

Against Religious Synthesis

There is a movement today to create a synthesis of religion and science. It takes several forms, including "Intelligent Design," but also the Big Bang as Creation, the Anthropic Principle, spiritualism as evidence for life after death, the Gaea hypothesis, etc. Another form is illustrated by Stephen Jay Gould's *Rocks of Ages*, in which the "synthesis" consists only of a division of labor, in which for example science tells us how nature works and religion tells us why it works that way. Or science may tell us about facts, and religion about values. Pope John Paul II, in discussing Galileo and Darwin, announced that the Catholic Church accepts some such position. The cooperation between science and religion may be explicit, as in Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man*, or it may be implicit by each being incomplete without the other. For both, the claim is that one need not choose between science and religion; one can, and indeed should, accept both.* This movement must not be confused with Fundamentalism, whether Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, which does not fully accept science; or with Atheism (or Agnosticism), which does not accept religion as giving us knowledge of any kind.

What reasonable person could object to such a movement? It sounds admirably open-minded and tolerant. Nevertheless, by allowing religion to play a role in the acquisition of knowledge, however circumscribed, it raises all the epistemological problems which have been familiar since Hume and Kant in the 18th century, and which lead only into blind alleys and vicious circles. Further, it restricts unduly the potential of science and philosophy to give us understanding. For example, science can tell us "why" as well as "how," in the sense that it can reveal the purpose of an event, if that means its function in a larger process. And ethics, a part of philosophy, can tell us sometimes, at least, what our values should be.

The idea that religion and science complement each other, rather than competing for our confidence, also encourages the related idea that religion should play a part in our public education system and our democratic political process. If there is a certain aspect of reality that only religion can tell us about, surely we don't want to exclude that aspect from our education and politics? But if religion gives us only some people's beliefs about these questions, and if these beliefs are based on no objective evidence at all, but solely on what these people feel is true, this is simply not a firm enough basis on which to bind people to act according to a set of rules, which is what politics is. A unanimous jury finding someone to be a witch does not justify her punishment. For such a law to be just there must be evidence that she actually caused harm. Majority vote does not determine justice, for the same reason that it does not determine truth.

If religion is what the atheist or agnostic says it is, merely the

expression of a subjective attitude, it must be rigorously excluded from the political process in a liberal democracy. And it must be rigorously excluded from the epistemological process as well, for the same reason.

Richard Burke
June 15, 2005

*One can accept both in another way, which I cannot object to: science (and philosophy) tells us what is (probably) true, while religion expresses what people feel is true. If religion makes no claim to be knowledge of any sort, but only to make people feel more comfortable, I have less objection to it. Maybe this is what Gould meant.