

# ARE WE APES OR GODS?

PILAR G.



## By-gone

Religion and science are like windshield wipers on the same car--they both offer a clearer view of the world, they move in unison, yet separately contribute to the journey that lies ahead. However, there is an apparent conflict between religion and science, and how they are perceived to advanced society, because some believe that of the two, one holds more value than the other. My goal is not to moralize these distinct ways of understanding, but rather, to think of religion in the same way I think of science--as an inquiry that can adapt as society evolves.

This experimental film presents the parallels relationship between religion and science. I evoke religious symbolism and imagery to pose these questions. The capriote, a conical hat worn in some parts of Spain in religious observance of Easter, was appropriated by the KKK in their campaign of racial violence. Furthermore, oppression of black people was justified by the research and work of members of the scientific community during the mid-nineteenth century.

Both symbols have cultural significance and these symbols illustrate that both religion and science are cultural constructs. Science and religion, although different, are best understood in reference to each other. Science and religion both function to give purpose, hope, and unify people. They also function to deprive people of purpose and hope, and serve as a wedge to break people apart. Religion and science serve as cultural vessels. My artwork is meant to capture how intertwined those vessels are.

Pilar G

*“People are attracted to religion the way that moths are attracted to flames” (Wilson 44). Science is associated with the physical and religion is linked to the metaphysical, although science and religion are not often considered counterparts, they work together like hands on a clock. As scientific developments are made and humans begin to understand their function and their influence on their environment, religious values also evolve. Religion serves the role of keeping members of society grounded in traditions. In this sense, religion evokes culture. Science and religion can conflict. Many atheists presume that religion is fixed, because if it is evolving it cannot be authentic. Religious values do evolve and progress along with society, despite the need for some to think of them as static.*

For the most part, religion had not been a significant feature in my life. I do not attend church, I do not pray, I do not say blessings before I eat. My mother prays every night and is always telling me that God is watching, that I should recognize there is meaning beyond which we can completely understand. Growing up I visited my grandparents house in Hempstead, Long Island. When I went to their house I felt faithful and closer to God than ever, I felt safe and appreciative. Both my grandparents died before I went to high school. I remember going to my Grandma and Pop Pop's funerals. I felt stronger because of the intense sermons. My mom feels more connected to her parents because of her faith and she always talks about them watching over her like angels. I lived in a neighborhood, however, where no one ever discussed religion in such an expressive way and at home we didn't attend church because all the churches nearby were homogenous, the congregants were largely upper class whites. The realization I had was that both weddings and funerals were the only times I spent at a church. In my experience those were the times that I got to see people I hadn't seen in a long time. Church brought my family, in all it's chaos, together.

In middle school I experimented with my identity. I was surrounded by a lot of negative drama at my school and I needed an anchor. I meditated, became vegan, and simplified my lifestyle. I believed in the social practices of Buddhism. I liked the idea of living a positive life and creating a karmic balance. I soon discovered that following the Buddhist ideals wasn't the only accurate path to spiritual enlightenment. There are areas of my life where I feel Christian and have those values and beliefs; and then, there are times where I feel more agnostic-- I just wanted live my life and not question humanity's presence and responsibilities.

My conflict with religion is that people's religious values can cause them to be stubborn and resist difference of opinion. When I have conversations with my atheist friends about how they feel about religion, I feel as though they mock the idea of faith because they don't have any. As we evolve culturally, it seems that we become less tolerant of ideas that cannot be supported by physical evidence. I believe that as technical values, such as, the way we get our food, shelter, and the ways in which we stay healthy, evolve so do religious values. Scientology is an example of a "new religious movement" that displays a value that has become more prominent in human culture. Scientology is a religion that values the soul and self. This focus on self as opposed to society functioning as a whole has become an important aspect of modern society and reflects that technical evolution. The inherent selfishness of humanity allows us to believe that we are the only reason why the Earth continues to spin. I believe that this is part of the problem with the 21st century; we've evolved to become more self righteous, we idolize ourselves because we are the earth's "benefactors". As many pop culture references conclude, we are gods. People think that by not having a religious faith they are rebelling because they are not letting some book or the word of God manipulate them.

Another form of rebellion is by forming new religions, cults. Cults have a controversial connotation because they have not achieved the status of recognized religion yet. Cults are associated with the sociological aspect of religion that demands obedience. Cults can dominate an individual's mind. Many religions that have appeared from the mid-1800s on are considered cults and have negative implications such as, the Manson Family. The religions that come from this time period are considered part of the "new religious movement". Some religious symbols are taken from religions and manipulated for the purpose of propaganda for these rising groups. The swastika and capriote are examples of religious symbols given negative connotations.

Both "Cult" and "Culture" are rooted in the latin word colere meaning to tend or cultivate. Part of what makes a cult or religion appealing is its collective representation. Cults

like religions have “cultures.” Geneticist and evolutionary biologist, Theodosius Dobzhansky believed, “Culture is not inherited through genes, it is acquired by learning from other human beings. In a sense human genes have surrendered their primacy in human evolution to an entirely new, nonbiological or superorganic agent, culture,” (Aunger 323). Although culture cannot be inherited through genes its replication in society is similar to the replication of genes in biology. Knowledge can be passed on like genetics. Culture has its own course in life. Examples in biological culture of replication and transmission of information include diseases, viruses, and infections. The goal of diseases, viruses, and infections are to manifest themselves through this process of replication and transmission, and in some cases this process manifests in the an actual link between biology (science) and religion, as evidenced in the cultural rite described in the following vignette.

In 1953, a young girl of the Fore tribe, participating in funerary rites, consumed pieces of her deceased grandmother’s brain. The elderly woman had died from an illness that progressively caused an uncontrollable dementia. Four years later, just as a brash young American doctor reached their village in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea, the girl began to exhibit symptoms of the trembling disease herself. A year later, she [is] dead too. Most of the women in her village were soon suffering from what they called Kuru, the shaking. But then the young virologist, Carleton Gajdusek, established a connection between participating in funerals and becoming the subject of a funeral yourself. The cultural practice of eating brains soon stopped when the news of this link spread, and kuru’s devastating consequences on Fore society gradually dwindled away . . . (Aunger 7).

Kuru was a genetic disease that was passed on due to a cultural tradition. The Fore tribes story is just one example of how science and religious/cultural practices can intermingle. This example illustrates the manifestation of both.

Richard Dawkins, famous ethologist and atheist, founded the theory of memetics. A meme is the manifestation of culture:

Memes are a second form of replicator that although as ‘selfish’ as any replicator, are at least somewhat independent of the interests of our genes. Memes are generally thought to be replicators residing in people’s brains that are able to reproduce themselves during transmission between individuals. Memes arise as a consequence of social learning... (Aunger 16).

Darwin’s cousin, George Galton was interested in the concept of genius being hereditary. When George Galton died, Gregor Mendel continued to pursue his idea but instead of investigating humans he did his study on peas, a plant which can fertilize itself. Mendel discovered that how the peas appeared was not the only thing that mattered and that one pea could hold another pea’s genetics but not appear to influencing the outcome of that pea’s offspring. Mendel later learned that his method did not work the same way with other plants. Mendel’s experiment poses the question “How does a fertilized egg with no structure of its own develop into the incredible complexity of a human being or a pea?” (Jones 21). Relatedly, my overarching question is, how are our cultural traits, such as those expressed through religion, separate from our scientific ones? Do they ever cross paths?

Dawkins is a firm believer that religion is a burden. Professor and evolutionary biologist, David Wilson, takes a different view on religion. Though they both believe evolutionary theories

can be the base for dissecting religion, Wilson believes cultural traits do not evolve for humans gratification, but for their survival:

Evolutionists employ a number of hypothesis to study any trait, even something as mundane as the spots on a guppy. Is [it] an adaptation that evolved by natural selection? If so, did it evolve by benefitting whole groups, compared to other groups, or individuals compared to other groups, or individuals compared to other groups, or individuals within groups? With cultural evolution there is a third possibility. Since cultural traits pass from person to person, they bear an intriguing resemblance to disease organisms. Perhaps they evolve to enhance their own transmission without benefitting human individuals or groups. (Wilson 42).

Wilson separates traits from adaptations. Traits originate from genetics, just as adaptations do, however, a trait can continue to hold its place in a population without being functional or adaptive. He uses a moth's adaptation of using natural light to aid in flight as an example of a trait with a negative byproduct. The moths become attracted to artificial sources of light and end up dead. Dawkins sees religion as a negative byproduct. He believes that though religion may have been beneficial for the earliest humans, in the "new age" religion has not adapted.

Religion forms groupthink, however, Dawkins doesn't believe that the concept of something being "for the good of the group" exists. The relationships within religious groups are meant to be mutualistic but many times are manipulated into becoming parasitic. "Virtually all adaptations evolve at the individual level and even examples of apparent altruism must be explained in terms of self-interest . . ." (Wilson 44). Charles Darwin, prominent naturalist, believed in the theory of natural selection. Natural selection is the principle of preservation of beneficial characteristics to be passed on in evolution. Darwin's focus was on the evolution of instinct and the selection that came with each adaptation. Many believed that adaptations were not contingent and remained equal throughout evolution.

Science and religion must necessarily have a conversation with each other -- they are both part of our culture and "embedded" in our nature. Science takes part in religious values and religion is connected to the science of our humanness. People take different perspectives on the relationship between the two. Neil deGrasse Tyson, well-known astrophysicist holds a strong bias toward the sciences, in an interview with National Geographic he states:

Enlightened religious people view science as a means of decoding nature, nature that they feel in their heart of hearts is created by god, perhaps. But they view science as a means for learning about nature rather than the bible as a means of defining nature. If you look at the world that way you will never have a conflict with science. Science is your guiding light for how the universe works. So all this conflict that everyone talks about that unfolds if you're fundamentalist religion and you are certain that every word in the bible is the literal truth of an unairing creator of the universe...you're going to spend your life fighting everything. (*Startalk*)

However, religious faith "is" at a minimum a means of perception. When people define nature through their values it is cynically believed to be tainted. People should have the ability to decide what their definition of nature is. Scientists see nature as only the physical world and often fail to ask the questions of the world at an individual level or the unconscious level and the role such questions have on their assessment of the empirical. However, whether you are religious or scientific perception plays a role. As noted by one author in connection with

Christian concepts of genesis:

“The Christian doctrine of creation may have encouraged science by assuming that creation (being the product of a designer) is both intelligible and orderly, so one can expect there are laws that can be discovered. Creation, as a product of God’s free actions, is also contingent, so the laws of nature cannot be learned through *a priori* thinking, which prompts the need for empirical investigation. According to Barbour (2000), both scientific and theological inquiry are theory-dependent (or at least model-dependent, e.g., the doctrine of the Trinity colors how Christian theologians interpret the first chapters of Genesis), rely on metaphors and models, and value coherence, comprehensiveness, and fruitfulness,”(*Religion and Science*).

So how does one better integrate the role of perception? Interestingly, anthropology is a form of science that has a grip on both science as well as human cultures. Not all scientific problems will be solved and when the answers can’t be found people rely on their imagination. Tyson believes that having faith will cause conflict to be present in a person's life but never suggests what would happen if all we had was science. Some cultures founded off of religion created and brought scientific advancement to society.

Additionally, if we didn’t begin to question our piety we may not have made those advancements and who's to say we don’t have more to make. By studying the science of the natural world we appreciate a part of its formation or creation. Sometimes religion actually forces scientific inquiry. Astrolabes for example, used to measure the inclined position in the sky of a celestial body, were developed by Muslims to schedule morning prayers. Stephen Jay Gould, American paleontologist, evolutionary biologist, and historian of science, “. . . identified science’s areas of expertise as empirical questions about the constitution of the universe, and religion’s domains of expertise as ethical values and spiritual meaning. Non-Overlapping Magisteria is both descriptive and normative: religious leaders should refrain from making factual claims about, for instance, evolutionary theory, just as scientists should not claim insight on moral matters,” (Cruz). At first blush Gould’s argument seems to have some appeal. But it ignores one fundamental flaw in science – science is hardly foolproof empirically. Perceptions are still the means by which science is measured and claiming them to be physical when they can only be processed cognitively ignores the role thought has on analyzing the empirical. He also ignores the possibility that religion does at least indirectly employ the empirical through its cultural ties.

The intersection of religion and science should be considered beyond the traditional oppositional conflict. Instead, the two should be seen as an illumination in how we come to the truth As Hume states:

As far as writing or history reaches, mankind, in ancient times, appear universally to have been polytheists. Shall we assert, that in more ancient times, before the knowledge of letters, or the discovery of any art or science, men entertained the principles of pure theism? That is, while they were ignorant and barbarous, they discovered truth; but fell into error, as soon as they acquired learn- and politeness . . .(Hume 2).

Hume implies that ignorance may have one closer to the truth than being “learned”. This seems

to be an acknowledgment that even the empirical is fraught with error. Scientist in particular should be made self-aware:

That which science refuses to grant to religion is not its right to exist, but its right to dogmatize upon the nature of things and the special competence which it claims for itself for knowing man and the world. As a matter of fact, it does not know itself. It does not even know what it is made of, nor to what need it answers.

(1973, p. 205 [excerpt from *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*])

Ultimately, if religious leaders and scientists become more aware of the role of culture and the physical have on their search for the truth they may find they have more in common than they think and may even be able to aid one another in their pursuit of knowledge. They may discover that science and religion are not so different, that religion has its own life.



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