

RELIGION VERSUS SCIENCE: THE CONFLICT IN REFERENCE TO TRUTH VALUE, NOT CASH VALUE

by *Ervin Laszlo*

Abstract. The rift between science and religion needs to be assessed not merely on pragmatic grounds, on the basis of the effect of scientific versus religious beliefs on people's behavior, as John Caiazza's essay does, but also and above all in regard to the cogency of the respective beliefs in reference to what we can reasonably assume is the true face of reality. About such truth value, the conflict is not irremediable; there are elements of belief regarding the nature of reality that are strikingly similar regardless of whether one arrived at them on the basis of faith in revealed knowledge or on the basis of knowledge acquired by reasoning from or in reference to experience. Two such items are selected here by way of example: belief that in certain states of mind and consciousness individuals can experience union with something larger or deeper than themselves, and belief that the universe we inhabit is the result of an original creative act.

Keywords: cash value versus truth value; revealed versus acquired knowledge; states of consciousness.

John Caiazza has written a remarkable essay, well worth examining. His conclusions are primarily sociological, assessing the conflict between science and religion in terms of its acceptance in society. He concludes that secularism carries the day, primarily because of the effect of science-based technology on people's lives. This conclusion needs to be qualified. On the one hand, there is increasing skepticism regarding the value of science and technology; on the other, there is a development that is often referred to as spiritual renaissance. Spirituality is admittedly not the same as religion, but it is definitely not the same as secularism. It tends toward revealed knowledge more than toward empirical reasoning.

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The development of various subcultures in contemporary society has been the subject of a number of empirical investigations, and reference could and should be made to them in assessing the sociological state of affairs in the science-religion controversy. Paul Ray's survey, for example, showed that "moderns" (which in 1999 made up 48 percent of the American people) share many of the traditional virtues and values of Americans, including belief in God. They, together with another subculture, the "traditionals," are among the regular churchgoers in United States society. The "creatives," which in 1999 had a 23.4 percent share of the U.S. adult population, manifest less adherence to institutional religion but have a far more intense spirituality. The controversy between "Jerusalem" and "Athens" in our day is not as straightforward as in the third century.

In this comment my intention is to dwell not on the sociological aspect of the science-religion issue but on its philosophical aspect—in the sense in which philosophy is a love of, and therefore a search for, truth. The deeper issue is not whether secularism has replaced religion in the minds of the bulk of modern society but whether revealed knowledge or acquired knowledge brings us closer to truth.

I should clarify what I mean by truth. I mean not a metaphysical given but something we can arrive at using human faculties. Not only our faculties but the human condition itself poses limitations. We would not know for certain that we grasped the truth even if we did; we have no way of examining both the state of affairs to which our conceptions refer and our conceptions themselves to see whether they match. We see the world only through our experience and what we make of it. The question is how we make sense of our experience. Revealed and acquired knowledge constitute different and in some ways opposing ways of doing so.

Institutional religion requires its followers to adhere to the truth as revealed to its founders, saints, and prophets. People are to accept a given state of affairs as true because an authority they must not question tells them that it is so. Scientists, on the other hand, should not be doctrinaire (although in practice they sometimes are)—they are not to accept any state of affairs as true unless they are convinced that it is linked by rigorous lines of reasoning to what has been and can repeatedly be verified by experience. This has little if anything to do with "cash value" in the pragmatist's sense. I judge what is true not because it has an effect on me and my world but because I have better reasons for accepting it as true than any alternative.

Evidently, "better reason" is a loaded term. I mean by it the most logical and economical and least speculative way of explaining what can be and has been experienced.

The choice between acceptance on faith in authority and acceptance on the basis of reasoning from or in regard to experience is, in the final count, the choice between religion and science. This choice has no further justification; it is a logical *a priori*, for we arrive at everything we hold true on

the basis of it. It is decisive. On the other hand, if we opt for acceptance based on faith in authority, we immediately opt out of science, for science is defined by publicly verifiable systematic reasoning. If we opt for belief based on reasoning, however, we do not automatically eliminate all of the revealed knowledge conveyed by religion. There is a great deal in human experience that leads to reasoned belief in states of affairs held to be true in religious doctrines. This is not just because revealed knowledge “works,” although this “cash value” can support belief in such knowledge. It is also, and above all, because *a reasoned examination of certain aspects of human experience leads to some varieties of revealed knowledge as their simplest and most logical explanation.*

Caiazza does not take the philosophical dimension of the conflict sufficiently into account, yet what he says about the development of science provides grounds for it. He notes that classical materialism has vanished from the leading edge of science. Science has become “magical.” (The term I have been using is “fabulous” [Laszlo 2003; 2004].) The GUTs (grand unified theories) and TOEs (theories of everything) advanced in physics and the multiple universes put forward in cosmology postulate as true certain states of affairs that are just as removed from everyday experience as the Trinity and the immortal soul. Methodologically there is a difference. Belief in the Trinity and the immortal soul is based on faith in revealed knowledge, whereas GUTs, TOEs, and multiple universes are based on reasoning from experience, no matter how complex that reasoning may be and how far removed from experience based on sensory perception. But in some cases the methodological difference becomes less decisive. In their latest development the avant-garde branches of science are capable of supporting some items of revealed knowledge by means of reasoning linked to experience.

I choose here two items of revealed knowledge by way of example. One is that human beings can enter into communion with realities that lie beyond the sphere of immediate sensory experience. The other is that the world we experience was the result of an act of creation.

Consider the first example. Although the pragmatist William James assessed the meaning of religious experience in terms of its “cash value,” he did not fail to note that the sense that one enters into union with something deeper or larger than oneself is a hallmark of genuine religious experience. This kind of communion with a wider sphere of reality is increasingly researched and recognized in modern consciousness research. Psychiatrist Stanislav Grof, for example, found that in altered states of consciousness, generated by psychotropic substances, hypnotic suggestion, or breathing exercises, individuals can experience practically any aspect of the world around them without sensory contact. When experiencing the mind of other individuals, some subjects report a loosening and melting of the boundaries of the body ego and a sense of merging with another person in

unity, while others achieve a sense of complete identification to the point of losing awareness of their own identity. In still deeper altered states some individuals can expand their consciousness to an extent at which it encompasses the totality of life on the planet and seems to extend outward into the cosmos (Grof 1999).

The day-to-day experience of psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychotherapists attests to an analogous phenomenon known as therapist-to-patient transference and patient-to-therapist countertransference. In these processes the subconscious, and occasionally the conscious, mind of the patient is infused with the feelings, images, and intuitions of the therapist, and the mind of the therapist manifests elements directly intuited from the mind of the patient. The phenomenon is widely known and often is interpreted in reference to an interpersonal or bipersonal field (Conforti 2001; Mansfield 1995).

Transpersonal psychology and related branches of modern consciousness research are rediscovering that the empirical sources of human experience are not limited to perceptions conveyed by the sensory organs but include spontaneous intuitions, manifested above all in altered states of consciousness. Deep prayer and systematic meditation, which are usually the necessary (even if not the sufficient) condition of spiritual experience, produce such states. The resulting revelatory experiences have a bona fide explanation in terms of brain states and states of consciousness. More than that: laboratory experiments on telepathy, remote viewing, near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences, and spiritual healing show that transpersonally acquired experiences often have a veridical core (for references, see Laszlo 2003).

My second example is the intuition that a transcendent agency or force has created the experienced world. This perennial intuition is supported by a chain of reasoning based on science, even if the reasoning goes beyond the currently recognized bounds of science. The discovery of a wide range of “coincidences” presupposed by the complexity of the universe—and the presence of life in the universe—first prompted speculations based on the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum theory: the universe is such as it is because we are observing it (this being the “strong version” of the anthropic principle). Currently this variety of speculation is retreating before alternative cosmological models. In the pertinent models the universe we inhabit is not equated with *the* universe; it is a local universe, one among conceivably many others.

Some multiple-universe cosmologies endeavor to explain the remarkable features of our universe by resorting to the law of large numbers. If there are a very large number of universes, the one we inhabit has a reasonable probability of coming about. This reasoning comes up against Occam’s Razor—postulating myriad universes is hardly a parsimonious way of explaining the features of one universe. Alternatively, we can postulate causal

contact between the successive universes, so that each universe “informs” (that is, sets the physical parameters) of its successor. This reasoning leads to an infinite regress, unless we postulate a primordial Alpha universe that had no precursors. In that event, we must explain how the parameters of that universe were set, given that a random selection among the alternative possibilities is astronomically unlikely to have produced a sequence of universes where ultimately complex systems such as those presupposed by life appear (Laszlo 2003; 2004).

At this point science either retires behind the excuse that it has reached the limits of empirical reasoning or must agree to the perennial intuition of an original creative act. This act is required not to explain why the universe is the way we now find it, only how it could evolve to the state in which we now find it. The original creative act refers to the creation not of particles and galaxies, atoms, molecules, cells, and organisms but of the evolutionary potentials leading to particles and galaxies, atoms, molecules, cells, and organisms—and all complex systems in space and time. In the language of theology, the call is not for Creationism, only for Deism.

Revealed knowledge and knowledge based, even if indirectly, on science can and sometimes do meet. When traditional religious insights are reexamined in terms of current scientific knowledge, some insights can be revalidated by empirical reasoning. Of course, not every kind of empirical reasoning will revalidate revealed knowledge; the narrow kind of empiricism that dominated science and society until quite recently will not. And not every item of revealed knowledge can be revalidated even by the broadest and deepest stream of scientific reasoning. But the conceptions emerging at the leading edge of the empirical sciences—especially in the new physics, cosmology, biophysics, evolution theory, and consciousness research—do revalidate some insights gained by states of consciousness induced by meditation and prayer.

The “magic” of cutting-edge scientific research is about to rediscover through empirically based reasoning some of the conclusions that religious and spiritual people have reached by intuition. This, I maintain, is the most significant and hopeful element in the ongoing search for rapprochement between religion and spirituality, and science.

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