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Art, Religion, and the Aesthetics of Everyday Life

Reweaving the Rainbow

For several decades, the cultural world of Europe and North America has been marked, dominated, it might be said, by the “clash” between religion and science. A recurrent theme of much discussion in newspapers, radio, television, and online is whether the rise of science inevitably means the decline of religion. As the use of “rise” and “decline” suggests, these apparently related phenomena are easily viewed as just two sides of one coin. Science, it is commonly held, at both the level of theoretical explanation and of practical manipulation, has proved to be far more successful at doing what in the past the Christian religion (and religion more generally perhaps) claimed to be able to do. Modern science, this view of the matter contends, offers far better explanations of the physical world, the biological world, and the social world than the theological stories about creation, providence, and miracles we find in the Bible. Still more importantly, by producing technologies that give human beings much greater control over their lives and prospects than prayers and rituals ever did, science has fundamentally altered the human condition. We don’t need God (or the gods) anymore, because thanks to technology we can protect ourselves from the elements, literally dispel the terrors of the night (with artificial light), and, by using modern methods of transportation, eliminate most of the dangers historically associated with travel. Medical science, too, has played an important part in this change, rendering redundant archaic spells and petitionary prayers for healing. Of course, these age-old practices persist. In reality, however, or so this new scientific enlightenment claims, the superiority of medicine is acknowledged even by people who cannot quite bring themselves to let go of

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their religious beliefs. Modern “believers” still offer up prayers of healing certainly, but this does not lead them to abandon drugs, physicians, and medical research, in which, in truth, they actually place far greater hope.

If this way of seeing things is correct, then it does make the rise of science/decline of religion idea very plausible. Given that religion and science are competitors, huge scientific advances such as there have undoubtedly been, on two fronts – the explanatory and the practical – must mean that religion inevitably, and ever more rapidly, is forced to beat a retreat. And yet, even in highly developed societies it has not died out completely. No modern state is entirely secularized, but in many religion has been pushed out of the public sphere and into the sphere of privatized spirituality.

The line of thought just expounded has many adherents, and in some quarters would be taken to be stating the obvious. Yet in other quarters it remains an open question and a matter of serious debate whether religion and science are indeed rivals. Claims about the triumph of science and the end of religion were especially prominent at the turn of the twenty-first century, but it is important to remember that such claims have a long history. They stretch back to the eighteenth century at least, and even to the seventeenth. With the appearance of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* in 1859, the “conflict” between science and religion received fresh stimulus, and claims about the triumph of science and the death of religion generated widespread debate for most of the remaining nineteenth century. After some time, the debate receded, though it never quite disappeared, perhaps. At any rate it has gained great attention once again. Some scientists have written books that sell millions of copies, often with the aim of finally destroying “the God delusion.”¹ Some philosophers have joined enthusiastically in “breaking the spell”² of religion, by which, they allege, large numbers of people are still held captive. Meantime, theologians, other philosophers, and a few scientists have responded, often no less vigorously, either with the aim of restoring religion’s scientific credibility,³ or showing that the two are not rivals at all.⁴

In this way an old debate has been revived, though it has not proved any more conclusive than previously. Part of the reason for its inconclusiveness is that the practical “triumph” of science is not as straightforward

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, (London: Bantam Press, 2006)

² Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, (New York: Viking, 2006)

³ John C. Lennox, *God’s Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (London: Lion Hudson, 2009); Alister E. McGrath, *Why God Won’t Go Away*, (London: Nelson, 2011)

⁴ Stephen J. Gould, *Rocks of Ages*, (New York: Random House, 1999)

as many of its protagonists suggest. Modern technology has at best been a *qualified* source of good. If science has given us penicillin, it has also given us the atomic bomb, and while truly extraordinary advances in telecommunications have been immensely valuable, the technology of the internet and the smart phone has also aided criminality, been a stimulus to vindictive abuse, and encouraged child pornography. It has also been widely used for “sharing” information that is essentially trivial. Of course, enthusiasts for modern technology can argue with some plausibility that these “downsides” are more than offset by the immense social and commercial benefits that have been made possible.

Perhaps this is true, though difficult to estimate with any degree of confidence. Still, the value of technology does not settle the issue about science and religion. It is easy to find powerful voices on the other side of the theoretical debate also. Philosophers have presented compelling arguments that constitute serious challenges to the explanatory superiority of science, and powerful analyses that expose the “atheist delusions”⁵ upon which a lot of scientific triumphalism rests. Even professedly atheistical philosophers do not always sign up to the unqualified success of science. Some of the most distinguished have denied that natural science adequately explains the phenomena of “mind and cosmos,”⁶ while others argue that if we consider the issues between science and religion more closely, we will find that the most prominent warriors in the battle are mistaken about “where the conflict really lies.”⁷

The existence of opposition to the pretensions of science is not surprising. As was observed earlier, though the debate was renewed with special energy at the turn of the twenty-first century, it is both an old and a recurring one. While its most recent occurrence has undoubtedly witnessed new voices and some fresh angles, it is also true that claims which sound novel to new audiences are often re-articulations of long established positions. To describe them in this way is not to dismiss them, of course. There is both demand for and value in, new ways of restating old views. At the same time, while genuinely innovative thought on these matters can never be ruled out, in times past when the debate has subsided, it has generally been because scientists, philosophers, and theologians find themselves repeatedly treading exceptionally well-known ground,

⁵ David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009)

⁶ Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012)

⁷ Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

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occupying the same positions and rehearsing the same arguments. Once this happens, a kind of exhaustion sets in, and attention moves elsewhere.

One direction in which those who have tired of the science/religion debate might move, is to consider religion's relationship to another important aspect of modern culture – art. Here, it is common to suppose, defenders of religion should find themselves on more congenial ground. If the intellectual “battle” between science and religion has inevitably cast them as cultural rivals, art and religion, by contrast, are widely held to be cultural allies. The histories of art and religion, especially in Western European culture, are intertwined and their aspirations are mutually supportive. Or so it is quite widely thought. The agreeable expectation, consequently, is that investigating their relationship holds out the prospect of a conversation rather than a contest.

This hope is undoubtedly rooted in fact. Religion and art are often in sympathy with each other. It is not only religious believers who worry about the cultural dominance of science and the conception of reality that the success of scientific ways of thinking appears to validate. Poets, painters, and composers also often lament the materialism this success brings with it. As they see it, when human beings subscribe wholeheartedly to a scientific conception of reality, the result is a kind of spiritual impoverishment – a “disenchantment of the world,”⁸ to use Max Weber's famous phrase. By objectifying and quantifying everything, the artistic mind alleges, science robs human experience of its humanity.

This lament is not new either. It was given a memorable expression, possibly its most memorable, in the early nineteenth century by the English poet John Keats (1795–1821). What we call “science,” Keats called “natural philosophy,” a more familiar name at the time. He writes:

Do not all charms fly
 At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
 There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
 We know her woof, her texture; she is given
 in the dull catalogue of common things.
 Philosophy will clip an angel's wings,
 Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
 Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine –
 Unweave a rainbow.⁹

⁸ Max Weber, ‘Science as a Vocation’ in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited and introduction by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 1948)

⁹ John Keats, *Lamia*

But why should science have the effect of “disenchancing the world” and “unweaving the rainbow”? The answer implied by Keats’s poem is that while the scientific method of inquiry has proved a successful method of investigation in many respects, it requires us to re-conceive the *whole* of reality, the reality of our own minds as well as our bodies, in purely mechanical terms. That is to say, science, (or “natural philosophy”) understands reality as a vast complex of interlocking, measureable and quantifiable systems. The explanatory power and the impoverishing effect of scientific ways of thinking have the very same source. The sciences of astronomy, physics, biology, and psychology uniquely help us to understand and master the worlds of nature and the human mind, but only by interpreting them as systems whose internal relations can be exhaustively captured within the formulation of quantifiable causal laws.

If this is true, it seems that the underlying vision of the scientific world view, broadly speaking, is “deterministic.” This makes it indifferent to human beings as *subjects*. By becoming an object for investigation and manipulation, humanity is importantly separated from its subjectivity, its self-conscious awareness. Science presents nature to us both as a source of knowledge, and as a means to satisfying the desires that our biology generates. Viewed in this way, though, the world in which we find ourselves ceases to be an *environment*, which is to say, a place to be at home, to love, and to delight in. It becomes, rather, a vast machine of which we are just one functioning part. Keats’s lines, then, give compelling voice to this lament: while a scientific vision of reality may be highly effective in conquering “by rule and line,” it simultaneously eliminates the “feel” of experience, and thereby our delight in the mystery of existence. That, after all, is the point; science aims to explain *everything*,¹⁰ and with the aid of explanation, bring as much as possible under the subjugation of human needs and desires.

The belief that there is no aspect of reality that the natural sciences cannot capture and master, is not itself a discovery of natural science. It is a metaphysical view about the power and value of a particular form of investigation and explanation. For that reason, it is more accurately referred to as “scientism.” But even the most ardent proponents of scientism will agree that their aspirations in this regard are far from complete. They readily accept that there is much we still do not know, and much that we cannot yet control. They take the undeniable fact of scientific *progress*,

¹⁰ The great aspiration of modern physics is often described, in fact, as a “theory of everything” or TOE.

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however, to both reflect its real accomplishments and to rationally ground their faith in its steady advance toward this goal.

Another way of putting this same idea is to say that, scientifically conceived, the world either *excludes* anything we might properly call “spiritual,” or *re-interprets* the spiritual as a by-product of material causes. The mournful wind, the glittering stars, the form of the rose, the pattern in a snowflake can all be explained in terms of physics and chemistry. We no longer need to appeal to divine design or spiritual energy of any kind. Those who want to destroy the God delusion and break its spell in the name of science, expressly acknowledge this. Indeed, they insist upon it. But the poet’s complaint is that while their intention is to exclude divine or supernatural spirits and anything that could be regarded as “spooky,” the full effect of their explanations is to eliminate the human spirit as well. Where, the poetic mind asks, do love, and beauty, and courage, determination, imagination, and playfulness, fit in to this interconnected complex of deterministic systems? It seems that in so far as these are “explained” by the physical and biological sciences, they are explained *away*. Romantic love becomes a hormonal reaction to external stimulus whose value and importance lie chiefly in the part it has to play in reproduction. Similarly, love of children is explained as a built-in biological response with proven evolutionary advantages for the species. Imagination is the faculty by which we generate useful survival strategies. And so on. At one level these hypotheses *about* human life may be true. The trouble is they do not seem to leave any room for *living* it.

To express the point succinctly: the understanding of the world that science offers us is, quite literally, dispiriting. There can be no doubt that science has proved hugely successful on an explanatory level, and has produced an enormous number of valuable technologies. Only “creationists” and “Luddites” of various kinds could deny this. Nevertheless, the scientific vision of reality is not one that human beings can live by. It tells us how things work. It tells us how they can be manipulated to deliver the basic needs we find we have – nurture, food, shelter, sex, freedom from pain, and so on. The problem is that while knowing how things work will give us the power to manipulate them, it will not tell us what it would be good to use this power to do. Nor will it tell us whether, and why, the things we want to do truly *matter*. Neither knowledge nor power can in themselves make the life of a human being *mean* anything. Once we are struck by this dimension of existence, we need to look elsewhere.

These are real limitations to scientism. Someone who has no inclination to question the validity of modern science, and who happily makes use

of all the devices modern technology has given us, may nevertheless intelligibly raise questions of meaning and significance. Such a person wants the world of physical and biological processes to be infused with a value other than that of interesting or useful information. This desire is not in any way “anti-scientific.” On the contrary, it is often highly successful scientists who are most inclined to put the truth and the usefulness of their theories in second place, and express their greatest enthusiasm for the beauty and the wonder that their studies reveal to them. At the level of the beliefs of practising scientists, there is no very strong correlation with atheism, and many will say, in fact, that a powerful sense of wonder lies at the heart of the attraction science holds for them. Their inclination in this regard accords with Keats’s implicit assertion that the human spirit is not fed by fitting experience into some formula of “rule and line.” We want, and need to be able, to see the world as something more than a mechanism, however large, intricate or complex. Only then can it be the sort of world in which it is possible for us to lead purposeful, valuable and meaningful lives.

Of course, Keats’s poetry, however compelling, falls short of a demonstration of the assertion implicit within it. As far as the debate between science and its critics is concerned, there is plainly much more to be said. The brief articulation offered here simply states what many have claimed – that a purely scientific conception of the world is radically deficient from a human point of view. It does not show this affirmation to be true. What it does do, however, is provide a context within which we can think about the relationship between art and religion. Can both be regarded as importantly spiritualizing alternatives to the materialistic conception of the world that the success of science seems to require us to endorse? Might they together serve to counter, or at any rate check, the cultural dominance that “science” currently seems to enjoy? In other words, are art and religion natural *allies* in the task of combatting the “disenchantment” that Keats feared? And will their ability to do so be maximized, if they find ways to act in concert? This, certainly, is the supposition behind some hugely successful collaborations between the two – art exhibitions, musical events, poetry festivals. It also serves to explain the rapidly rising number of books and periodicals that have art and religion as their theme, as well as the creation of new organizations and institutions whose purpose is to bring art and religion closer together.

Yet, just as it is a mistake to assume that science and religion are necessarily *rivals*, so it would be a mistake to assume that art and religion are inevitably *allies*. While both casts of mind and experience may share

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reservations about the consequences of an exclusively scientific view of the world, that is not sufficient in itself to show them to occupy important common ground. It does not even show that they are mutually supportive. Art and religion could be found to have importantly divergent ways of addressing the deficiencies of science, in which case there may in the end be an element of rivalry here too. It is at any rate a possibility to be borne in mind while their relationship is investigated more closely. One essential preliminary to such an investigation is to see what the history of their relationship has been.

Religion and the Birth of “Art”

In his earliest work – *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* – Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) claims that we can find the origins of both music and drama in the religious rituals of ancient Greece. It may be questioned whether the historical thesis that Nietzsche advances is strictly correct, but the real purpose of his book does not actually lie in tracing the history of art to its origins. He means, rather, to highlight the difference between two ways of thinking about art (a subject we will return to in the next section). There is something right about his opening contention, however. It is easy to identify a link that goes back to the ancient world connecting religion and what we think of as the arts – music, painting, sculpture, architecture, story, poetry, drama, and dance. This is true across many different cultures. The Vedic Hymns of Hinduism, for instance, are believed to be the longest surviving oral tradition in the world, dating from the present day back to the time of Homer – roughly 1000 BCE. The Hebrew Scriptures, some of which are possibly even older than this, explicitly refer to the use of music and dance in acts of worship. Architectural construction, in the form of the building and re-building of the Temple in Jerusalem, also figures centrally in the development of the Jewish religion. The oldest of all are the ancient cave paintings in Lascaux in south west France. These may be as much as 17,000 years old, and some experts suggest there is reason to think that they had a religious purpose and were connected with ritual dance and the worship of the stars.

The most evident connection between religion and art, however, and the one which will provide much of the material for this book, is to be found in Christianity’s relationship to European, or Western, art in all its manifestations. The earliest Christians were Jews, of course, and continued using the hymns and psalms with which they were already familiar. Soon they were adding new material of their own. Paul’s *Letter to the*

Philippians includes what was probably an early Christian hymn. Soon, too, Christians began to paint pictures with religious subjects, thereby deviating from the Jewish prohibition on religious painting (a prohibition that Muslims also adopted some centuries later). At the beginning they met for worship, prayer, and Bible reading in houses, and though we do not know very much about the origins of Christian architecture, we do know that the practice of constructing and decorating buildings as dedicated sacred spaces was an early one. Statuary, poetry, and drama, which had served religious and quasi-religious purposes in the ancient world were also called upon to serve the interests and purposes of Christians, and when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine, the Church first joined and then superseded the State as the principal patron of the arts.

This close connection lasted a long time. Over many centuries, painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry were taken to new heights in virtue of their connection with religious life and the worship of the Christian Church. As a result, the world now possesses a vast collection of religious buildings, paintings, statues, and frescoes, devotional poems and sacred music, an artistic inheritance that includes many works that have been heralded as among the greatest masterpieces of all time. Not all these masterpieces were produced for the Church, and many are not explicitly Christian. Alongside markedly religious works, history has left us indefinitely many compositions, books, poems, pictures, plays, and more recently movies, that have broadly “spiritual” themes, especially if we include under the label “spiritual,” moral and psychological subjects. These include such masterpieces as the plays of William Shakespeare in which expressly Christian concepts are almost wholly absent. Explicitly religious motifs make a very limited appearance, and yet the profundity of his greatest plays undoubtedly derives from the fact that they deal with enduring aspects of the human spirit – the outworking of ambition, corruption, redemption, and forgiveness in the lives and fates of the characters and events the plays depict. Shakespeare’s themes are in a very broad sense religious, even if he does not deal with them in an obviously theological way.

We may justly conclude, then, that the use of music, literary art, painting, statuary, architecture, and poetry for religious and more broadly spiritual purposes is very ancient. At the same time, the use and development of the arts for other communal purposes – social solidarity, political authority, imperial aggrandizement, military conquest – has also been an important part of their historical development. The world

possesses a large number of works of art whose origins and purposes are not religious, or even spiritual in the widest sense, but political – castles and palaces, royal portraits, landscapes, military music, and patriotic poetry, for instance. These alternative purposes may be said to have accelerated greatly in the Renaissance, that extended period in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when medieval other-worldliness receded and European culture found new inspiration in the humanism of the ancient worlds of Greece and Rome. Classical styles, myths and legends, as well as surviving fragments of sculpture, provided artists of every kind with new subjects of a largely non-religious kind. Meantime, increasing economic prosperity generated a burgeoning market for the work of painters, architects, dramatists, and musicians, paid for by patrons who had made large sums of money in trade and manufacture.

Ironically, perhaps, developments within the Christian Church aided this change. While preference for “silence” unadorned by poetry or music as the mode best suited to apprehension and contemplation of the divine was a recurrent tendency in the church both East and West,¹¹ it was the sixteenth century Protestant Reformers, in their anxiety to purify the Church of what they regarded as pagan cultural accretions, who encouraged the destruction of paintings, statues, stained glass windows, altar pieces, and so on. All these, they believed, had resulted in idolatry. The power and attractiveness of beautiful objects had deflected ordinary believers from properly spiritual worship – the worship of God – and become objects of worship in themselves. In this respect the Reformers were echoing the same anxiety as the iconoclasts of the eighth century who had attacked the use of icons in the worship of the Eastern Church. Combined with the Protestant emphasis on the sole authority of the Bible, the Protestant Reformers effectively came to share, and to endorse, the ancient Jewish prohibition of “graven images” inscribed in the second of the Ten Commandments delivered to Moses on Sinai. In many cases, in fact, prohibition was extended beyond images. Protestant suspicion fell on other arts, and expressed itself in, for instance, the replacement of ornate polyphonic settings of the Latin Mass with far simpler styles of church music, and the construction of much plainer buildings in which to meet for worship.

While some branches of the church underwent a significant artistic austerity, neither the practice of art making, nor the creative impulses of artists went away, of course, even in Protestant countries. They simply

¹¹ See Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (London: Allen Lane, 2013)