

RELIGION AND SCIENCE: IRRECONCILABLE? Albert Einstein

*A response to a greeting sent by the Liberal Ministers' Club of New York City.
Published in The Christian Register, June, 1948.*

Does there truly exist an insuperable contradiction between religion and science? Can religion be superseded by science? The answers to these questions have, for centuries, given rise to considerable dispute and, indeed, bitter fighting. Yet, in my own mind there can be no doubt that in both cases a dispassionate consideration can only lead to a negative answer. What complicates the solution, however, is the fact that while most people readily agree on what is meant by "science," they are likely to differ on the meaning of "religion."

As to science, we may well define it for our purpose as "methodical thinking directed toward finding regulative connections between our sensual experiences." Science, in the immediate, produces knowledge and, indirectly, means of action. It leads to methodical action if definite goals are set up in advance. For the function of setting up goals and passing statements of value transcends its domain. While it is true that science, to the extent of its grasp of causative connections, may reach important conclusions as to the compatibility and incompatibility of goals and evaluations, the independent and fundamental definitions regarding goals and values remain beyond science's reach.

As regards religion, on the other hand, one is generally agreed that it deals with goals and evaluations and, in general, with the emotional foundation of human thinking and acting, as far as these are not predetermined by the inalterable hereditary disposition of the human species. Religion is concerned with man's attitude toward nature at large, with the establishing of ideals for the individual and communal life, and with mutual human relationship. These ideals religion attempts to attain by exerting an educational influence on tradition and through the development and promulgation of certain easily accessible thoughts and narratives (epics and myths) which are apt to influence evaluation and action along the lines of the accepted ideals.

It is this mythical, or rather this symbolic, content of the religious traditions which is likely to come into conflict with science. This occurs whenever this religious stock of ideas contains dogmatically fixed statements on subjects which belong in the domain of science. Thus, it is of vital importance for the preservation of true religion that such conflicts be avoided when they arise from subjects which, in fact, are not really essential for the pursuance of the religious aims.

When we consider the various existing religions as to their essential substance, that is, divested of their myths, they do not seem to me to differ as basically from each other as the proponents of the "relativistic" or conventional theory wish us to believe. And this is by no means surprising. For the moral attitudes of a people that is supported by religion need always aim at preserving and promoting the sanity and vitality of the community and its individuals, since otherwise this community is bound to perish. A people that were to honor falsehood, defamation, fraud, and murder would be unable, indeed, to subsist for very long.

When confronted with a specific case, however, it is no easy task to determine clearly what is desirable and what should be eschewed, just as we find it difficult to decide what exactly it is that makes good painting or good music. It is something that may be felt intuitively more easily than rationally comprehended. Likewise, the great moral teachers of humanity were, in a way, artistic geniuses in the art of living. In addition to the most elementary precepts directly motivated by the preservation of life and the sparing of unnecessary suffering, there are others to which, although they are apparently not quite commensurable to the basic precepts, we nevertheless attach considerable importance. Should truth, for instance, be sought unconditionally even where its attainment and its accessibility to all would entail heavy sacrifices

in toil and happiness? There are many such questions which, from a rational vantage point, cannot easily be answered or cannot be answered at all. Yet, I do not think that the so-called "relativistic" viewpoint is correct, not even when dealing with the more subtle moral decisions.

When considering the actual living conditions of presentday civilized humanity from the standpoint of even the most elementary religious commands, one is bound to experience a feeling of deep and painful disappointment at what one sees. For while religion prescribes brotherly love in the relations among the individuals and groups, the actual spectacle more resembles a battlefield than an orchestra. Everywhere, in economic as well as in political life, the guiding principle is one of ruthless striving for success at the expense of one's fellow men. This competitive spirit prevails even in school and, destroying all feelings of human fraternity and cooperation, conceives of achievement not as derived from the love for productive and thoughtful work, but as springing from personal ambition and fear of rejection.

There are pessimists who hold that such a state of affairs is necessarily inherent in human nature; it is those who propound such views that are the enemies of true religion, for they imply thereby that religious teachings are utopian ideals and unsuited to afford guidance in human affairs. The study of the social patterns in certain so-called primitive cultures, however, seems to have made it sufficiently evident that such a defeatist view is wholly unwarranted. Whoever is concerned with this problem, a crucial one in the study of religion as such, is advised to read the description of the Pueblo Indians in Ruth Benedict's book, *Patterns of Culture*. Under the hardest living conditions, this tribe has apparently accomplished the difficult task of delivering its people from the scourge of competitive spirit and of fostering in it a temperate, cooperative conduct of life, free of external pressure and without any curtailment of happiness.

The interpretation of religion, as here advanced, implies a dependence of science on the religious attitude, a relation which, in our predominantly materialistic age, is only too easily overlooked. While it is true that scientific results are entirely independent from religious or moral considerations, those individuals to whom we owe the great creative achievements of science were all of them imbued with the truly religious conviction that this universe of ours is something perfect and susceptible to the rational striving for knowledge. If this conviction had not been a strongly emotional one and if those searching for knowledge had not been inspired by Spinoza's *Amor Dei Intellectualis*, they would hardly have been capable of that untiring devotion which alone enables man to attain his greatest achievements.