Science and Religion: 5 Questions
edited by Gregg D Caruso
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reviewed by David A Rintoul

This book is one of a series in which prominent scholars/philosophers are interviewed and asked the same five questions. The interviewees are chosen so as to represent multiple viewpoints on the topic, in the hope that the reader will gain some perspective on all aspects and approaches. In this particular instance, the topic is the relationship between science and religion.

As was the case in previous volumes in the series, the 33 interviewees represent a broad spectrum. The majority are philosophers, but there are also theologians, scientists, and individuals who straddle two of these three fields (such as Massimo Pigliucci, a biologist-turned-philosopher). A variety of religions, including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, are represented. The sole representative of the “intelligent design” movement is William Dembski. Finally, there are a few interviewees who can best be described simply as professional skeptics (such as James Randi and Michael Shermer). It is certainly an eclectic group, but demonstrably biased toward advocates on both sides of the fundamentalist Christian creationist/evolution dispute.

All interviewees were asked to provide answers to these five questions:

1. What initially drew you to theorizing about science and religion?

2. Do you think science and religion are compatible when it comes to understanding cosmology (the origin of the universe), biology (the origin of life and of the human species), ethics, and/or the human mind (minds, brains, souls, and free will)?

3. Some theorists maintain that science and religion occupy non-overlapping magisteria—i.e., that science and religion each have a legitimate magisterium, or domain of teaching authority, and these two domains do not overlap. Do you agree?

4. What do you consider to be your own most important contribution(s) to theorizing about science and religion?

5. What are the most important open questions, problems, or challenges confronting the relationship between science and religion, and what are the prospects for progress?

Note that the questions are remarkably vague (what is “science,” and what religion are we talking about?), and repeatedly use words that are inapt. For example, I’d replace “theorizing” with “speculating,” since in my view there really is no theory involved in this relation-
ship. One of the respondents, philosopher John Searle, agrees rather pithily. He writes, “I’ve never theorized about science and religion. These are names of domains of activity and not the names of theories” (page 201). This sloppiness in word usage is moderately surprising in a philosophically-oriented work. In my experience, philosophers can be sticklers for using words or concepts properly, and generally abhor undefined or vague terms. Although some of the respondents rightly pointed out these deficiencies in the questions themselves, in many cases this verbal laxness naturally allowed the respondents to wander all over the rhetorical map. Furthermore, questions 2 and 3 seem to be asking the same basic question, and, again, some respondents pointed out that they had already answered question 3 by responding to question 2. Finally, although questions 1 and 4 lead to some interesting personal history anecdotes in a few cases, the answers are often just self-aggrandizing fluff. Amusingly, Dembski lists his establishment of the blog Uncommon Descent as one of his important contributions. There might be some unwitting truth to that, since that blog has provided a lot of humor for a lot of folks over the years. However, Searle again answers the question quite directly. He writes, “As far as I know I have made no contribution whatever to theorizing about science and religion, because I consider it a fruitless enterprise. The two concepts are too vague to be worth theorizing about” (page 202).

In many respects, the book would be just as informative if only questions 2 and 5 had been asked. That would make it more difficult to fit the work into a series entitled “5 Questions,” however.

The basic problem with the format of the book is that it allows individual respondents to say things that go unrebutted by the other respondents. Each respondent’s answers are a self-contained domain, and in many cases, when the answers rely on an incomplete understanding of the facts, it is frustrating to the reader to see falsehoods trotted out as if they were valid. In some cases the error is pointed out in a subsequent section (for example, Sean Carroll’s treatment of the fine-tuning argument invoked by William Lane Craig in the chapter immediately preceding his), but in too many cases the respondents rely on tired and oft-rebutted arguments that go unchallenged. Here are a few examples; there are many more. Several chapters include the trope that there is no evidence for macroevolution. The word “random” is subjected to its usual willful misunderstandings. Strawman arguments against scientific observations and scientists’ motivations are abundant. Dembski and others make statements about probability that have been debunked many times over the years. Again, all of these stand alone and unrebutted in the individual respondents’ chapters. The lack of dialogue that is a necessity of this format makes reading many of these chapters quite frustrating.

Frankly, this sort of volume is a rather intellectually lazy approach to a controversial subject. The editor simply needs to round up an adequate number of respondents, interview them, and then transcribe and print the interviews. There is no analysis of the responses, and no summary. Obviously this is a topic that has been analyzed extensively, but I would hope that the opportunity to assemble a group like this would be accompanied by some attempt to provide an overview. Alas, this book is merely a series of independent interviews, held together by the simple thread of five common questions.

Nevertheless, the book does have some illuminating moments. Besides the aforementioned comment from Dembski about Uncommon Descent, it was interesting to read about the
conflicts (or lack of conflicts) between non-Christian religious perspectives and science. Various perspectives about the origin of ethics and morals made for interesting reading as well. Furthermore, the respondents did provide a broad overview of the arguments surrounding the conflict between fundamentalist Christian theology and evolutionary biology, reflecting their diverse outlook and backgrounds. This book would make a good primer for someone who was unfamiliar with the controversy and merely wanted to get acquainted with the broad scope of the arguments, without too much concern about how they have developed and been challenged.

In summary, again it is instructive to return to John Searle. In reply to question 5, he writes,

As far as I know there are no interesting philosophical questions in this domain. There are some interesting psychological and sociological questions: such as, how is it that traditional dogmatic religions survive when their views are too idiotic to be worth even discussing. My guess is that the traditional religions satisfied deep psychological needs, and the fact that their views are often idiotic is not a source of weakness but a source of strength. (page 202)

In other words, it’s a feature, not a bug. Religion is here to stay, and musings about science and religion are probably going to be around for a long time as well.

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