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Mystery and EvidenceBy **TIM CRANE**

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There is a story about Bertrand Russell giving a public lecture somewhere or other, defending his atheism. A furious woman stood up at the end of the lecture and asked: “And Lord Russell, what will you say when you stand in front of the throne of God on judgment day?” Russell replied: “I will say: ‘I’m terribly sorry, but you didn’t give us enough evidence.’ ”

This is a very natural way for atheists to react to religious claims: to ask for evidence, and reject these claims in the absence of it. Many of the several hundred comments that followed two earlier Stone posts “[Philosophy and Faith](#)” and “[On Dawkins’s Atheism: A Response](#),” both by Gary Gutting, took this stance. Certainly this is the way that today’s “[new atheists](#)” tend to approach religion. According to their view, religions — by this they mean basically Christianity, Judaism and Islam and I will follow them in this — are largely in the business of making claims about the universe that are a bit like scientific hypotheses. In other words, they are claims — like the claim that God created the world — that are supported by evidence, that are proved by arguments and tested against our experience of the world. And against the evidence, these hypotheses do not seem to fare well.

But is this the right way to think about religion? Here I want to suggest that it is not, and to try and locate what seem to me some significant differences between science and religion.

To begin with, scientific explanation is a very specific and technical kind of knowledge. It requires patience, pedantry, a narrowing of focus and (in the case of the most profound scientific theories) considerable mathematical knowledge and ability. No-one can understand quantum theory — by any account, the most successful physical theory there has ever been — unless they grasp the underlying mathematics. Anyone who says otherwise is fooling themselves.

Religious belief is a very different kind of thing. It is not restricted only to those with a certain education or knowledge, it does not require years of training, it is not specialized and it is not technical. (I’m talking here about the content of what people who regularly attend church, mosque or synagogue take themselves to be thinking; I’m not talking about how

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theologians interpret this content.)

What is more, while religious belief is widespread, scientific knowledge is not. I would guess that very few people in the world are actually interested in the details of contemporary scientific theories. Why? One obvious reason is that many lack access to this knowledge. Another reason is that even when they have access, these theories require sophisticated knowledge and abilities, which not everyone is capable of getting.

Yet another reason — and the one I am interested in here — is that most people aren't deeply interested in science, even when they have the opportunity and the basic intellectual capacity to learn about it. Of course, educated people who know about science know roughly what Einstein, Newton and Darwin said. Many educated people accept the modern scientific view of the world and understand its main outlines. But this is not the same as being interested in the details of science, or being immersed in scientific thinking.

This lack of interest in science contrasts sharply with the worldwide interest in religion. It's hard to say whether religion is in decline or growing, partly because it's hard to identify only one thing *as* religion — not a question I can address here. But it's pretty obvious that whatever it is, religion commands and absorbs the passions and intellects of hundreds of millions of people, many more people than science does. Why is this? Is it because — as the new atheists might argue — they want to explain the world in a scientific kind of way, but since they have not been properly educated they haven't quite got there yet? Or is it because so many people are incurably irrational and are incapable of scientific thinking? Or is something else going on?

Taken as hypotheses, religious claims do very badly. Yet the striking fact is that this does not worry Christians.

Some philosophers have said that religion is so unlike science that it has its own “grammar” or “logic” and should not be held accountable to the same standards as scientific or ordinary empirical belief. When Christians express their belief that “Christ has risen,” for example, they should not be taken as making a factual claim, but as expressing their commitment to what Wittgenstein called a certain “form of life,” a way of seeing significance in the world, a moral and practical outlook which is worlds away from scientific explanation.

This view has some merits, as we shall see, but it grossly misrepresents some central phenomena of religion. It is absolutely essential to religions that they make certain factual or historical claims. When Saint Paul says “if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is in vain and our faith is in vain” he is saying that the point of his faith depends on a certain historical occurrence.

Theologians will debate exactly what it means to claim that Christ has risen, what exactly the meaning and significance of this occurrence is, and will give more or less sophisticated accounts of it. But all I am saying is that whatever its specific nature, Christians must hold that there was such an occurrence. Christianity does make factual, historical claims. But this is not the same as being a kind of proto-science. This will become clear if we reflect a bit on what science involves.

The essence of science involves making hypotheses about the causes and natures of things, in order to explain the phenomena we observe around us, and to predict their future behavior. Some sciences — medical science, for example — make hypotheses about the causes of diseases and test them by intervening. Others — cosmology, for example — make hypotheses that are more remote from everyday causes, and involve a high level of mathematical abstraction and idealization. Scientific reasoning involves an obligation to hold a hypothesis only to the extent that the evidence requires it. Scientists should not accept hypotheses which are “ad hoc” — that is, just tailored for one specific situation but cannot be generalized to others. Most scientific theories involve some kind of generalization: they don’t just make claims about one thing, but about things of a general kind. And their hypotheses are designed, on the whole, to make predictions; and if these predictions don’t come out true, then this is something for the scientists to worry about.

Religions do not construct hypotheses in this sense. I said above that Christianity rests upon certain historical claims, like the claim of the resurrection. But this is not enough to make scientific hypotheses central to Christianity, any more than it makes such hypotheses central to history. It is true, as I have just said, that Christianity does place certain historical events at the heart of their conception of the world, and to that extent, one cannot be a Christian unless one believes that these events happened. Speaking for myself, it is because I reject the factual basis of the central Christian doctrines that I consider myself an atheist. But I do not reject these claims because I think they are bad hypotheses in the scientific sense. Not all factual claims are scientific hypotheses. So I disagree with Richard Dawkins when he says “religions make existence claims, and this means scientific claims.”

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Taken as hypotheses, religious claims do very badly: they are ad hoc, they are arbitrary, they rarely make predictions and when they do they almost never come true. Yet the striking fact is that it does not worry Christians when this happens. In the gospels Jesus predicts the end of the world and the coming of the kingdom of God. It does not worry believers that Jesus was wrong (even if it causes theologians to reinterpret what is meant by ‘the kingdom of God’). If Jesus was framing something like a scientific hypothesis, then it should worry them. Critics of religion might say that this just shows the manifest irrationality of religion. But what it suggests to me is that that something else is going on, other than hypothesis formation.

Religious belief tolerates a high degree of mystery and ignorance in its understanding of the world. When the devout pray, and their prayers are not answered, they do not take this as evidence which has to be weighed alongside all the other evidence that prayer is effective. They feel no obligation whatsoever to weigh the evidence. If God does not answer their prayers, well, there must be some explanation of this, even though we may never know it. Why do people suffer if an omnipotent God loves them? Many complex answers have been

offered, but in the end they come down to this: it's a mystery.

Science too has its share of mysteries (or rather: things that must simply be accepted without further explanation). But one aim of science is to minimize such things, to reduce the number of primitive concepts or primitive explanations. The religious attitude is very different. It does not seek to minimize mystery. Mysteries are accepted as a consequence of what, for the religious, makes the world meaningful.

This point gets to the heart of the difference between science and religion. Religion is an attempt to make sense of the world, but it does not try and do this in the way science does. Science makes sense of the world by showing how things conform to its hypotheses. The characteristic mode of scientific explanation is showing how events fit into a general pattern.

Religion, on the other hand, attempts to make sense of the world by seeing a kind of meaning or significance in things. This kind of significance does not need laws or generalizations, but just the sense that the everyday world we experience is not all there is, and that behind it all is the mystery of God's presence. The believer is already convinced that God is present in everything, even if they cannot explain this or support it with evidence. But it makes sense of their life by suffusing it with meaning. This is the attitude (seeing God in everything) expressed in George Herbert's poem, "The Elixir." Equipped with this attitude, even the most miserable tasks can come to have value: *Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws/ Makes that and th' action fine.*

None of these remarks are intended as being for or against religion. Rather, they are part of an attempt (by an atheist, from the outside) to understand what it is. Those who criticize religion should have an accurate understanding of what it is they are criticizing. But to understand a world view, or a philosophy or system of thought, it is not enough just to understand the propositions it contains. You also have to understand what is central and what is peripheral to the view. Religions do make factual and historical claims, and if these claims are false, then the religions fail. But this dependence on fact does not make religious claims anything like hypotheses in the scientific sense. Hypotheses are not central. Rather, what is central is the commitment to the meaningfulness (and therefore the mystery) of the world.

I have suggested that while religious thinking is widespread in the world, scientific thinking is not. I don't think that this can be accounted for merely in terms of the ignorance or irrationality of human beings. Rather, it is because of the kind of intellectual, emotional and practical appeal that religion has for people, which is a very different appeal from the kind of appeal that science has.

Stephen Jay Gould once argued that religion and science are "non-overlapping magisteria." If he meant by this that religion makes no factual claims which can be refuted by empirical investigations, then he was wrong. But if he meant that religion and science are very different kinds of attempt to understand the world, then he was certainly right.

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