuted, either deliberately or unconsciously, they have created a confrontation between religion and science.

Especially when having meaning would mean that it is testable (the view held by most members of the Vienna Circle), one cannot test and investigate a religious decree in the same manner that one would with routine scientific hypotheses and theories (of course, grand scientific theories, too, are not provable or refutable in their totality).

The point that needs to be considered here is the meaning of experiment and investigation. If we intend the general meaning of experiment, undoubtedly it would include religious, moral and mystical experiments. Hence, it could no longer be considered a characteristic exclusive to science and scientific research. But the statement that decrees are meaningful only when they can be investigated through scientific methods cannot be supported and the men of science reject such statements. Hence, if someone says that the definition of science is in conflict with the definition of religion, he can hardly justify his own words.

3. Where do you think there may be a conflict between these two?

The way is paved for the emergence of conflict whenever and wherever they want to evaluate religious decrees with scientific measures, and especially view its language of allusion as identical with the quantitative language of sciences. But if the boundaries are clearly recognized, the belief in the religious principles and exigencies would never hinder scientific investigation anywhere. But sometimes some of these dependencies create or destroy the context for doing scientific research. However, whatever is not considered as preconditions for scientific research and does not pave the way for it, is not opposed to science.

4. What have been the grounds for the development of conflict between these two?

In the past periods, there was no contradiction between science and religion. The conflict between reason and religion has been discussed since the time of Plato. From the beginning of the Hellenistic era and Alexandrian period, this conflict was intensified somewhat. Muslim philosophers and theologians from the Christian era tried to somehow resolve this conflict. The result of the efforts by Muslim philosophers and researchers such as Khwaja Nassir-al-Din Tusi and Fayyaz Lahiji is that reason and religion are not at all opposed to each other. If some of the mystics denigrated science, they were referring to a science which serves as a veil.

5. What has been the role of religion in the development of science in the West?

The people of Iran and those in the regions considered the Islamic lands were able to learn the sciences of the Greeks, Chinese and Indians before accepting Islam. But as we know, they did not show any interest or desire [to learn these sciences]. But with the expansion of Islam, the interest in science grew. Seekers of knowledge traveled from remote regions in order to learn sciences.

In less than 80 years, sciences such as medicine, astronomy, mathematics, alchemy and philosophy arrived in the world of Islam from India and Greece. Despite the perception common among some historians of science, the sciences of the Islamic era did not have a stillbirth. Rather, they were like dynamic newborns who grew to their maturity. But, it would not be appropriate or right to compare the growth and vitality of the sciences of the Islamic era with those of the Renaissance period in Europe.

6. Can we have a religious science?

One understands two things from the term "religious science". One is a science which is about religious questions and discussions. The other is a science which has acquired religious

characteristics, even though it is not necessarily connected with religion and is separate from religion. Undoubtedly, the second type of science is intended when it is asked whether it is possible to have religious science. If we approach the issue from an abstract perspective, we realize that logic, mathematics, physics and sociology would not become religious sciences, and there is no need to make them religious, and it is possible to say that speaking of Islamic physics and geometry would be meaningless.

These statements, as has been stated before, are generally understood to imply that a person has only engaged in an exercise of futility if he decides to make mechanics and astronomy Christian or Islamic. In whatever world the sciences are, they acquire the characteristics of that world. They also rotate around the axis, as well as serve the interests, of that world. As far as we know, the only non-religious world in the history of man is the modern Western world. The non-religious thought and science began in Greece. The Greek world was non-religious and their science, too was non-religious. But if the modern non-religious world would be transformed to a religious world, i.e. this world would vanish and a new world would emerge for which religious thought would serve as the backbone, then science, too, would be under the shade of religion, and would become religious in a sense.

7. Can science dispense with religion?

Apparently, science can be independent from religion because the fundamentals of science are not the same as the principles and fundamentals of religion, and scientific judgments are rarely mistaken for religious decrees. Not only the modern science is independent from religion, but also the science of perspectives, astronomy, mathematics and mechanics of the earlier people were not religious and would not have any relations to religiosity. But one could discuss the issue in a different way.

One could imagine that if man had not had any religion, would science have evolved to become what it is today? Would science have been possible at all? We do not know what man would have been if there had been no religion. Man became man with the Covenant, and if this Covenant had not been there, man would not have become possessor of science, technique, ethics and politics.

It might be said that this statement contradicts what have been considered established facts, because millennia of growth and development of science in the religious contexts are not comparable with the 200-year or 300-year growth of science in the modern non-religious world. It is true that the modern world is non-religious but this world follows a religious world. In the modern world, pseudo-religious interests have taken the place of religious interests. The

existence of this world depends in many ways on religion and religious beliefs. Modern science too, has roots in metaphysics and religious thought. I do not want to dwell on what has been said about the Christian foundation of modern civilization and science. Suffice it to say that if religion had not been there, we would not have known about truth. The dependence of science on truth is of the same type as the religious quest. Actually, science has borrowed the concept of truth from religion and has given it another meaning. Even though science, in its abstract form, is independent from religion, when all the conditions for emergence of science are considered, then we realize that it is connected with religion.

8. Can one separate the domains of activity of science and religion completely?

Based on what has been said in the seventh question, the domains of science and religion are in one sense independent from each other. But if we consider it with a view to unity, both are rooted in the same source