Overview: Faith and Science

By Dr. Nicholas Rossi

This review is focused on Western civilization where Science was born and its relation to Christianity which had been ever interactive and changing since the beginning. It could not have had a greater progenitor than the one it got – Augustine of Hippo (354-430) He argued for 4 fundamental points in defining the relationship between the two: 1. The doctrine of the unity of Truth. The idea is that there is one source for the truth that lies in each. 2. The doctrine of the 2 complimentary books. The Bible and the book of Nature. 3. Both books require careful scrutiny and interpretation. Conflict follows if any literal interpretation of the Scriptures is not made to conform to knowledge gained from the book of nature. 4. Belief and Understanding are handmaidens. Credo ut Intellegam ( I believe so that I may understand ) first, then Intellego ut credam (I understand so that I may believe).

Reference: The Confessions

From Augustine to the Middle age discussions centered on how God is involved in running his creation. What causes what we see. For scientific inquiry the discovery of causes is the central question. It is also of great interest to theologians. One explanation is Supernaturalism which is of 2 kinds. The “naïve” kind assumes God is the immediate cause of all effects. This undermines the use of reason. It appears in the various forms of Fundamentalism which keeps popping up and is still a feature in our culture today. The other is Occasionalism that holds that all causation is directly from God’s will and that the link we see between cause and effect is an artifact of our perceptions. At the opposite end is Naturalism which holds that God’ direct action ceased after creation and that effects are brought about by a common cause of nature, cursus communis naturae. Christian theologians in the Middle Ages held a position in between but closer to Naturalism. God can do whatever he wants but restricts himself to common natural causes. i.e. that almost invariably works through “secondary causes” Miracles bring a crucial test case. Being supernatural they can only be called miracles if scientific inquiry can produce no explanation.

Reference Lindberg and Numbers, God and Nature, chap. 2

A turning point in the relation between Science and Religion came in the 17th century, the age of the birth of science brought about by scientific greats like Copernicus, Newton, Galileo and Kepler. All were deeply religious. With Galileo comes a story that resonates today and is still told inaccurately and sometimes intentionally so. The story extends over 2 time periods and involves multiple personages and is too long to give here. IT needs to be retold over and over. Excellent reference: “Finocchiaro: The Galileo Affair”: A Documentary History. It resulted in a new way to consider the relationship as new discoveries are made. Scientists came to accept Galileo’s view that scientific theories and explanations are literally true descriptions of reality. A view that has been accepted and held until science entered the bizarre sub-atomic world where things that never will be seen like quarks, bosons, neutrinos, superstrings abound. The church in Galileo’s time until this moment espouses Instrumentalism which holds that theories are instruments or tools that are useful, give plausible and consistent views of what we see but are not final explanations. The geocentric view of the solar system gave useful information about planetary positions until Galileo questioned it. Natural selection, the central theme of the theory of evolution, is now being seriously questioned in the same way.

The next turning point- the 17th Century and its concept of the Mechanical Philosophy to replace the Aristotelian natural philosophical system. A clock-like concept accepts God more like an absentee God, promotes materialism, invokes determinism and opens the door to atheism. These fears became pre-eminent. God becomes a God of the gaps which get narrower as natural knowledge increases. These possibilities were pointed out by critics like David Hume who pointed out the weakness of Natural Theology the principal support belief system for England and the Protestant world in a machine world, In that world miracles no longer take place A believer then looks for God in the wonders of nature. Consider the hymn “How great thou Art”. If not miracles than perhaps spiritual manifestations like ghosts, poltergeists, Angels and Demons. Ghosts became a recurrent theme in books like the Legend of Sleepy Holly, A Christmas Carol and in movies like The Canterbury ghost with Charles Laughton, The Ghost and Mrs. Muir with Rex Harrison and Ghost with Patrick Swazie. Then, in 1859 came the Origen of Species and in 1871 The Descent of man. The concept of Natural Selection asserted that changes in living things including man were slow over time random and un-designed except for environmental adaptation. Evolution has been the “rage” up to the present time. Sci the stage was set for a declaration of war between Science and Religion based on the belief that they are intrinsically inimical, a belief rejected by all historians of Science.

Reference John Henry Brooke “Science and Religion”

The storm breaks. In 1925, a contrived trial to accentuate the animosity between Science and Religion set up by the newly formed American civil Liberty Union. The scopes trial followed the works of 2 men: epitomes of bigotry, false claims, erroneous quotes and lying assumptions. 1874 History of the Conflict between Science and religion. Too shameful to quote. John William Draper, born in England, MD from Univ. of Penn., became a professor of Chemistry and the 1st Pres. Of the American Chemical Society. He became political, a prominent member of the Know-Nothing party. His book embracing Positivism was immensely popular and stands out for its bigotry. Andrew Dickson White was a historian who became a senator, ambassador and a co-founder of Cornell Univ. He wrote rambling, dishonest certainly flawed discourses on the warfare between Science and Religion. As propaganda they have influence today but are rarely cited.