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On Learned Ignorance: Science and Unknowability in the Religious Enterprise

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IN THE RELIGIOUS ENTERPRISE

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The author looks at the importance of the dynamic of unknowability in theology and in science, alike. Both disciplines teach us about ourselves, not about God. Learning about the universe and our own place in it, we learn more about our fallibility and the need for humility.

Can science teach us anything new about God? No. Yet the work of science is extremely valuable to the religious endeavor—if we are willing to take what science teaches us seriously.

There have been theologians throughout the history of the Church, including Origen and Nicholas of Cusa, who have held that God is unknowable. And even those theologians who held otherwise, such as Augustine, were quite clear that the knowledge vouchsafed to us is very limited, and that it is only available by believing first and asking questions later. In the Christian tradition, the religious endeavor turns on belief without proof, on the subjective commitment to a Person whose existence and significance is doubted by many. The very dynamic of unknowability is deeply important; it is necessary to the religious enterprise that we constantly keep our ideas of God before us as ideas, and remain always ready to acknowledge our limitations before that which we try to comprehend.

Trying to search out the nature of God through science is a futile endeavor; but remembering the inadequacy of our ideas of God is extremely important, and we can thank science in all its disciplines for making the search a necessity in today’s world.

Science is helpful to religion, because it increases awareness of this religious dynamic of unknowability. Many people have argued that science undermines religious validity, because it undermines the “knowledge” that earlier generations have had of God. Science reminds us that this “knowledge” was false and misleading, and that “knowledge” is never the point anyway. Science teaches us ourselves, not God. It offers insights into the nature of religious knowledge, the nature of religion, and the importance of the unknown.

The traditional philosophical definition of knowledge is tripartite: to know is to hold a true, justified belief. To be true means that a given proposition represents reality accurately. To be justified means that there is external support for the proposition’s truth. A true belief that is unjustified is merely a guess, while a false belief that is justified is simply wrong. Science seeks to match beliefs with reality by providing “objective” external justification. Religious beliefs, in order to qualify as knowledge, must also be able to check propositions against reality, must be able to find external justification for believing. In the past, Christians have sought to check their propositions against the external world, and particularly against the Scriptures. But science has dismantled the traditional arguments from natural theology—design, first and final cause, degrees of perfection, are no longer available to us to “prove” that our beliefs qualify as knowledge. And the authority of the Bible as an “objective” source of information has been greatly undermined by higher criticism.

Science, in the form of history, archaeology, and linguistics, has forced us to take stock again of the nature of revelation itself. Many liberal theologians no longer regard...
the Bible as inerrant, but see it now as being the work of human beings—inspired by God, perhaps, but still human enough to speak a limited human language, written down and redacted by others who may not have been

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inspired at all. While some Christians have applied “scientific” methods to Scripture, using “Baconian” methods to discover what God intends, in doing so it seems that they prove only that it is impossible to read a coherent system of theology out of it without putting many of their own presuppositions into it. Not surprisingly, they find what they expected to find. The Bible exists as an “objective” artifact, but whatever knowledge it may offer is highly subjective. Scripture cannot serve as our objective justification.

Scientific method begins by teaching that our conceptions do not always match reality—that they are forever subject to correction by a reality greater than they. We can learn from this that our ideas of God are not God, not the “reality” itself. Our conceptions are fluid, changeable. Where science attempts to compare conceptions to objective reality and correct conceptions thereby, we do not compare our theological conceptions to the reality of God, but to the reality of what the Scriptures say, or to what we have experienced, or to doctrinal standards. And these things in themselves are not God; they too are conceptions.

Science attempts “objectively” to measure reality and create conceptions that match this external truth, the “things as they are.” Yet even scientists now realize that, at a certain point, purely objective measurement is impossible. The viewer cannot observe without participating in what is observed. Religious knowledge is similar (though, of course, the analogy is limited).

There is no “objective” standard, no reality that is not conceptualized. In order to gain anything even resembling knowledge, we must enter into what we are observing—give credence to the Scriptures or to our own experience. But neither of these things of itself offers knowledge of absolute reality. Our own experience, which perhaps comes closest to what is free from conceptualization, is itself “subjective.” It “proves” nothing. Through it, we may redefine our beliefs, our conceptions; but they remain fallible and subject to future revision.

The progress of science forces us constantly to remake our conceptions of God. For instance, the discoveries about evolution, the geological age of the earth, and the extent of the universe have forced us to recreate the idea of what a Creator could be, and what it could mean that we are created in God’s image. Many of us realize now that our ideas of God are limited analogies and metaphors, rather than representative of sacred reality; and so we reinterpret the old ideas, repaint the pictures in our mind. Tillich’s “ground of being,” for instance, is a new picture of the creative activity of God. We are always in danger of becoming attached to our ideas; but science, if we listen to it, reminds us that idea is not reality.

Of course, a significant difference between religious conceptions and scientific conceptions is that science does envision someday getting to the bottom of it all. Some scientists believe that there is a finite amount of knowable things and that someday we will know them all. Their belief is that science’s triumph will be the unveiling of all mysteries of the universe. The search in physics for a unified field theory, ever elusive, may someday be rewarded.

Biologist’s fascination with the origins of life and paleontology’s questions about evolution may someday be answered. Of course, not all scientists think this is possible; surely, there will always be technology, at
least, even if science comes to an end. Science pursues the unknown. Science as a whole tries to explain what we do not understand; individual scientists spend their lives learning what other scientists have done, and hope in their turn to contribute to knowledge, to discovery. It is the lure of discovering the unknown that makes science the great human story that it is. Should all mysteries one day be solved, on that day science will be dead.

Similarly, what would religion be if God were scientifically "known"—if propositions about the nature of God could be scientifically, objectively "proven"? Our relation with God is largely energized by the dynamic of not-knowing, of trusting without guarantees, of believing things that we cannot prove, of bowing our heads before inscrutability. The entire point of mystery and miracle is its inexplicability. When miracles are proved to be frauds or to have naturalistic explanations, they are no longer considered miracles. When mysteries are uncloaked, they are no longer mysteries. To some, theology is a devotion, not a science. As we learn about our universe, we learn about our ways of conceiving God, and find new ways of casting our definitional nets, individually and culturally; but because God remains unknown, the relationship with God is always new, always being rediscovered.

But don't we know anything about God? I would argue that our knowledge is limited to ourselves and our environments. The information that we have about God is really information about ourselves, and about the constructs of God we have created. For instance, we "know" that there is only one God, eternal and omnipotent, who should be the exclusive object of our worship. When we think about it, we know that God is to be worshipped simply because giving our hearts and souls to temporal things is a faulty and disappointing way to live. We know, and have always known, that turning ourselves towards the eternal is what is best for us. We identify God as eternal; indeed, eternality is part of the definition of God. Yet we do not know that God exists. We merely turn towards the inconceivable eternal as though it is a property of a person whom we love, knowing that to love anything else is, in the end, futile. We do not know God. We know only that we must not worship temporality. Our knowledge has reference to ourselves; it is our belief and our hope that have reference to God.

History, anthropology, and psychology teach us that religion is a deeply human pursuit, universal, taking on different forms in different times and places, and apparently with good and useful potentialities in every form. When the conceptions given by our religion are challenged by the conceptions of another, we can no longer easily assert that our form of religion is correct, that our form of religious knowledge is the only true one. Our "knowledge" of God is no longer absolute, but relative, fallible. We see ever more clearly that religion, like culture and language, exists for and is created by human beings. It is temporal, finite, historical, conditional. To worship a religion blindly, rather than God, is to offer sacrifice to a thing made with hands.

The transcendent God that Christians believe in could not, by definition, be

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...discovered by objective study of the world. Science does help religion in the only way that it can: by teaching about its subject matter—ourselves, our universe, our experience. It can teach us about our ideas of God and of the sacred, and these ideas will change as our knowledge of ourselves changes. For instance, learning about other religions has, for many, precipitated a change in the view of exclusive salvation.
We have also learned, from Freud, Marx, and cultural anthropologists and psychologists, to be wary of our religious ideas, to be aware that they tend to be about ourselves more than about God. From historians, we learn to place the Bible in historical context and to be wary of idolizing it. From physicists and biologists, we have learned to change our ideas of what it means to be "creator" of the world, and to afford greater respect to other living beings on the globe we share. We learn, too—or we should—that we are not the center of the universe after all, and that humility before the vastness of creation and the One who created suits us better than hubristic claims of our own importance.

This, it seems to me, is more true to the nature of the religious enterprise. The discovery of God does not involve knowledge, but belief, hope against hope. Trust, humility, love: these things do not involve "information." When we learn more about the universe, we learn about its greatness, and put ourselves in our place. We learn our own limits, compared to the limitlessness of the infinite. We learn to love and value what is outside ourselves, and give ourselves into God's hands for safekeeping. We learn that the world has room both for chance and determinedness. We learn that medicine can cure disease. We learn that we have it in our power to destroy ourselves and our home. We learn that death is inevitable, even for the universe. We learn that mortality—entropy—is the sine qua non of the entire creation. Both our will and our fate are given greater scope. And all these things we weave into our thoughts of God. Our science and the minutiae of our personal lives are brought to God in prayer and through theology—another sort of devotion.

Science does not show us God. It shows us that our pictures of God have been inadequate and intimates that they still are; and the nature of the subject matter reminds us that they always will be. What are we, that we should be able to comprehend God? Science is constantly teaching us to look at religious belief in new ways and with a critical eye, to remember that when we claim to have the sort of "objective" knowledge of God that science has of the universe, we are mistaken, deluded by pride. Our belief must be valued as the bridge that we build between ourselves and God, trusting in what we do not understand.

Science, in its methods and its discoveries, constantly gives the religious person cause to let go of false claims to infallible knowledge. Though science does not show us God, it reminds us that we have always been in danger of creating God for ourselves.

Jennifer Snow was awarded her M.A. degree in 1997 by Boston University School of Theology. She reads books on science written for a popular audience, both for fun and for use in her theological studies, which she hopes to pursue at the doctoral level in the near future. Her religious tradition is Roman Catholic.

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