Omega
II (2003)1, 88-96

Hermeneutical Proximity Between Science and Religion

- Victor Ferrao[1]

This paper is a fresh attempt to present a better understanding of the true nature of science and religion, one that avoids the narrow scientistic perspective of science on the one hand, and the myopic fundamenatalistic view of religion on the other. Such an understanding can give us a better insight into the relationship between science and religion. The author makes use of the latest developments in the philosophy of science and in hermeneutics to carry out this task. Finally, he introduces Habermas' concept of 'life-world' which both shape the specific form of science and religion in a given context and is, in turn, shaped by it.

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"The eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility," says Albert Einstein. Humans as beings-in-the-world have sought to understand the world from the first moments of their existence. Science is a great window through which humankind has attempted to understand our universe, our planet, ourselves and other living as well as non-living things. Religion too has its significance in our attempt to understand the world. It does provide us a big picture of life and indicates how we fit into the whole scheme of things. In this paper we shall try to arrive at an understanding of both science and religion. Perhaps this can pave the way for a deeper understanding of the relationship between science and religion.

Understanding Science

The problem of demarcation that sets the borders of science and non-science was raised by Karl Popper, a philosopher of science of the

20th century. Although philosophers like Quine opposed such a project, we can trace such a criterion of demarcation between science and pseudo-science operative quite openly among the Logical Positivists in the 1950s. They seem to identify science with every form of rational and empirical knowledge. Basing themselves on this perspective, they bestowed the status of being a paradigm of all knowledge on science, and taught that only that which can be empirically verified qualified to be knowledge. Thus the notorious principle of verification separated science from that which was deemed non-science. But the fact that this principle of verification itself could not be verified reduced their position, and along with it an elitist purely empirical vision of science, to ashes.[2] Karl Popper appears to have rejected this narrow elitist view of science when he taught that the community of scientists is an open society in which anyone may propose ideas or theories and anyone may criticize the same. Thus in the Popperian vision all are seekers of truth, and all recognize the extent of their ignorance and the uncertainty of their knowledge. In the light of these limitations the attempt to prove is displaced by the attempt to disprove. Hence he proposed his principle of falsification as a criterion of demarcation. It teaches that science is something that is potentially falsifiable. The Popperian principle of falsification seems to rehabilitate that which is rejected as non-science (non-sensical) by the Logical Positivists. Yet we have to note that both verification and falsification basically suffer from the same assumption that there are neutral observation statements.[3]

The constitutive role of non-science has been effectively brought to the fore with *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* of Thomas S. Kuhn, according to which science is paradigm-centered and paradigm-controlled. Kuhn admits that it is not easy to define a paradigm. It is "a cluster of items such as laws, theories, goals, methods, etc., that provide models from which spring forth a particular tradition of scientific research."[4] Hence, we can see that Kuhn effectively demonstrates that the boundaries of science are porous. Science gains its specific character from non-science also. Non-science also contributes to the formation of the horizon that underpins and circumscribes our scientific activity.

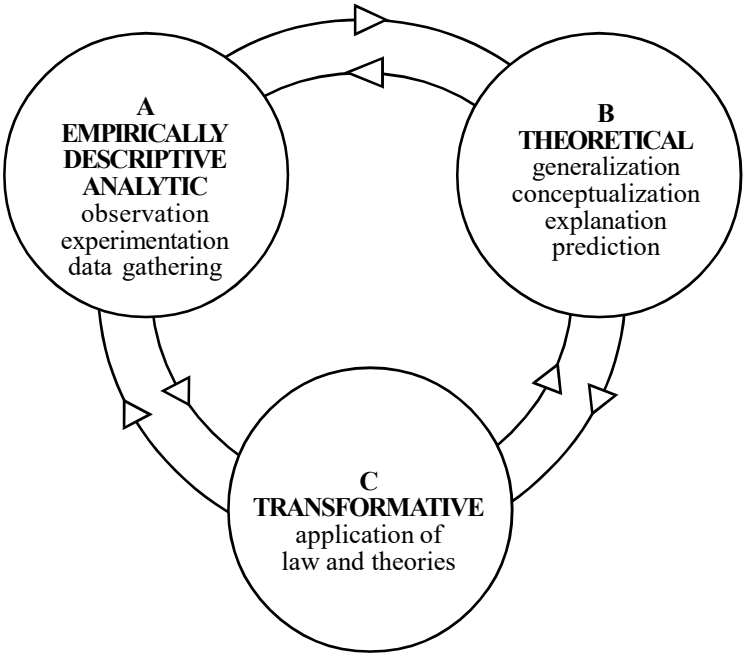
Many Kuhn-inspired philosophers of science began to teach that the irrational 'social' factors in the practice of science were to be called

in only to explain failure and error, never to explain scientific success within a paradigm-based research tradition. Thus, whenever a paradigm-based form of inquiry met with success, the explanation for the success was that the paradigm was accurate, that the model of reality it contained was true. This asymmetry was unacceptable to David Bloor and his fellow sociologists of knowledge. They saw it as a Weak Programme. Against it, they advocated what came to be christened as the Strong Programme. The Strong Programme taught that false beliefs and true beliefs in science are to be explained by the same kinds of social, non-rational causes.[5] Thus thinkers like Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar attempted to corroborate these views with their case studies. They studied the researchers at work in the Salk Institute in California, a laboratory specializing in the investigation of hormones that originate in the nervous system, and attempted to demonstrate how their science was strongly socially constructed.[6]

Social constructivism when taken to its logical end can cut an anti-realist or 'anything goes' relativistic picture of science. Hence, philosophers of science tend to take a position which is today referred to as historical realism. Historical realism strives to avoid the extremes of positivism as well as social constructivism inspired by Thomas Kuhn. They teach that science is partly discovered and partly constructed.[7]

The focus of the philosophy of science today seems to move to the reflection on science as actually practised. We know that science as practised involves an organizing process of observation, experiment, recourse to prior theory, reliance on various metaphysical principles and so on, exploited via reason and argument to propose hypotheses, evaluate their promise for further progress, debate their adequacy, accept them as true or false. The point of this noble enterprise is to obtain systematic knowledge that can assist us to understand the world and transform our life. Hence, scientific activity that always takes place in a social setting is always influenced by the worldview that guides that particular community. Since the worldview belongs to the level of the horizon, it cannot be pinned down. Perhaps the analogy of light will illumine our position. In the light of light we can see most things while light itself remains invisible. Similarly, the worldview is a womb in which our entire life becomes meaningful. We can notice how a particular scientific activity

is guided and centered on a specific paradigm. There is a hermeneutical circle between the scientific activity and the paradigm that builds a particular scientific community.



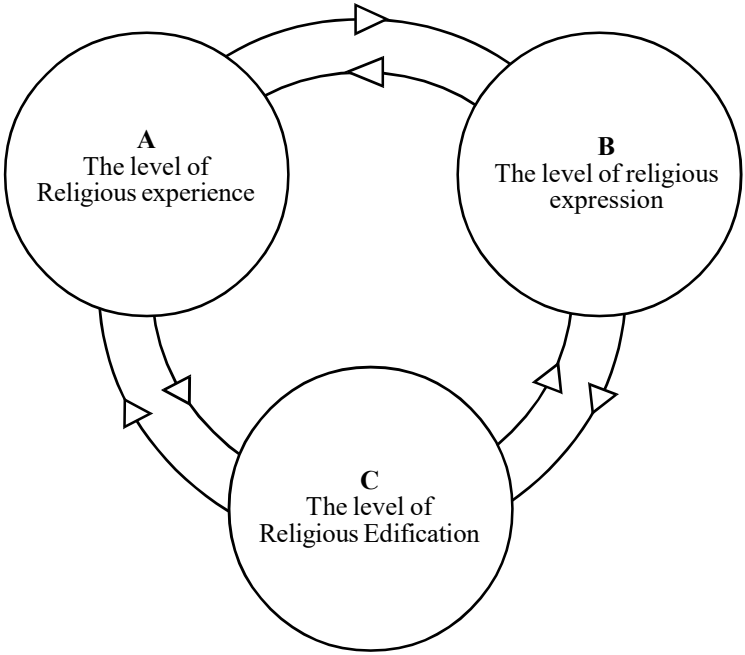
Harold K. Schelling portrays the dynamic circularity of our scientific activity. He speaks of three circles: a) empirically descriptive circle; b) theoretical circle; c) transformative circle. The empirically descriptive circle engages in data gathering with the help of observation and experimentation; the theoretical circle strives to produce symbolic structures for the purpose of the correlation of concepts, generalization, explanation and prediction; and the tranformative circle attempts to transform human natural and cultural environment. All these three circles are inter-linked.[8]

Our analysis radicalizes the proposal of Harold K Schelling by embedding all the three circles into a larger circle that we christen as worldview or *Weltanschauung*. It is the specific paradigm that, to some

extent, generates, circumscribes and renders meaningful our scientific activities mapped by the three circles that we have considered above.

Understanding Religion

Religion has no one meaning for all. Modern usage of this term covers a wide spectrum of meanings that reflects the enormous variety of ways in which the term can be interpreted. On the one extreme we might place the recognition of one's own tradition as a religion, while on the other extreme we can trace those who equate religion to ignorance, superstition, wishful thinking, etc. Indeed, religion does not have a fixed meaning, nor is it a zone with clear boundaries. Perhaps, Wittgenstein's notion of family-resemblance might assist us to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon. There is a trace of some generality, which expresses that which all religions appear to share in common. At the same time there is some specificity in the concept of religion inasmuch as it attempts to map some concrete phenomena. That is, whatever we abstract as common elements from various religions are always found localized, and hence take on various forms according to the context.



Religion appears to have three levels: a) the level of religious experience; b) the level of religious expression; c) the level of religious edification. These three levels are deeply intertwined in a dynamic circularity. That is, there is a hermeneutical circle between them.

The level of religious experience forms the core of religion inasmuch as the other two levels depend on it. But we can find some philosophers raising their eyebrows on the issue of the very possibility of such experiences. These skeptics of religious experience strive to demonstrate either that religious knowledge is not based on experience or it does not lend itself to any experiential check. Even Kant seems to sail in the same ship as he found only a moral ground for religious belief. Thanks to the labours of Richard Swinburne, Alwin Plantiga, William P. Alston, such a rejection of religious experience is shown to be largely based on a naïve understanding of experience itself. The work of these scholars points out that the objectors take ordinary perception as the paradigm of all experience, which they then use as a criterion to dismiss all forms of religious experience. These above scholars view that there is a parallel between perceptual and religious experience. Hence, religious experiences are as valid as our perceptual experience. In this context it will be important to remind ourselves that William James has already attempted to demonstrate that there can be diverse forms of experiences in his famous book, *Varieties of Religious Experience*.[9]

Today many scholars speak of mediate as well as immediate forms of religious experience. Immediate religious experience is a direct experience in which the divinity or whatever the person considers as transcendent enters the little-ness of one's personal space, and one is lifted into a transpersonal dimension. Mediate religious experience takes place through the medium of some structures that may belong to the level of religious expression.[10]

At the level of religious expression we can trace the so-called unholy trinity: the Creed, the Code and the Cult. The Creed forms the belief system of a particular religious group, while the Code consists of the rules, customs, laws, modes of behavior, etc., that govern the religious life of the group. The Cult deals with the domain of worship, the

prayers, the rites, the rituals and the symbols, etc. The Creed, the Code and the Cult need not form the essence of any religion, yet they are warranted by our embodied nature.[11]

The level of edification deals with the transformation and growth that an individual and the community undergo due to the operation of the above two levels. All these three circles are also embedded in a larger circle that we christen as the worldview.

Understanding the *Weltanschauung*

We humans as beings-in-the-world find ourselves thrown into a *Weltanschauung* or worldview. It forms the universe of meanings. Meaning is intrinsic to us. Without meaning we shrivel and die. Viktor Frankl aptly describes us as a will to meaning. Neitzche is also said to have said, "He, who has found a why to live for, can cope with any how!" We humans as *beings-in-the-world* are in constant search for meaning. We strive to make sense of our own existence and of the events in the world through our meaning-making endeavours. This quest for meaning is not always visible at the surface level, yet it surrounds us like a horizon from which we can never escape. Human life devoid of meaning leads to despair and self-annihilation. Thus meaning becomes our basic need, even more basic than our long-accepted basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. Hence we might say, "If there is no meaning in life, we will have to invent it." The meaning that we construe for ourselves underpins our values, our beliefs and our general view of life.

Perhaps the concept of life-world popularized by Jürgen Habermas could help us to understand this. The life-world is the everyday world in which we are born and live. It shapes us into the people that we become. The shared meanings, perspectives, values, beliefs about how things should be, what people should do, how our institutions should be, etc., go to form the life-world.[12] The life-world can be identified with the Panikkarean *Mythos,* which is a horizon against which all human living derives its meaning. It is like the light that remains invisible, but with the help of which we can see everything illuminated by it.[13] The life-world is not a static given because it is shaped and reformed by those that

have been shaped and formed within it. Habermas refers to the former as the phylogenetic aspect, while the latter he looks at as the ontogenetic aspect. Thus an individual is shaped as well as shapes his/her life-world.

In the context of the above discussion we can see how science and religion emerge from a life-world and in their turn help in the transformation of the life-world. The relationship between these two great pillars of our society that we have now called life-world is circular. The life-world is the womb in which we humans become what we are. It is in dialogue with our respective life-world that we grow as humans. Today science and religion along with other things form the integral part of our life-world. Hence they are important means through which we make meaning of our life. Yes, science and religion may not need each other but it is we humans who need both.

Conclusion

Our study invites us towards a re-understanding of both science and religion. It attempts to move away from the narrow scientistic understanding of science as well as the fanatic fundamentalist understanding of religion. Having rooted both science and religion in our life-world, it has paved the way for a deeper understanding of the relationship between science and religion and their dialogical search for truth and meaning.

Notes

1 Victor Ferrao teaches Philosophy of Science at Rachol Seminary, Goa. He is doing his doctoral studies in Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune.

2 See Anthony O'Hear, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Science*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 106-113.

3 Steve Woolgar, *Science: The Very Idea* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 16.

4 See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

[5] See Robert Klee, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Science: Cutting Nature at Its Seams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 157-162.

[6] See Klee, pp. 165-174.

[7] See Frederick Suppe, *The Structure of Scientific Theories* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), pp. 650-728.

[8] See Harold Schelling " Three-Fold and Circular Nature of Science and Religion," in James E. Huchingson (New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993), pp. 40-43.

[9] See George Karuvelil, *Interrelations and Interpretation,* ed. Job Kozhamthadam (New Delhi: Intercultural Publications, 1997), pp. 109-119.

[10] Peter Lourdes, "Less Religion, More Experience," *Divyadaan: Journal of Philosophy and Education* (2002), pp. 327-328.

[11] Lourdes, p. 326.

[12] Terrence Tilley, et al, *Postmodern Theologies* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 6.

[13] Raimond Panikkar, *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics: Cross-Cultural Studies* (Bangalore: ATC, 1983), p. 4.