

A Correct Definition of Religion Resolves the Conflict Between Science and Religion

By John Calvert¹
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Jerry Coyne, claims the conflict between science and religion is irreconcilable and doomed to fail.² He is an evolutionary biologist, Atheist,³ staunch critic of Intelligent Design and defender of Evolution, who makes his case in a lengthy review of two books that seek a reconciliation: Kenneth Miller, *Only A Theory: Evolution and the Battle for America's Soul*), and Karl Gibberson, *Saving Darwin: How to be a Christian and Believe in Evolution*.

Coyne recognizes that the conflict arises from irreconcilable views about the cause of life and the universe. For Coyne, the “strategy” of science precludes any intelligent cause for either event. It restricts all explanations of origins to only natural or material causes. Hence, any explanation that implies the intervention of an intelligent cause violates the “strategy” and is classified as “religion” rather than “science.” Since religion must be excluded from science, the implication cannot be allowed. Because the “strategy” rejects intelligent causes, it renders the scientific enterprise one that promotes Atheism, Pantheism, Secular Humanism and other non-theistic religions. Science then becomes the adversary of traditional theism and the advocate of Atheism. That is the “conflict.”

Miller, a biologist, and Gibberson, a physicist, are ardent opponents of intelligent design in biology and have worked to keep the idea out of the science classroom in public schools. However, they are also Christians who are concerned about the Atheistic implications of the “strategy.” They worry that science is becoming functionally religious. Accordingly, they have suggested exceptions to the “strategy” that will render their theistic views consistent with science. If theists then subscribe to their religion of theistic evolution, there will be no conflict between religion and science.

Coyne’s review of their books is fascinating, because it exposes the religious fundamentalism at the root of the conflict. Because of that fundamentalism, Coyne views the conflict irreconcilable, and seems more interested in winning it than resolving it.

Coyne’s fundamentalism classifies Miller and Gibberson as functional “creationists.” This is because they invite science to countenance the intervention of the supernatural to explain the origin of the universe, it’s fine-tuning for life and even changes in DNA through undetectable quantum events:

“In other words, [for Miller] God is a Mover of Electrons, deliberately keeping his incursions into nature so subtle that they're invisible. It is baffling that Miller, who comes up with the most technically astute arguments against irreducible complexity, can in the end wind up touting God's micro-editing of DNA. This argument is in fact identical to that of Michael Behe, the ID advocate against whom Miller testified in the Harrisburg trial.”

The “creationist” label, in its broadest sense, is correct. The “fine-tuning” of the universe for life is an intelligent design argument logically inferred from three basic observations: (1) the values of the laws and constants that provide the structure of the universe and the properties of its matter, energy and forces are arbitrary rather than necessary; (2) life would not exist if any of the values were different, and therefore life appears to be the purpose for the eerie coincidence or “fine-tuning” of the values and (3) chance is not a statistically plausible explanation for the coincidence. Since the apparent purpose of the universe has not been explained by natural

causes, then the inference to a “tuner” or creator remains the better of the two explanations. Francis Collins, a geneticist and former head of the Human Genome project came to the same conclusion as Miller and Gibberson and acknowledged that this made him a “creationist” (*The Language of God*, p 171, 2006).

Coyne cannot reconcile his definition of “science” with his definition of “religion,” because he defines religion very narrowly to exclude Atheism. He limits “religion” to just theistic beliefs that require an intervention by God in the natural world, a concept excluded by the “strategy.” The reconciliations suggested by Miller, Gibberson and Collins do not work, because they allow a Divine foot in the door of science. Coyne’s fundamentalism is like that of Richard Lewontin, a prominent evolutionary biologist, who described science’s commitment to “materialism [as] *absolute*, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.”

The materialistic fundamentalism of Coyne and Lewontin is logically necessary if one wishes to keep the immaterial and supernatural out of science. The commitment against any immaterial cause must be absolute. If an intervention is allowed for the origin of the Universe, then why not allow it for the start of life, an event having no current plausible natural cause explanation? Once a supernatural cause is allowed for the start of life, why not explain changes in the diversity of life as modifications rather than adaptations? Once, any intervention is allowed, it seems that Occam’s razor will shave away many of the speculative and contradictory natural cause “just-so stories” that abound in evolutionary biology.

Coyne claims his commitment to materialism is not an *apriori* philosophical commitment, but just a research “strategy.” When I read this passage in his review, my eyes started rolling. Scientific materialism or methodological naturalism is an *apriori* commitment. It is a doctrine used by powerful institutions, but only in origins science. Ask the heretics who have lost their reputations, jobs and tenure. Dr. Caroline Crocker and others have been metaphorically burned at the stake, as shown in the recent documentary, *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*. This absolute *apriori* commitment was enshrined in Kansas Science Standards in 2007 as an explicit “restrict”[ion] on the causes the mind of a scientist can use to explain an origins event. Only “natural” or material causes are permitted.

A restriction is a boundary or limit, beyond which one may not go. Thus, when one asks, what is the cause of the universe, or the cause of life, only one explanation is permitted: a “natural” or material cause. The restriction, is absolute. It does not even permit an honest “cause unknown” explanation, as that alternative was also deleted when the restriction was added to the Kansas Standards. The “cause unknown” explanation is forbidden as it opens the mind to an examination of the commitment itself as well as forbidden alternatives. Like any orthodoxy, the restriction, which Coyne euphemistically calls a “strategy,” closes the scientific mind.

Recent scientific research shows the religious effect of a commitment to provide only strong materialistic explanations of origins. Strong explanations generate subconscious negative evaluations of God and positive evaluations of the Atheistic idea of no-God.⁴

Coyne correctly notes, that if reconciliation is to be had, it can only be found in the definition of “religion.” He explored the idea of redefining religion consistent with the naturalistic pantheism of Spinoza where “God” “is simply the name we give to the order and harmony of the universe, the laws of physics and chemistry, the beauty of nature, and so on.” This definition of religion would make “religion” compatible with materialism. But he concluded the idea to be unworkable, because traditional theists would choke over a definition of religion that “leaves out God completely--or at least the God of the monotheistic faiths.”

In his analysis of definitions he is correct in concluding that a “meaningful effort to reconcile science and faith must start by recognizing them as they are actually understood and practiced by human beings.” When this principle is applied to the definition of religion, one finds that many human beings as well as the Supreme Court of the United States define religion inclusively, according to the way beliefs about matters of “ultimate concern” *function* in the life of the believer.⁵ Interestingly, an inclusive definition of religion actually renders science and religion compatible.

An inclusive definition recognizes that religion is a set of beliefs about matters of ultimate concern, like the cause, nature and purpose of life. It includes both theistic and non-theistic belief systems, including Atheism, Secular Humanism, Scientology, Spinoza’s Pantheism, and a variety of Eastern Religions. Atheistic beliefs function in the lives of Messrs. Dawkins, Dennett, Stenger, Hitchens and Harris as Christian beliefs function in the lives of Billy Graham and Richard Warren. These competing belief systems both relate our lives to the world. Based on the differing views of that relationship, they then lead to different paths about how life should be lived.

Religion in this inclusive sense was explained by Justice Frankfurter and Harlan in *McGowan v. Maryland*: “religion in the comprehensive sense in which the Constitution uses that word - is an aspect of human thought and action which profoundly relates the life of man to the world in which he lives.”⁶ Thus, religion is not confined by law to just belief in God or the supernatural, it also includes religions that have embraced a faith that natural or material causes explain life without the intervention of a creator.

The functional definition of religion may be found in Supreme Court opinions, dictionaries, within the halls of academia and the EEOC’s Manual for handling religious discrimination in the workplace. It is essential to freedom and a society that does not discriminate between functionally equivalent belief systems. This is because the inclusive definition places on the same playing field all the actually competing views about ultimate questions that permit no certain answer, such as origins, ethics, morals, and the purpose of life. In this kind of competitive environment, the belief system most effective at optimizing the mental and physical health of the individual, family and culture should emerge victorious.

As Coyne recognizes, science and religion do overlap with respect to their subject matter. There is hardly a subject of human activity today that is not in some respect addressed by “modern science,” including, mental and physical health, human behavior, sex, morals, ethics, economics, government, politics and even property rights. If that is the case, then what differentiates science from religion?

Philosopher of science and “Secular” Humanist Paul Kurtz, explains that the core distinction between science and religion is that science is open-minded and objective, while religion is necessarily orthodox and dogmatic: “Science *requires an open mind*, free inquiry, critical thinking, *the willingness to question assumptions,..*”⁷ Coyne agrees. For Coyne, “religious beliefs are immune to ugly facts,” while scientific explanations must respond to them and the competing claims they generate.

Thus, science can keep functional religion out of its domain, however broad in scope, by simply being objective and open-minded rather than orthodox in its investigation and explanation of matters of ultimate concern that cannot be deduced with certainty. If natural causes are presumably as robust as they are said to be, then they should be able to defeat the claims of ID in

an open-minded and no-holds barred competition. Removing the non-theistic religious fundamentalism of Lewontin and Coyne will expose “natural” or material cause explanations to the “ugly facts” of the immaterial biological information ubiquitous to the natural world. Open-minded science will then permit its patrons an opportunity to rationally assess the strengths of natural cause claims, rather than be indoctrinated into accepting them.

In fact there is no actual conflict between science and religion today. Rather it is a conflict between the religious fundamentalism of “scientific” materialism and theistic religion. When religion is given its inclusive and non-discriminatory meaning, the orthodoxy of scientific materialism is exposed for what it actually is, a religious orthodoxy that belongs in a Unitarian Church, rather than an open-minded science laboratory.

To end that conflict, institutions of science need to employ the correct definition of religion and apply to questions of origins the “philosophy” described by Francis Bacon in his 1620 essay on the scientific method: “[T]he philosophy which I bring forward ..does not flatter the understanding by conformity with preconceived notions.”⁸ Actually, the first step is the most important, for when it is taken, the second will naturally follow, if science is to remove religion from its enterprise.

Thus, the formula for resolving the conflict between scientific materialism and theistic religion is actually quite simple. Just use an inclusive rather than discriminatory definition of religion.

¹ John Calvert, J.D. (BA Geology), is a lawyer, Managing Director of Intelligent Design network, inc., a non-profit that seeks institutional objectivity in origins science. He is the author of *Intelligent Design is Good Science*, in the book: Robert Winters, Editor, *Issues on Trial: Education*, p 137-143 (Greenhaven Press 2008); William S. Harris, Ph.D., and John H. Calvert, J.D., “*Intelligent Design, the Scientific Alternative to Evolution*,” *The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly*,” p. 542-549 (Autumn, 2003); and John H. Calvert, *Are We Designs or Occurrences? Should Science and Government Prejudge the Question* (*Whistleblower*, pub by WorldNetDaily, vol 14 no 8, p24-33, August 2005).

² *Seeing and Believing: The never-ending attempt to reconcile science and religion, and why it is doomed to fail* (New Republic, Feb. 4, 2009); His review is posted at <http://www.tnr.com/booksarts/story.html?id=1e3851a3-bdf7-438a-ac2a-a5e381a70472&p=1>

³ Prof. Jerry Coyne: An Atheist's Call To Arms; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOdhNvO5CLQ>

⁴ Jesse Preston and Nicholas Epley, *Science and God: An automatic opposition between ultimate explanations* [(*Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, vol 45, p 238-241 (2008)

⁵ *United States V. Seeger*, 380 U.S. 163, 187 (1965), embracing the view of Paul Tillich

⁶ *McGowen v. Maryland*, 366 U.S. 420, 461 (1961)

⁷ Paul Kurtz, Editor, *Science and Religion: Are they Compatible*, p. 13 (Prometheus Books, 2003)

⁸ Francis Bacon, *The New Organon or True Directions Concerning the Interpretation of Nature*, (1620)