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# SCIENCE AND RELIGION: IS IT A COCK FIGHT?

No, there is no reason for their relationship to be defined as a clash nor do we have to spur them on. In the view of a group of philosopher/researchers at the Rosario, Nacional and Javeriana Universities in Bogotá, science and religion are two different and complementary human ambits which may coexist in modernity.



By: Amira Abultaif Kadamani  
 Photos: Leonardo Parra, Ximena Serrano

**J**ane Wilde, the first wife of the British physicist Stephen Hawking, devoted herself, body and soul, to her husband, with the aim of helping his genius to stand out so that he would leave a mark on history. And in fact he did. From an early age, when he was only 32, this scientist proved his brilliance by trying, for the first time to unify the two major theories of 20th century physics: The theory of relativity and the theory of quantum mechanics.

He dedicated his life to finding the answer to such profound questions as the origin of the universe and establishing principles as absolute as the “theory of everything”, which was the preamble of his final conclusion – “God does not exist” – as set forth in his last book *Brief Answers to the Big Questions*, published in October 2018, seven months after his death.

However, in the opinion of Wilde, the two questions which Hawking and many modern scientists have not answered are: Why are we here?, and, for what purpose? Why haven’t they found the answers?: They are digging in the wrong place. For this linguist who believes in God, the answer does not lie in science, but in faith and love. The same concepts which, in her opinion, wrought a miracle in the life of her husband, who was diagnosed with lateral amyotrophic sclerosis at the age of 22, when his doctors told him he would only live for two more years. But he lived 54 years more.

That famous cosmologist, who sought to explain the great design of the universe to millions of laymen, turned into a cult hero for the mass public and an icon of the ironclad rationalism which so strongly governs modern science. According to that rationalism, religion – understood as a set of beliefs and practices in which the idea of a God may or may not exist – is based on superstitions which, of course, do not have any cognitive value and therefore the only possible relationship between the two (science and religious faith) is a conflictive one.

But, in the opinion of the researchers Carlos Miguel Gómez, Raúl Meléndez and Luis Fernando Múnera (of the Rosario, Nacional and Javeriana Universities, respectively), this combative image is not necessary and, in addition, it turns out to be very impoverishing because it does not allow one to fully understand what reason is or what religion is or what science is, nor their respective scopes and purposes. While from the scientific standpoint, it is assumed that rigorous research is the best approach man has to attaining a real knowledge of nature, and if, in turn, a certain way of understanding religion holds that only the doctrines of belief allow for a true view of the world in its totality, these three doctors of philosophy propose a third way: That in which science and religion are thought of “as human practices which emerge within a framework or horizon of prior meaning,” as they write in the introduction to their recently published book *Ciencia y Creación* [Science and Creation], which presents nine essays by well-known philosophers who uphold that point of view.

The analysis of Gómez, Meléndez and Múnera rests on the idea that “all of science presupposes an image of nature” and that this premise is analogous to an act of faith. It is worth noting that it is



Raúl Meléndez, a researcher at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, believes that it is obvious that science does not exhaust all of the forms of rationality. “In any case, it is important that religion does not ignore the advances of science,” he adds.

not necessarily religious, but an act of faith in the sense of trusting in something whose truth or falsehood cannot be proved. That is, the image of nature on which scientific research is based is not the result of the same image, but of the way one understands reality, which is given by science.

They resort to a metaphor which Ludwig Wittgenstein employs in *On Certainty*: “I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself.”

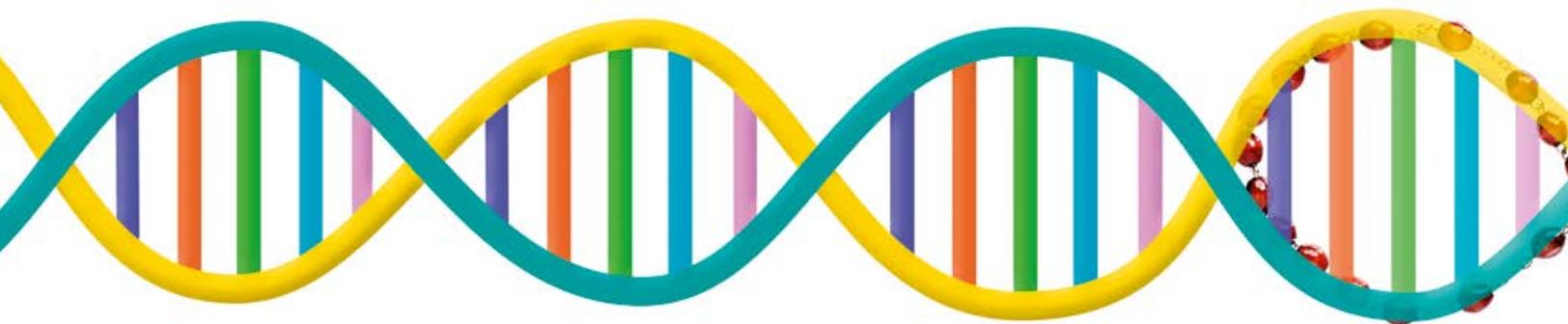
In the words of Carlos Miguel Gómez, director of the Center for the Study of Theology and Religions (CETRE, in its Spanish initials), at the School of Human Sciences of the University del Rosario, “both science and religion and, in general, all human activity, are based on assumptions, on tacit principles, on taking for granted something which we have not stopped to think about or prove: It is an articulated and meaningfully ordered pre-understanding of the world on the basis of which we build knowledge and meaning.” For this believer whose religion is theistic but not institutional and whose faith is, above all, a kind of experience and way of life, “you first believe and then you justify.”

### Modern science and religion: A false opposition

According to what these researchers say in their book, “The Christian doctrine of the Creation, built on Biblical foundations and a fruitful dialogue with the philosophy of Ancient Greece, has become the pillar on which a new understanding of nature as Creation and the place of man in nature was established.” And, thanks to that understanding, modern science arose, along with its turbulent but productive conversation with religion.

Hence, in their opinion, the idea that the two are opposed is basically wrong and “arises more from an effort to defend positions close to atheism or agnosticism than a scrupulous examination of the history of the emergence of science and the evolution of ideas.”

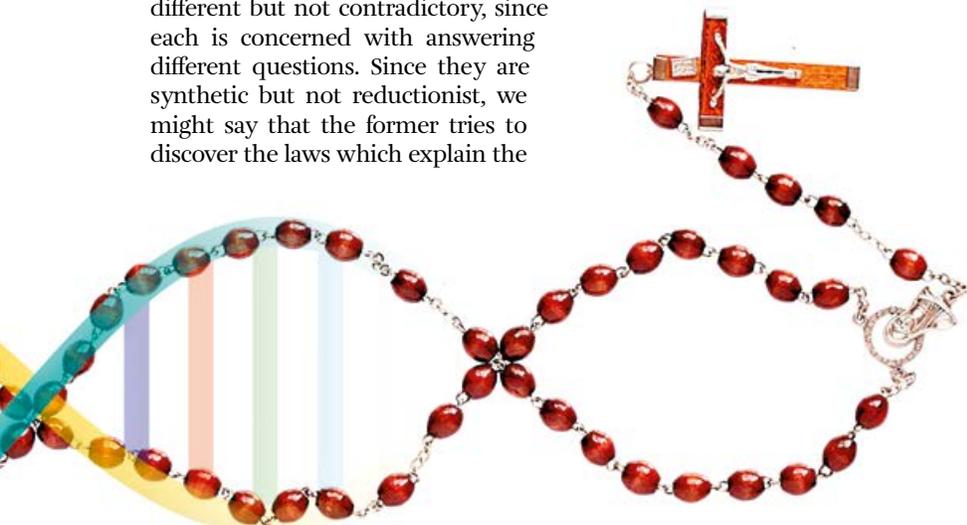
The battle between science and religion occurred at a particular moment in history, specifically, after the Enlightenment, and it became very heated in the course of the 19th century, when the sciences began to flourish and understood their potential strength, which lay in the development of a mode of knowledge that was theoretically free of presuppositions and prejudices and, with a direct, privileged and objective view of reality, would guarantee a valid and more firmly based one than the view offered until then by philosophical doctrines in accordance with religion. However, this did not take that pre-comprehension of the universe into account nor the subjective assessments of the researcher – inherent in his human nature and formed by his culture and tradition – nor, in the end, that reason is not entirely autonomous nor can science completely justify itself.





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Does belief have a cognitive value? While this question has been one of the unfinished leitmotifs of 20th century philosophy, the approach of Gómez, Meléndez and Múnera says that it clearly does. In addition, they validate the opinion that science and religion pertain to categories which are different but not contradictory, since each is concerned with answering different questions. Since they are synthetic but not reductionist, we might say that the former tries to discover the laws which explain the



causal order of nature, while the latter makes an assessment of reality and the orientation and meaning of life. Thus, it is thought that the kind of questions which they address are different and that makes them complementary rather than incompatible.

But, even so, science may argue that no cognitive value can be derived from those functions of faith, only an ethical function perhaps. And in the face of that, these authors respond that “while religious belief plays different roles in the life of believers, all of them are only possible because religious belief points to what is real par excellence, that which gives a foundation, meaning and direction to all of the rest”. That is why a believer who does not assume that his faith says something about reality would fall into a sort of self-deceit, insofar as his beliefs would serve to steer his life in a certain direction at the same time that it would deny the possibility of embracing a truth, in the manner of the person who states that he is going to be happy but simultaneously thinks that happiness does not exist. In other words: Faith cannot understand itself if it excludes any pretension to truth from that.

“We are saying that science and religion pertain to different human ambits, but that to separate them too much may turn out to be problematic, because it may deny that beliefs have a cognitive dimension and for many, that is essential if it assumed that religion entails our understanding of the world,” Raúl Meléndez remarks, who believes that it is obvious that science does not exhaust all of the forms of rationality. “In any case, it is important that religion does not ignore the advances of science,” he adds.

To achieve that is very demanding, to say the least. But it turns out to be essential, otherwise there is a risk of not only succumbing to fundamentalism but also of clipping the wings of faith. “There is no reason to believe that the Creation is a matter of ‘once and for all’, as a single act which originates all that exists, but it should be understood as an unfinished process in which God deploys his work of creation through the very unfolding of his Creation,” the authors explain in their book.

According to this precept that creation is a continuous act, religion may work hand in hand with science to reveal the mysteries of the universe, which would allow mankind to find the meaning of that effort in the same process, something which Hawking perhaps noticed – and admitted – if we take into account that, according to his three children, he once said that: “The universe wouldn’t be much of a thing if it were not the home of people that you love.” ■