

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Learning by asking different questions in science and religion

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Last week, Kelly James Clark discussed how the different faiths can come together to explore topics like science and religion, and thereby receive new insights while engaging in mutual interfaith understanding.

For decades, I have been involved in science and religion dialogue and find many similarities to our interfaith dialogue.

Some people insist science and religion are incompatible and pursuing one necessarily involves rejecting the other.

Loud voices, such as Richard Dawkins, a biologist and outspoken atheist, see no possible peace between these two ways of knowing.

Unfortunately, there are religious voices that also say when science discovers something that appears to conflict with religious teachings, then the

science must be rejected.

This conflict position sometimes is described as the warfare between science and religion.



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We recognize, however, that this is just a metaphor. No one expects chemists to pick up guns and attack Congregationalists or physicists to engage in battle with Presbyterians.

On the contrary, those of us who have been involved in science and religion dialogue find much benefit in looking at the ways in which these two ways of knowing can be mutually beneficial.

Just because the two pursuits ask different questions does not mean they cannot engage in fruitful dialogue and learn from each other.

In fact, the various disciplines

of science themselves ask different questions and yet often learn from each other.

In a similar way, there are those who would insist religions are necessarily in a conflict with each other and there can be no fruitful conversation between them.

Believing one requires rejection of the other.

Unfortunately, the warfare term here might not be a metaphor when some extremists feel it a religious duty to enforce their position through violent means.

There is no question about the potential harm that can come from religion, especially when some believe all religions can be put in one of two categories: my religion and all of the other, false religions.

On the other hand, to say all religions are essentially the same can also be dangerous.

Professor Stephen Prothero, from Boston University, points to some convergence among reli-

gions when it comes to certain ethical issues like love and service, but shows how they diverge on doctrine, ritual, mythology, experience and law.

His book, "God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World — and Why Their Differences Matter," argues each religion asks different questions and to ignore that reality is "dangerous, disrespectful, and untrue."

The various sciences, likewise, ask different questions: Physics is interested in the fundamental concepts of matter, energy, force and motion; biology is concerned with life and living organisms; psychology seeks to understand mind and behavior; formal sciences like logic and mathematics look at the processes and conclusions from formal reasoning.

Prothero suggests a similar distinction among religions and the questions they ask: Judaism is primarily concerned with how

one should live; Christianity seeks salvation from the results of sin; Islam teaches submission as the response to an omnipotent God.

The sciences benefit from their various pursuits by asking different questions and developing different approaches, and yet they learn from each other.

Perhaps religions can affirm their own insights while at the same time learning from the questions and practices of other faith traditions.

If these comparisons between the various sciences and the relationship to religion are of interest, then consider joining us for the Grand Dialogue in Science and Religion Annual Conference on June 13.

Our special guests will be a team of Islamic scholars from Turkey. For more information and free registration go to GrandDialogue.org

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