

Religion, Science, and the Psychology of Ultimate Meaning

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Paper presented at the 2013 Mid-Year Meeting of the
Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality,
Columbia, MD, March 22-23.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, it introduces a new perspective for understanding the highest level symbolic functions of the human brain, what the philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1957) called the *symbolic forms*. Second, it illustrates the consequences of this perspective through an examination of the relation between two powerful symbolic forms, religion and science.

Religion and science

Religion and science are complex, multifaceted, cultural forms. Fundamentally, both can be understood as systems characterizing the nature and functions of the world as a whole, of life and of humanity. They are commonly differentiated according to the methods by which their respective epistemologies are formed, organized, and maintained.

Religious knowledge is formed by revelation, organized by doctrine, and maintained by individual faith, tradition, and institutional authority.

Scientific knowledge is formed by empirical observation and experimentation, organized by theory, and maintained by rational argument and informed social consensus.

The exact nature of the relation between religion and science, however, has long been an issue of often heated and emotional debate. In his book, *When Science Meets Religion*, Ian Barbour (2000) examines four different characterizations of this relationship. These are Conflict, Independence, Dialogue, and Integration.

In the relation of Conflict, scientific and religious pursuits are seen to constitute antagonistic endeavors and to create conflicting claims about the world. Many people, both lay-persons and

professionals alike, see religion and science in unavoidable conflict. Those on the side of science see religion as superstitious and irrational. Those on the side of religion see science as amoral materialism.

In the relation of Independence, each pursuit is taken to have its own distinctive domain of application. For example, science can be seen as relating to the material structure and dynamics of the world, whereas religion relates to the spiritual meaning and significance of the person's engagement with the world. Independence is a popular neutral position. Persons advocating independence see religion and science as relating to different facets of their daily life.

In the relation of Dialogue, science and religion are seen as largely independent endeavors, but they can nonetheless benefit from, and be informed by, each other's perspective. Dialogues between advocates of religious and scientific perspectives are supported by many individuals and by scientific and religious organizations. However, though such dialogues are often very interesting, they rarely resolve issues or produce significant outcomes.

In the relation of Integration, it is held that the true nature of reality is not encompassed by either science or religion alone, and a complete understanding will require the proper fusion of both approaches. Barbour argues, and I concur, that integration holds great promise for the future. Currently, however, this is probably the most controversial and uncertain of the four perspectives. Its progress requires the resolution of many conceptual and empirical obstacles.

Barbour's characterization is both informative and interesting. The present paper, however, examines the relation between religion and science from a different point of view. This fifth perspective can be called Symmetry. According to this position, religion and science are both manifestations of an *archetype of ultimate meaning*. Critically, therefore, evidence for this

archetype will be found in identifiable structural and functional symmetries between scientific and religious pursuits.

The archetype of ultimate meaning

The central claims of the present perspective are first that, despite the differences in the character of religious and scientific epistemologies, both are performing the same function with respect to human understanding and engagement with the world. This function is the self-conscious symbolic elaboration of ultimate meaning. Second, this function is the consequence of a single system of higher-order neurological structures. These structures constitute the archetype. Finally, insofar as both religion and science are productions of this same archetypal system, they will both give evidence of critical structural and functional similarities.

The functions of the archetype of ultimate meaning are varied and complex. Fundamentally, the archetype provides an alternative to what I call the *archetype of organismic meaning* as a means of filtering and organizing symbolic consciousness. The archetype of organismic meaning constitutes the biological level of organization generally referred to by Paul MacLean (1973) as the “reptilian brain” and by Sigmund Freud (1960) as the “id”. This level of functioning is solely governed by self-interest.

The critical problem is that it is impossible for an organism governed solely by self-interest to develop an organized conception of self and other, and therefore a stable social culture. It is the archetype of ultimate meaning which counters strict self-interest and makes possible the development of all symbolic forms, particularly language, selfhood, community, and the full range of cultural forms. The core of this process resides in the manifestation of ultimate meaning.

Ultimate meaning is a paradox. It is the experience of power without apparent cause. It is, therefore, mystery; it is wonder. In *Apology for Wonder*, Sam Keen (1969) quotes Gabriel Marcel, “A mystery is something in which I am myself involved, ... a sphere where what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning.” Keen goes on to say, “there is no substantial difference between wonder and the experience of the holy.” Ultimate meaning is a *positive* emptiness, an *engaging* semantic void, a cloud of unknowing. It draws us out of a life of blind self-interest and into a life of self-conscious meaning.

The archetype gives structure and functional impetus to the phenomenal experience of ultimate meaning. First, it provides an overarching structure by way of a tripartite ontology of ultimate meaning in the *world*, the *community*, and the *self*. First and foremost, individuals experience ultimate meaning as a foundational power within their world. The nature and existence of the universe is a fathomless mystery and wonder. The ultimacy of the power of this experience compels the person to fill this void with a corresponding meaning.

This experience has its natural corollary in the experience of ultimate meaning within the people, the community, of which the person is a part. This in turn stimulates wonder in the ultimate meaning of one’s own existence. Experiencing wonder in the mystery of world, community, and self, expands self-consciousness beyond the narrow confines of personal interests and desires. Selfhood and culture are not built by wonder, however. The mystery must be resolved through the creation of symbolic forms.

A dual praxis provides functional impetus for the symbolic elaboration of ultimacy in experience and in behavior. There are, in other words, two paths by which ultimate meaning is symbolically manifested. The esoteric path is phenomenological and seeks the direct

experiencing of the oneness between all three forms of ultimate meaning, but especially between that of universe and self. By virtue of this oneness, a new, higher form of selfhood is forged. The second, exoteric path is practical and seeks to reconstruct both world and community in accordance with the dictates of ultimate meaning. In particular, the exoteric path transforms the world through the promotion of moral imperatives (life, liberty, individual rights, peace, etc.) and the construction of a functional civilization.

Symmetry between religion and science

Given this characterization of the ultimate meaning archetype, we can utilize its aspects to examine the symmetry between religion and science. The first and primary aspect is ultimate meaning itself. There is no doubt that religion is concerned with ultimate meaning. Recent research on religion (e.g., see Hood, Hill & Spilka, 2009), as well as a long history of writings and testaments in every religious tradition, confirms that the wonder and mystery of the world serves to motivate religious pursuit. Neither is there any doubt that the exact same wonder and mystery motivates scientists in their research and lay persons in their interest in scientific discoveries. In short, it is abundantly clear that both religion and science are, at root, products of the self-conscious experience and pursuit of ultimate meaning. This leads to an albeit too brief consideration of the specific components of the ultimate meaning archetype.

Ultimate meaning in the Universe

Religion: For all theistic religions, of course, the premier power and meaning in the universe is a Divine Being. This Being is given various names—Brahma, Yahweh, God, Allah, and others. Other Beings can also be given this status, e.g., Buddha or Jesus Christ. Many religions, however, also specify a Divine Principle. Christians call this the Godhead. Buddhists call it

Dharma. Many religions also regard a Dark Power as permeating the universe. This is known as Satan, Iblis, or by some other name. Finally, most religions involve eschatology, that is, they possess a vision of the end of the world. For Christians, Moslems, and some Jewish sects, this is a Final Judgment. Even Hinduism and Buddhism, however, who have a cyclical world-view, speak of the possibility of breaking out of this cycle and into a timeless perfection (nirvana).

Science: Science eschews a divine being, but it does place an absolute premium on the concept of an ordered, lawful universe. Physical scientists seek a “Theory of Everything” which folds all physical powers into a single Universal Force. It is important to note that there is no strictly scientific reason for seeking such a Force; it is not demanded by empirical data, per se. It is simply a consequence of a desire for ultimate meaning. There is also the acknowledgement of a “dark” force. This is chaos or maximum entropy. Chaotic forces destroy the Order in the universe and reduce it to noise. Science is also concerned with eschatology. It is quite interesting that, following the recent discovery at Europe’s LHC of a particle believed to be a Higgs boson, scientists soon announced that its characteristics predicted the end of the universe (Klotz, 2013).

Ultimate meaning in Community

Religion: Religions characterize ultimate meaning in the community in a variety of ways. One approach is to identify a community of the faithful. Examples are the Chosen People of the Hebrew tradition, the Church in Christianity, or the Sangha in Buddhism. The tribal structure of many traditional peoples exists as an outward manifestation of their inward religious solidarity. More generally, it is also common within religions to acknowledge a oneness or connection among all forms of life as creations of the Divine. Lastly, another way of designating a meaning-

full community is in terms of those who practice a special, often ascetical, devotion to God.

These are the shamans, the priests, the monks, the Sufis, and so forth.

Science: Science designates the meaning-full community in several important ways. Analogous to a community of the faithful, scientists can view the scientific community in a privileged light, sometimes regarding lay-persons as less rational and less informed. More generally, however, the dominant scientific perspective holds that all living organisms form a biological community insofar as all life shares the same genetic code, all life is the result of evolutionary processes, and all life is in interactive relation within both local and global ecological systems. The community of human beings is given special regard with respect to the evolution of Homo Sapiens. It is fascinating in this regard to consider Misia Landau's argument (1991) that our theories of human evolution can be viewed as *quest narratives*.

Ultimate meaning in the Person

Religion: Most religions postulate an individual spiritual essence variously termed soul, atman, ruh, nephesh, and so forth. This soul is immortal and of the same nature as the divine. Though Buddhism does not postulate an immortal soul, it does argue that all humans possess Buddha-nature, and are therefore inherently perfect. All religions hold that human beings are in some manner fallen, sinful, ignorant, or otherwise less than their spiritual potential. However, humans are also capable of transforming this state of affairs, generally with help, such that a divine state, whether salvation or enlightenment, can be realized.

Science: Importantly, the zeitgeist of science is largely unformed with respect to a thorough understanding of the person, particularly when it comes to the areas of intelligence, mind and consciousness. It can be argued, however, that the scientific perspective has, in effect, replaced

the soul with the brain. The brain is often regarded as if it were the true person, certainly more fundamental, but also more intelligent and more functional than mind or consciousness. An increasing number of research studies have investigated the neurophysiology of consciousness and experiences of ultimate meaning. Though there is great value in this work, it often simply confirms the attitude which seeks to replace the experience of a mind with the activity of a brain. And finally, rather than sin, science focusses on pathology. Significantly the number of mental disorders identified in the DSM, one of the most authoritative psychiatric diagnostic manuals, has increased eight-fold over the last fifty years (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Exoteric practice

Religion: A common expression of religious exoteric practice is participation in an organized system of worship, whether this be a mosque, church, temple, synagogue, or otherwise. Exoteric practice also involves the performance of works and services which promote basic moral imperatives. These include the promotion of physical, mental, and spiritual well-being, the promotion of the rights and integrity of individuals, and the promotion of peaceful coexistence among all peoples. In general, the goal of exoteric practice is to create a better world, one that is of increasing value and benefit for oneself, one's family and for all peoples.

Science: Historically, scientists from all disciplines, as well as their organizations, have been at the forefront in the promotion of health, welfare, rights, freedom, and peace for all peoples. For present purposes, however, it is important to note that this humanitarian orientation cannot be justified purely scientifically. In other words, to a large extent it must be seen as deriving from a deeper concern for the ultimate meaning of persons and communities. With regard to science itself, the exoteric path is represented by both the pure and applied scientist. Both have their

places of “worship”, i.e., meetings, conventions and journals, and both are engaged in the performance of works and services aimed at the betterment of all mankind.

Esoteric practice

Religion: The esoteric religious practitioner, though often involved in organized worship, for the most part separates themselves from others and the world. Within this seclusion, the esoteric seeks to achieve an experiential confirmation, through meditation, prayer, contemplation, and study, of the nature and oneness of Ultimate Meaning in all its aspects—universe, community, and self. Besides this experiential confirmation, the further goal of esoteric practice is the symbolic definition of a higher form of selfhood, one which transcends the constraints of self-interest. And finally, the esoteric must sometimes leave their seclusion to teach and promote an acceptance and understanding of this higher form of selfhood among the people at large.

Science: Three points can be made with respect to the conception of an esoteric path within the purview of science. Beginning with the Pythagoreans, there is a long history of a level of involvement in mathematics that has much in common with the mysticism of religious esotericism. Mathematicians, especially pure mathematicians, could thus be considered the esoterics of the scientific perspective. In a different vein, as noted earlier, there is an increasing amount of research on the neurophysiology of spiritual experience, or what Andrew Newburg (2010) calls “neurotheology”. In the future, this research may result in understandings and breakthroughs which would enhance and support esoteric religious practice. This might be an example of Barbour’s category of Integration. And finally, despite the previous two points, insofar as science has yet to develop an encompassing understanding of critical processes such as

intelligence, mind, and consciousness, the existence of a truly esoteric path within the scientific domain must await future developments.

Conclusions

A model has been sketched whereby an archetype of ultimate meaning might function to diminish the power of self-interest and stimulate the self-conscious symbolic construction of both self-hood and culture. This archetype is hypothesized to provide the underlying organization for the creation of all high-level symbolic forms. This hypothesis is examined by comparing basic structural and functional attributes of two major forms, religion and science. This analysis has, in fact, revealed several interesting and consistent symmetries in the structuring of both religious and scientific pursuits.

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