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Topic 2

Faith in Science and Religion

Throughout the history of our country religion has always been a focal point in our society. Questions are asked such as should religion play a role in government, schools, and work? The same questions are being asked in the scientific community that stumps even the brightest minds. Does religion and faith play a role in the everyday practice of science, and if so how? In Frederick Grinnel’s book, “Everyday Practice of Science,” he too asks this question. Grinnel provides readers with an analysis of faith and how scientists sometimes need to integrate science and religion in order to achieve results. “I suggest that science and religion represent distinct human attitudes toward experience based on different types of faith,” (161) Grinnel means that sometimes you are unable to understand things based on scientific research and that you must trust in your religion and the information that it provides you with. For me, the bible offers me a core understanding of human nature and at certain points will present answers to conflicts that are not possible to achieve from scientific research. On the other hand religious ideology cannot provide answers for other conflicts and scientific research is needed. In the chapter “Faith,” Grinnel shows the reader that we need to incorporate both religion and scientific research in order to gain a full understanding of the world and its happenings.

Grinnel begins the chapter discussing the effect religion has had on science. Throughout history religious institutions have influenced scientific research, the conflict with Galileo and the Catholic Church is a prime example. Galileo discovered that it is the earth that is revolving around the sun. The church thought that the earth was stationary and it was the sun that was revolving, this idea was taken from the bible. When Galileo threatened that they misinterpreted the bible, the church had him prosecuted, “the church’s understanding of the Bible was incorrect, a possibility that the church was not prepared to contemplate” (162). Here Grinnel shows us that the scientific research that Galileo did was enlightening and correct, but due to religious understandings he was not given credit. Grinnel shows us that we cannot always rely on the bible or other religious documents for truth. The Catholic Church put their faith into the idea that the bible was always correct, but in this instance Galileo’s scientific research was correct. The two were not complementarily incorporated and therefore the desired outcome did not occur. Scientific research provides us with real factual answers rather than ideas and thoughts derived from religious documents.

Faith in science and faith in religion provide us with answers for many different questions in the natural world. Grinnel emphasized that you need to have faith in scientific research and in religious studies. Without faith, or the belief that your observations are accurate, progression in the practice of science would never occur. Faith is necessary in making discoveries, “Notwithstanding the diversity of opinions about how the world came into existence and whether the world has purpose and meaning, there is only one source for human understanding- life experience,” (163) the experiences one goes throughout his life create a certain understanding he or she has on the world and the way it works. We need to have faith that these experiences provided us with certain knowledge. Without this knowledge basic observations could never have been made. Facts and observations cannot always be the source of truth in everyday science, “Religion describes the nature of the unseen order and offers insights- sometimes commandments- regarding how to harmonize oneself with this order. The individual quest for meaning- the person’s spiritual encounter with the world- offers its own insights,” (164) Grinnel describes religion as a gateway to finding yourself and how it works into the natural world. This is something that scientific research cannot do for you. When the two of them work together however a true understanding could take place. Science and religion need to be complementary.

The idea of complementarity was proposed by Niels Bohr in 1927, the purpose of this idea from Bohr was to, “harmonize the different views, apparently so divergent,” (178) these views were the differing opinions that science and religion can offer you. Grinnel uses an example of a rock on a beach in order to show the different mindsets of the two. As you are walking down the beach you stumble upon a rock, there are two different questions that could be asked. The first involves what kind of rock it is and how did it get here, while the other question is what can this rock teach me? The first set describes scientific thinking and the second question involves religious thinking. These two questions are completely different ways of thinking, but when they are working together you can achieve “knowledge of the self and the world” (181). Grinnel and Bohr believe this to be important because “interpretive and experiential frameworks of the religious and scientific attitudes reveal distinct domains of knowledge that cannot be seen or inferred or negated from the other perspective” (181). Combing these two view points gives you the ability to not only think about how something works in the world, but how it relates to you. This is the goal of Grinnel and many other scientists, having the ability to see yourself and how you work in society allows you to “recognize the limitations of our understanding” (185).

There are two distinct aspects of human thought or attitude, religious attitudes and scientific attitude. There are also two questions that are asked, how the world works and how I fit in the world. Before reading “Everyday Practice of Science,” I found it difficult to answer both of these questions, however, Grinnel provided me with a strong base to work off of when attempting to make observations. Grinnel describes a time when he was told, “Prove you exist” (167), by a young college student. He pondered for many days what this meant. What I took from this interaction between Grinnel and the student was prove your function in this world. Grinnel wasn’t able to understand because he was thinking in only a religious or scientific mindset. He then showed that when using the other attitude along with his original attitude, which was most likely scientific, he was able to make sense of what the college student meant. I had the same problem; I wasn’t able to view the world from both a religious attitude and a scientific attitude. Grinnel showed me that it is necessary to think both ways, but he also showed how to think both ways. It is simply asking questions that involve the basic how and why. Grinnel does do a first-rate job explaining the importance of knowledge of the self and the world, but he needs to further elaborate on what life is like with science and religion working in unison. Is there any other benefit to this besides being able to make scientific discoveries? Is this even relevant to me if I don’t become a scientist? The answer is yes, being able to connect your observational ability and your analytical ability goes far beyond scientists, and really is the basis for all categories of intellectuals.

In the last chapter of his book, Frederick Grinnel, shows us that we need to incorporate both a religious attitude and scientific attitude. In this chapter Grinnel discusses faith in science and science working with religion in a complementary fashion. Science and faith are closely related because often time’s science and the experiments that are conducted are based on experiences and you must trust that you’re these past experiences have provided you with enough knowledge. Furthermore Grinnel goes on to discuss that in science religion and scientific standards shouldn’t be separate, but need to interact with each other. Thinking only one way, religiously or scientifically, will only provide you with only half the answer. If you think just scientifically your only getting the image of the world, but if you think with a religious attitude as well, you get the whole picture which is the world and yourself in it. Grinnel adds a quote from Emily Dickinson’s poem “A Light Exists in Spring,”

A color stands abroad

On solitary hills,

That science cannot overtake,

But human nature feels.

This quote emphasizes that fact that science cannot account for certain things in the natural world, conversely religion cannot explain certain things in the scientific world, the two must work in perfect harmony.