Religion and Science: A philosophical study

Preface

Religion and Science are the two main historical sources for man’s guidance. Both of them have the most influence on all aspects of man’s life but some times on some issues, there seem to be problems and clashes that need to draw our attention. There is still a popular belief that religion and science are two fundamentally conflicting viewpoints. Religion has several definitions, but as we understand the term, it implies a relationship not merely between men, but also between man and some moral powers that includes the ways for man’s ethical perfection. According to some definitions, whenever and wherever man has a sense of dependence on external moral powers which are conceived as mysterious as and higher than man’s own, there is religion, and the feelings of awe and self-abasement with which man is filled in the presence of such powers is essentially a religious emotion, the root of worship and prayer. The internal aspect of religion is the body of ideas, convictions and emotions and actions concerning man’s relations to God, involving essentially an unselfish righteous life, while its external aspect is the system of prayers, ceremonies, rites, and actions through which the religious will and feeling are manifested. Some claim that unselfish righteous life with the belief that it is a truly intrinsically happy life constitutes the essence of religious life. In this sense even an atheist could be a religious person. Other perspective has a different method and different definition. It is generally agreed that a scientific thought is essentially a publicly testable empirically well justified thought about the world.

The question of whether religion is compatible with science has occupied a prominent place in the discussions of the nineteenth century and some thinkers hold the view that science and religion are incompatible. We know that historical religion has always opposed science and free enquiry. It has not encouraged scientific knowledge. Some of the main causes of conflicts between science and religion are as under:
1. One of the important causes of conflict between science and religion is that the boundary between the two is shifting. What was unknown till yesterday is known today.

2. Another cause of conflict is that science possesses a faith of its own. The scientific pursuit of universally testable empirical truth is opposed by the religious pursuit of non-universally testable truth.

3. Yet another cause of conflict is that religion is subjected to scientific analysis.

Those who believe that religion and science cannot be opposed to each other, argue that they are two aspects of the facts of life. One aspect touches the soul while the other indicates material advancement. Religion gives peace to the scientifically advanced and worried society. It is also said that both try to pierce into the realm of unknown. They also argue that in every society there are eminent scientists who believe in God. They, therefore, feel that it is not correct to say that both are absolutely opposed to each other.

But, it cannot be denied that there is a conflict between the two. Religion fears that free enquiry of science may damage or shatter its image at least partially, if not wholly.

On the other hand with the help of its ethics, religion could solve many problems of mankind. For example, faith and purification to complete goodness can add new horizons of human’s perfection. Thus we have to see, how science can oppose to religion or be compatible and what is the place of ethics in this relationship? This is a fundamental idea of Islam that the empirical science does not conflict with religion. According to Islam, science is God’s sign and his reminder in the nature.

Due to Marx and Darwin’s views, in the nineteenth century some had thought that the growth of new science (i.e. empirical science) could erase the age of religion. But we see so much optimism about religion and credence in the twentieth century. Mirthful religious actions are broadly seen even more than before. And even seventy years of fighting against religion in the USSR could not remove and eradicate it from man’s nature and his world.
The relationship between man and religion is internal, without any mediator that is from the external world. The requirement for religion is the necessity for man, although some denied this, history is the real and best witness for this. Science alone, and without cooperation of religion, is incomplete. Sciences do not deal with values but religions do. Science cannot make man happy, hopeful and serious looking for the goal of the life. So science itself is not enough for his happiness. Science is a powerful instrument in man’s hands which he could use to remove or decrease his suffering. The topic of this research is: “Religion and Science; a philosophical study”. The outline of the thesis is as follows:

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter introduces the thesis with reference to its main problem, method of research, the scheme of chapters and some necessary definitions. Though the subject is so vast, the work mainly focuses on the relationship between religion and science with reference to philosophical and religious reactions to the question, whether they have any conflict or not (especially with reference to Islam and Hinduism.) Each religion includes two main parts, metaphysics and ethics.

Chapter Two: History of Religion & Science

This chapter describes the main problems of the subject and gives their brief description from historical perspective. Theistic religions base their interpretation and viewpoint on believing that this universe, life and man have a Creator, a Lord, a God; and that man's existence on this earth is neither a meaningless nor aimless one, nor it is a random happening. Life and man have their goals and values exceeding the time span of man's existence on the earth's surface. Although some religions like Buddhism do not believe in God, every religion has a system of ethics to guide one’s action and a metaphysical worldview with the belief that good will be necessarily and properly rewarded and evil will be punished in this life or life after death.

Science provides publicly testable and empirically justified thoughts about the world. Science produces useful models which allow us to make often useful predictions. Empirical sciences like astronomy and social sciences are observational sciences and
sciences like chemistry, atomic physics, psychology, etc. are experimental sciences. Experimental sciences can also be divided into natural and human sciences. Scientific findings and religious beliefs are normally quite separate; the main conflicts between religion and science are in areas in which they overlap. Here, both often hold conflicting positions.

It seems that there are four approaches and ways in which science and religion can be related to each other:

First: Conflict: the conviction that science and religion are fundamentally irreconcilable.

Second: Contrast: the claim that there can be no genuine conflict since religion and science are each responding to radically different questions.

Third: Contact: an approach that looks for dialogue, interaction, and possible "consonance" between science and religion, and especially for ways in which science shapes religious and theological understanding.

Forth: Confirmation: a somewhat quieter, but extremely important perspective that highlights the ways in which, at a very deep level, religion supports and nourishes the entire scientific enterprise.

There are three examples of clash that I have chosen and it has been argued that they do not show that religious statements are meaningless or that religions do not have any positive function or that they conflict with science. We have argued that whether some scientific views conflict with some religious views depend on the interpretation of the religious view. It is clear that it is not possible to bring all examples of clash between scientific points and religious scriptures here, so we try to investigate about three of the most popular examples of this clash.

Galileo’s clash with the Church concerning his view of the solar system is probably the most well known example of the conflict model between science and
religion, though this particular issue was resolved many years ago. Creationists who maintain that the universe is only thousands of years old, when there is overwhelming evidence of its great antiquity, give credence to the idea that science and religion are invariably opposed. On the other side, well-known scientists who assert that science leaves no room for religion, also support this school of thought.

Marx (1818-1883) says that religion is meant to create illusory fantasies for the poor. He wrote that religion was, “an opiate of the people.” Religions help the exploited man of proletariat tolerate all sufferings in the hope of the compensation hereafter.

Marx wrote that there was a social relationship between the upper class or bourgeoisie and religion. The upper class that owned the means of production, used religion as a tool to keep the working class or proletariat, oppressed and poor. Religions only reflect the economic condition of the society. So long as man is unconscious of economic factors that determine his physical existence and feels helpless before the forces of exploitation, man seeks religion. Religion will disappear in a classless society. Morality also is explained by orthodox Marxism as a reflex of the economic struggle. It claims that morality is always a class morality.

Does Darwin (1809-1882)’s theory perhaps put the final nail in religion's coffin? Or can there perhaps be a fruitful encounter of religion with evolutionary thought? According to Darwinian Theory of evolution, the different forms of life had developed gradually from a common ancestry through the struggle for existence and survival of the fittest. Darwin observed that all plants and animals multiply faster than nature can provide them. Therefore, in each generation many perish before the age for reproducing themselves. Animals and plants are, as a rule, not like the parents and in a given environment members of the same species compete for survival and those best adapted to the environment have the best chance to survive. Evolution is a purely scientific theory that need not be cast in either materialist, or religious terms. We will explain in the next chapter that according to Islamic philosophy, the scientific theory of evolution would be in some ways compatible with theism. The model or combination of models that a person adopts for relating science and religion is likely to depend strongly on his or her up-
bringing, as well as on the fundamental presuppositions he or she brings to the issue. We should note that a competent and successful scientist today can be found in all four categories.

This research is not restricted to science and Christianity only; it discusses Islam and Hinduism too with reference to relationship between religion and science. Under the headings of conflict, contrast, contact and conformation, we can present the positions of each approach as it responds to the attractive questions that science is raising for religion today. But in our understanding, religions, especially Islam; does not oppose to scientific and technological progress, on the contrary, it encourages it and we will explain this in more details in the next chapter.

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**Chapter Three: Islam and science:**

The third chapter discusses mainly sciences and the worldview of religion from the viewpoint of Islam. It has been argued that the scriptures of various religions could be interpreted in such a way that their world views do not conflict with science. Ever since the dawn of human life on this planet, man has always sought to understand Nature, his own place in the scheme of creation and the purpose of life itself. In this quest for truth, spanning many centuries and diverse civilizations, organized religions have been based on the sources, claimed by their adherents to be divinely inspired, others have relied solely on human experience.

The Quran, the main source of the Islamic faith, is a book believed by Muslims, to be a completely Divine origin. Muslims also believe that it contains guidance for all mankind. The message of Islam is not only opposed to scientific and technological progress; on the contrary, it encourages it, laying stress only on two points: Scientific, technological and social progress should not deviate man from his creator and make him snobbish. This endeavor and progress shall be utilized to better the condition of men and never be used in propagating sin or to buttress the foundations of cruelty and oppression. The Quran does not aim at explaining certain laws governing the Universe, however; it
has an absolutely basic religious objective. The descriptions of Divine Omnipotence are what principally incite man to reflect on the works of creation.

In Galileo (1564-1642), there is a bold commitment to the idea of unity (that there is one God behind both scripture and nature). For Galileo, the same God who created the things that we discover through science also wrote all of the Scriptures. He did not ignore the Bible; he knew very well that if his doctrine were proved, then it could not contradict the scripture when they were rightly understood. Marx argues that religion is not so much an independent “thing” in society but, rather, a reflection or creation of other, more fundamental “things” like economic relationships. This is not the only way of looking at religion, although it can provide some interesting illumination on the relation of religions to various aspects of society.

Although Marx does not reduce consciousness to matter, he believes that consciousness is a product of matter. Although critical Marxism does provide place to ethics, Marxist ethics does not provide any theory of selfless ethical love which constitutes the essence of religion.

Darwin’s theory of Evolution has not only influenced the minds but also characters of people. Such people do not believe in divine morals and values. They do not believe in God, soul and hereafter. It should be stressed also, as we know Darwin’s theory is opposed to Christianity scriptures in some interpretation. Islamic scriptures also describe about the story of creation. But in the Bible, the creation by God is direct. For instance, we have in the Holy Quran the verses that illustrated that God created all animals, the earth and sky indirectly while this concept is not mentioned in the scriptures of Bible. Then evolution theory of Darwin has no clash with Quranic verses. Therefore whether the theory of evolution is opposed to the creation of Adam and Eve or not, depends on the interpretations.

Chapter Four; Hinduism and science:

This chapter discusses the viewpoints of three great thinkers of Vedanta school of Hinduism as three examples, regarding the subject: Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, and
Dr. Radhakrishnan. The Vedas are the basic scripture of Hinduism and Vedantists in general hold the view that nature and all of God's creations are manifestations of Him.

The Upanishads discuss creation at a philosophical level, quite different from some of the hymns of the Riga Veda and also different from the narratives of creation in the later Puranas. According to Vivekananda, union of science and religion will bring harmony and peace to the humanity. He accepts unselfish moral goodness to be the test of religion. According to him the various religions that exist in the world, although differ in the form of worship they take, are really one.

Although Gandhi is a firm believer of God, he is not a speculative metaphysician. For him spiritual life is the same as unselfish ethical life and to realize God, to realize Truth, i.e. the true ultimate goal of life, is the same as to realize ethical perfection. For him, Truth is the true ultimate goal and non-violence is its means. Gandhi accepts the supremacy of reason: “Scriptures cannot transcend reason and truth. They are intended to purify reason and illuminate truth.” Any interpretation of scriptures which conflict with reason he would not accept. He would consider such a view to be a false interpretation or an interpolation in the scripture. Since scientific beliefs are empirically well justified, Gandhi would not accept any interpretation of a scripture which conflicts with science. Contrary to popular belief, he is not against science and technology, but he would not accept any use of science and technology which conflicts with morality. Gandhi, as a philosopher and interpreter of Hinduism, may have his viewpoint about man’s creation.

As we know according to Hindus’ scriptures creation of man cannot follow randomly or haphazardly. The Hindus believe that there is no end or beginning to God and His Creation. It seems that Radhakrishnan, in contrast to Marx, believes on religion as a whole, and as a system that can help out men and societies to solve their problems by religion. We may say that Radhakrishnan, as a Hindu thinker and a grand philosopher, affirms what scripture of Hinduism illustrated. He means that the Hindu tradition perceives the existence of cyclical nature of the universe and everything within it. The cosmos follows one cycle within a framework of cycles. He believed that nature and all of God's creations are manifestations of Him. He is within and without his creations,
pervading the entire universe and also observing it externally. Hence, all animals and humans have a divine element in them that is covered by the ignorance and illusions of material or profane existence. Hindu thought has no concept for the creation of the universe, assuming that everything - the universe, God, scripture and humanity - has existed without a beginning. Within this view is the idea of cycles of creation with relative beginnings. Each cycle begins from a pre-existent seed state, grows, flowers, withers and dies. But, just as a dying flower leaves seeds for its own propagation, each cycle drops a seed which begins the next state. Like Vivekananda and Gandhi, Radhakrishnan’s interpretation of religions in general and Hinduism in particular does not conflict with science. Similarly he also sees the supreme importance of morality in religion.

**Chapter Five; Ethics and science according to Islam & Hinduism:**

This chapter discusses Hindu and Islamic views about relationship, between religion, ethics and science.

The nature of Marx’s views on morality and ethics has long been a matter of considerable dispute. But we know that morality, ethics and religion are convertible terms, a moral life without reference to religions is like a house built upon sand as Gandhi said. He sees clearly that unselfish ethical struggle against exploitation injustice oppression, etc. is essentially a religious struggle. Thus, Marx’s view that “religion is an opiate of the people” is essentially false. Unlike Gandhi he fails to see that ethical life based on internal sanction constitute the essence of religious life and one could lead religious life even if he does not believe in external religious sanction.

Although all religions accept the external religious sanction for morality based on some metaphysical beliefs, they do have fundamental differences in the field of metaphysics. Since metaphysics is beyond the scope of apriori reason, there is no way for us to know the view of which religion on same metaphysical problem is true if science has no answer on the problem. At present science has no answer about the problem of
existence of God, soul and life after death. Marx’s belief in the non-existence of God, soul, life after death and so on is a metaphysical belief, not a scientific belief.

According to Marx, it has become impossible to study religion without also exploring its ties to various social and economic forces, but his viewpoint cannot answer all aspects of religion.

The Gandhian view which states that there is fundamental unity and truth of all great religions is essentially true with reference to their ethics. Since ethics constitutes the core of religion and fundamental ethical questions are within the scope of reason, the Gandhian view that critical ethical and religious dialogue is conducive to inter-religious harmony and growth of religions is essentially correct.

Islam, like other great religions, has emphasized on ethics for all situations of the man’s life. According to Islam, man has not come into existence on his own and nor he a product of natural forces that had somehow, by pure chance, combined to produce life. Moral virtues in man gain him eternal happiness, while moral corruption leads him to everlasting wretchedness. It is therefore necessary for man to purge and purify himself of all evil traits of character and adorn his soul with all forms of ethical and moral virtues. One of the most important ethical issues of Islamic thought is called Taqwa. We can call it as an internal Jihad or internal purification on which Prophet Mohammad had put great emphasis.

Regarding the theory of Jihad it seems that, the great levels of perfection in the spiritual life can also be seen in the light of the inner Jihad. To become separate from the impurities of the world in order to respond in the purity of the Divine Presence requires an intense jihad, for our soul has its roots sunk deeply into the transient world which the soul of fallen man does not distinguish from the reality. The Islamic path towards perfection can be conceived in the light of the symbolism of the greater jihad to which the Prophet of Islam, who founded this path on earth, himself referred. Fight against various external immorality such as injustice, exploitation etc. is called external jihad.
Chapter Six; Conclusion:

In the last chapter, a brief analysis of the relationship between religion and science, the place of religions in modern western civilization and Islamic and Hindu viewpoints about ethical approach with modern science and its issues has been discussed.

According to both religions, scripture and traditions do not have any clash with reference to their fundamental ethics although they have fundamental differences in the domain of metaphysics. On the contrary, it emphasizes different scientific researches the goal of which is exalted and manlike, because they divulge secrets of creation and divine particulars in the world. But some research, like “human cloning”, are meddling on creation and their prejudicial results are unanticipated.

As a final conclusion about the accuracy or validity of Marx’s ideas on religion, we should recognize that he provided an invaluable service by forcing people to take a hard look at the social states in which religion always performs. Because of his work, it has become impossible to study religion without exploring its ties to various social and economic forces. People’s spiritual lives can no longer be assumed to be totally independent of their material lives. In addition to this point we can find many social reforms which are based on religions such as Gandhian movement, Islamic revolution of Iran and Tobacco concession (1891). There are many interpretations on evolution. Some of them are acceptable according to Islam, while others that are not acceptable.

The Gandhian’s view that modern civilization is essentially irreligious, i.e unspiritual is essentially correct. According to him unselfish ethical life of love constitutes the essence of religion and modern civilization is essentially a civilization of selfishness. He rightly considers modern western civilization to be a false civilization in the sense that what it considers to be the ultimate goal of life is false. He would not accept the form of development of modern western civilization which causes destruction of thousand and thousand animal species and continues to cause great harm to our life sustaining natural systems. It does not mean that religion is against development. Both Islam and Hinduism would accept development within the limits of ethics.
Considering the main purpose of religions, the relationship among ethics and religion and modern science is stricter. In other words, religions have come to improve the moral activities in human’s life, and they have to lead him to goodness and happiness, because science cannot bring the value for man but religion can. The ethics of religion can solve many problems of mankind, for example, purification to complete goodness and bring new horizons of human’s perfection. The result of this study shows that the majority of man’s problems have arisen because of his disbelieving in religions and missing its role. As a last comment, it can be concluded that it is possible that religion and science converge in the future world and their convergence would bring lasting peace and happiness to humanity. Therefore man’s need for religion has not terminated. As The Quran says; “And be not ye as those who forgot Allah, therefore He caused them to forget their souls. Such are the evil-doers” (Holy Quran chapter 59/19), and as well as The Upanishad says: “Those who deny God deny themselves. Those who affirm God affirm themselves” (Taittiriya Upanishad 2:6; 7).

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