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Identifying Patterns

Faith in Science

Oscar Wilde said, “Religions die when they are proved to be true. Science is the record of dead religions”. People of religion and people of science have always been battling one another on one issue or another. The battles can be over things such as evolution to the ethical implications of stem cell research and genetic engineering. People have been exiled, isolated from society, and even killed for their discoveries or views because they are contradictory to the status quo. In his book, Everyday Practice of Science, Frederick Grinnell describes the conflicts between religion and science and the gives his view on how religion and science are related.

What does faith have to do with the everyday practice of science? To answer this question you must first ask what exactly faith is. Is faith the adhesion to the values of whatever religion you practice, or is faith the ability to trust a set of observations or data sets that have been proven to be true, but may still be controversial? If you are looking at faith as the adhesion to a set of values then faith is related to the practice of science. Science tends to be the proven, the truth in my opinion. However, if you are faithful to a religion that does not agree with certain aspects of science then you would have to make a decision. You would have to analyze your religion and the validity of the science that is in question by your religion. In some cases you may have to make a choice that your religion is incorrect and you have to pursue a different set of values, but in many cases this may not be necessary. You may reach a conclusion that both religion and science are correct. You can decide to acknowledge that the scientific view on a subject is true, but reconcile it with your religion in some way. In this way faith and religion would be synonymous. One example that always comes to mind for me is the creation of the universe. Now, I am catholic and as a catholic I am supposed to believe that God is the great creator and thus created the universe. Unfortunately, there is abundant evidence to prove that it wasn’t God that created the universe, but instead a natural phenomenon known as the big bang. Who do I listen to? Science, which has facts that can be backed up with tangible data and observations, or Christianity, which cannot be backed up with fact, but which I have been faithful to during my life. Instead of picking one or the other as the answer to the question of how the universe was created I discovered that there was a common ground. There was a solution that acknowledged the discoveries of science, while, also, incorporating religion. Science has established that the Big Bang was the reason for the creation of the universe, but scientists have been unable to discover where the source of energy, which was necessary for starting the big Bang, came from. I realized that that source of energy was what we know as God. I may have slightly deviated from the conventional religious views and scientific views, but I found a satisfactory median. In this way, science and faith can be linked.

If you look at faith as the ability to trust a set of observations, even though they may be controversial, then you need not look at religion here. You must think through the scientific discovery in question and evaluate the arguments of those who do not agree with it. An example of this, which Grinnell cites in his book, is the subject of evolution and whether or not it should be taught. Those of religion feel that it should not be taught and is not true because the bible says it is not true. In a situation like this you must decide if you have faith in the data and observations. If you do have this faith then you would have to believe that the subject should be taught. If not then you could believe the opposite. In this way faith and science are, also, linked.

Grinnell attempts to reconcile religion and science with an idea called complementarity. Complementarity was originally developed by Bohr to be used with quantum physics. He “introduced complementarity… to harmonize the different views, apparently so divergent” (178). Grinnell decides to use it in a different way that can be incorporated into everyday life. “We all have the view that single views of three-dimensional objects are incomplete” (178). What does this mean? Grinnell is saying that looking at an object at one time may look completely different from looking at it another time. He uses an example of a rock. You can look at a rock in the daylight and it may look completely different than it does in the dark. You may look at it during a rain storm and it will look different than on a clear day. This idea of complementarity can be used in everyday life when looking at more than just three-dimensional objects. It may be used when looking at Science and religion. You could look at religion one day and think that the values and ideas that the people of religion are trying to espouse are complete nonsense, but when you look at it another day you may think that the ideas are valid. You may hear a presentation of a recent discovery by one scientist and believe that his theory is not valid. However, you may hear the facts that make the name discovery valid, presented by a different scientist, and realize that the theory is possible. The same can be true for religion. You may look at the values espoused by a religion one day, under a specific set of circumstances, and think that they are not practical and should not be followed. However, you may look at those same values another day, under a different set of circumstances, and change your view completely. This idea of complementarity can be used to reconcile the rift between religion and science. One day, you may think that religion is correct on a controversial issue. The next day, however, a new set of data and observations may come out that could change your view on the subject. The next day, religion could find a way to reconcile these observations with religion, and again your view would change. This could go on forever. It really depends on the circumstances when deciding whether religion or science is valid when evaluating a specific situation. It is possible, even, that some days you may find ways to agree with both science and religion, such as my hypothesis about how the universe was created.

Is Grinnell’s view reasonable? I believe it is very reasonable, but only for a certain period of time. When someone is first introduced to a subject that is controversial, it is possible that they will flip flop sides. However, once they have done enough research, they will draw their conclusion. Once someone has made up their mind it is highly unlikely that they will change it, no matter what evidence comes out to the contrary of their views. An example of this could be someone’s allegiance to a political party. One side may be making a completely valid argument about a certain subject, but if you feel that the opposing party is wrong about one thing, you will believe they are wrong about everything, and will thus create arguments to rebut everything they say. In short, Grinnell’s idea of complementarity is valid when someone is first introduced to an idea, but does not factor in after a certain period of time.

Kahlil Gabrin said,  “Faith is knowledge within the heart, beyond the reach of proof.” Faith and the everyday practice of science can be related, whether you consider faith to be religion, or trusting science. I am hopeful that at some point enough information can be collected that religion and science can be interdependent on each other.