

Theists versus atheists: are conflicts necessary?

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Abstract

Mathematics is like theology; it starts with axioms (self-evident truths) and uses logical derivation to justify consecutive claims. Science is different; here claims are justified by reproducible experimental observations, not by pure logic. This does not interfere with peaceful coexistence and mutual respect between mathematicians and scientists. The situation can be contrasted with relations between some self-appointed theologians and self-appointed scientists. No one benefits from the endless “we know better” conflicts. Is it possible to avoid such conflicts? The topic was discussed over the Internet, as illustrated in this article.

1) Introduction

Conflicts between theists and atheists, often amounting to “we are better than you” accusations, are common; one can verify this by browsing the Internet. The aggressive combatants are usually neither professional scientists nor professional theologians.

Is it desirable to end such confrontations?

Is it possible to end them?

If yes, then how?

I am a professional scientist, not a theologian. As a student I was an aggressive atheist and a member of the Polish communist party. I am now a theist, believing in God and attending synagogue from time to time. Missing an earlier introduction to God, I am very different from other theists. My ideological evolution is described in a free on-line autobiography (1). Why is this book free? Because writing it was a moral obligation, to my parents, and to millions of other victims of Stalinism. They are dead but I was definitely with them, when writing. That is how I became aware that we humans live in two different worlds, material and spiritual.

My answer to the first question is positive. No one benefits from endless conflicts. Are we humans able to end the undesirable confrontations? Yes, we are. But the process, if we agree to start it, will be slow. And what about the third question? Having no answer, I wanted to learn from others. To this end I prepared a short introduction shown in Section 2 and a set of seven statements shown in Section 3. Published on a website, together with the questions listed above, the post generated a flood of

comments (2). Some of them are shown in Section 4. My own contributions are marked with L.K.

I still do not know how to answer the third question. But most comments were very interesting and I decided to share some of them in this article.

2) Our two worlds, material and spiritual

The two worlds in which most of us live, spiritual and material, are very different from each other; methods of validation of claims in science are not the same as in theology. Scientists try to minimize reliance on authorities; their claims are either confirmed or refuted by performing material experiments. Theologians, on the other hand, rely on authorities (holy books) and on spiritual experience. Scientists should agree not to deal with spiritual claims, such as existence of God or gods, and theologians should agree not to deal with material claims, such as the age of our planet or the reality of global warming.

Such agreement, between professional scientists and professional theologians, could be the very first step along the path toward peaceful coexistence and mutual respect.

3) Initial Statements

Statement 1 (L.K.)

Did God create us on his image? Did we create God on our image? The answer is “yes” to each of these questions.

Statement 2

That's an interesting thought. I'd like to know how both could be simultaneously true. There are thousands of verifiable instances of humans creating new religions, and none of the former option.

Statement 3 (L.K.)

Theological questions are not answered by using science and scientific questions are not answered by using theology. Likewise, theologians say that the universe was created in six days, as revealed in holy books. But astronomers say that they have evidence that the universe has been changing for billions of years. Scientific methodology is not used to validate holy books and holy books are not used to validate scientific claims. Mixing science with religion is not useful.

Statement 4

I think that science can be used to test the claims made in holy books. If the claims made in holy books were correct, we would expect scientific inquiry to support them. Yes, holy books contain pronouncements about the physical world. Such pronouncements should not be taken literally. They represent incorrect beliefs of our

ancestors. Faith and science were not yet separate disciplines. The world was not created in one week, six thousand years ago. Theologians know this; many of them do not take such stories literally.

Statement 5 (L.K.)

Holy books do not define God in terms of material attributes. The best a scientist can do is to confirm that God is not a material object. But that would not be a surprise to sophisticated theologians; they have already accepted that God is a spiritual entity.

Statement 6 (L.K.)

Think about close cooperation between scientists and mathematicians. The two disciplines are very different, in terms of methods of validation, but there are no conflicts. In fact, mathematics is like theology; it starts with axioms (self-evident truths in particular contexts) and uses logical derivation to justify claims. Science is different; here claims are justified by reproducible experimental observations, not by pure logic. Scientists and theists can coexist in the same way.

Statement 7

It is not good to subdivide knowledge in two categories. Knowledge is interconnected, that is its nature. There is one truth, not two truths. In a perfect man, it's one not two. So we either believe in the Bible, and in the story of the literal Genesis (or in some other religion like Islam), or not.

4) Subsequently selected comments

Comment 8

God means something more sophisticated than the old man in the sky, rewarding the good and punishing the bad like a cosmic Santa Claus. It is not what proselytizers tell us, or what tells terrorists to bomb buildings and trains.

Comment 9

There was a time when it was not believed that science could tell us where we came from, or where the universe came from, and religion stepped in to answer those questions. But science now CAN tackle those questions, and religion must retreat further into the shadows.

Comment 10

Whether we evolved from ape-like creatures or not, it does not tell us where we came from or what we're here for!

Comment 11

Interesting thought on the difference between science and mathematics, but both are interdependent. Science would be a shadow of itself if not for the math, and math wouldn't be anywhere as challenged if not for the science, yes? No?

If however scientists could be "tolerant" of religion the way they are of mathematics, then we could achieve something greater. It would be a start at least! Achieve this, and then integrate it into society at large. Idealistic? Perhaps, but it is still worth trying.

Comment 12

I don't mind coexistence with religion, but religious people seriously need to practice their religion in their bedroom and in their bedroom only. As soon as you theists cross over the line and try to interfere with my life through politics, law, and lifestyle, than you can go shove it up you know where and expect no mercy from me.

Comment 13

You wrote: "Holy books do not define God in terms of material attributes. The best a scientist can do is to confirm that God is not a material object. But that would not be a surprise to sophisticated theologians; they have already accepted that God is a spiritual entity." But what does it mean to say something is a "spiritual entity?" The stuff of thought? An idea?

Comment 14 (L.K.)

I wish I knew how to answer. Ask a theologian. They spend years debating various aspects of the spiritual world. But do not expect them to describe God in terms of physical attributes, such as mass, height, shape, color, etc. Spirituality is God, and everything associated with God. My basic assumption is that scientific attitude toward our material world, and belief in God, can coexist peacefully. Neither believers nor nonbelievers should be ridiculed.

Comment 15

For most scientists, there is absolutely no problem with religion or spirituality. It really is only when religion tries to extend its influence beyond the sphere of spirituality into science that things begin to get contentious. For example, when young earth creationists suggest that the earth is 6000 years old, or that Noah really brought 2 of every species onto the ark (including dinosaurs), etc... that scientists begin to have a problem with religion.

Personal spirituality is really even something that most scientists think about. In fact, there are many leading scientists, mathematicians, etc... who have a very strong spiritual base but continue to do outstanding scientific work- without letting their religious doctrine influence the evidence. If you would like a good example of this... see Martin Gardner. Martin was really one of the fathers of the skeptical movement and kept very strong spiritual beliefs. His book, "Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science" is one of the best books on the topic of critical thinking. For Martin, his spiritual beliefs were something that he held very dear but separate and distinct from evidence based science. He realized that there were likely no rational scientific explanations for his beliefs... but that didn't matter, because they exist outside the realm of science.

Another example is the work that Eugenie Scott has done over the years bridging the

gap between some Christians and the scientific method. So, to get back to your original question - I think that peaceful coexistence is entirely possible and is probably the default condition for most scientists. It is only when religion tries to over extend its influence with pseudoscientific ideas like YEC or intelligent design that scientists feel the need to fire back and clarify the scientific position.

Comment 16

If science and religion are so incompatible, perhaps someone should tell the Vatican Observatory, or the Pontifical Academy of Sciences which is by appointment and counts Nobel laureates, agnostics, and atheists on its membership.

The vast majority of working physicists and cosmologists today build their work around the 'Standard Model' of the Big Bang, a concept first proposed by a Belgian priest, Monsignor Georges Lemaitre. It is only when personal agendas are injected into the discussion that science and religion become incompatible. Both search for truth.

Comment 17

Yes, peaceful coexistence between scientists and theologians is desirable. But first disagreements between different groups of theologians must be resolved. That will be very difficult to achieve. Another difficulty has to do with political exploitation of beliefs, in all countries.

Comment 18

While it is not difficult to understand why scientists would reject Religion, it certainly is short sighted for people of a Religious core belief system to reject science. It is after all one of God's creations from the theist perspective and therefore worthy of exploration.

Comment 19

There is a distinction between those who want religion to rule and those who are interested in spiritual/theological/religious inquiry or experience. It is the latter that I understood the OP [original post?] to be considering. Given the fact that there will always be a substantial number of people in the world for whom spiritual/religious matters are important, coexistence between them and science is not only desirable, it is imperative.

Comment 20

Referring to science and religion, Stephen Jay Gould wrote: "The methods of one are inappropriate for the studies of the another's problems."

Comment 21

Science and religion are often considered to be on different planes. One represents reality and the other represents fantasy. There is no way to combine logic and superstition. It's like comparing apples and oranges.

Comment 22

I am opposed to peaceful coexistence. One does not halt a boxing match for fear of a winner

Comment 23

The borders are definitely breaking down and this change is coming from both sides. I read a physics book recently in which the authors argued that only with the help of spirituality can we bring the interpretation of our physical laws to a new level. . . .

Comment 24

I believe in a creator God, Darwinian Evolution and the Big Bang. So do all the Christians I know. The Pope has stated officially that evolution is not just a theory. The bigger question for me is why do so many non-Christians presume most Christians think the world is 6000 years old and that they are biblical literalists?

Comment 25

In order for scientists to recognize that a metaphysical world exists, there must be empirical evidence that such a world exists, and (by definition) there is none.

Comment 26

I don't believe in the Bible. But I do believe in God. I am a natural theist.

Comment 27

Some scientist will tell you that the material evidence drives his work but he's forgotten the creative arts and the dreams that allowed him in the end to touch a material fact. A scientist not animated by spirit will discover nothing.

5) A closing question

Comment 17 is a good reminder. Peaceful coexistence and mutual respect, between theists and atheist, is a small part of a much broader issue. Scientists also disagree with each other, but they have established a method for dealing with controversies. What prevents theologians from following their example?

References

- 1) Ludwik Kowalski, "Diary of a Former Communist: Thoughts, Feelings, Reality"
<http://csam.montclair.edu/~kowalski/life/intro.html>
- 2) "Collected Internet comments"
<http://csam.montclair.edu/~kowalski/comments.html>