

Religion and science: I

Introduction



It's common to hear people say, 'Science has proved religion is wrong' or that, 'Science is incompatible with faith'. Why then, if true, do many scientists live a religious faith?

Many misunderstandings underpin these terms. In fact, religion, faith, and science are three different things:

1. The word 'religion' generally implies a series of moral rules, codes, and laws.
2. The word 'faith' is different and means a belief in something that is not subject to objective verification.
3. The word 'science' means a step-by-step attempt to understand the world. It usually involves experimentation and thought as a means to formulating rules and models.

While these three concepts differ, they do overlap.

As a crude generalisation, Judaism and Islam are principally a religion because they centre around laws, rules, codes, and regulations. Some of those rules are very specific such as 'Do not kill' or might dictate times of prayer. Christianity is principally a faith as it talks most about God, about Jesus being God incarnate, about atonement, the forgiveness of sins, and about an afterlife—none of which can be proved.

There are clearly substantial overlaps. Both Judaism and Islam are faiths because they centre around an unseen, spiritual God whose existence cannot be proved; rather, His presence must be taken on trust. And the laws at the heart of these religions are said to come from this God. Christianity also subscribes to laws such as 'Do not kill' or 'Do not tell lies'. Some of the commandments in Christianity are imprecise: for although Jesus said, 'Love one another as I have loved you', we may often need to guess what his love would be like.

Contrary to popular opinion, science is generally more of a faith than a religion. Only very rarely are its rules seen as unchangeable because so many rules can and do alter often, generally as more facts come to light. Therefore, while we may talk

about the 'laws of science' (such as the 'laws of gravity' or 'the laws of mathematics'), in fact they are simply statements describing the current extent of our knowledge. They offer a 'snapshot' describing the way we understand our world today ... but no more. One obvious example: astronomy has moved from the idea that the earth is at the centre of the universe, to the sun at the centre, through to the solar system being part of the Milky Way which is itself somewhere near the outer edge of one galaxy. A good scientist is therefore a person of faith insofar as they will live with a lot of ideas that cannot be proved and is therefore taken on trust. Like a person following a spiritual faith, their views and opinions will change in response to changes in what is known. Perhaps that explains why the American monk Thomas Merton, talking about growing in faith, once said, 'Prayer is to faith what research is to science'.

As science and faith are so similar, we can learn from science how to grow our faith. As the cosmologist Carl Sagan said, 'Sceptical scrutiny is the means, in both science and religion, by which deep thoughts can be winnowed from deep nonsense'. And Galileo, who was the first western scientist in recent times to say openly that the earth travelled round the sun, said, 'I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with senses, reason, and intellect has intended us to forego their use'.