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The Dividing Line Between Science and Religion

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To the Editor:

Richard P. Sloan makes a distinction that is too hard to be helpful: "Religion and science," he says, "are independent approaches to knowledge ... with the former relying on faith as a source of wisdom and the latter demanding evidence" ("The Critical Distinction Between Science and Religion," *The Chronicle Review*, November 3).

A much more sophisticated -- and hence more valuable -- understanding appears in Terry Eagleton's review of Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* in the *London Review of Books*. Eagleton points out that "for mainstream Christianity, reason, argument and honest doubt have always played an integral role in belief." It's not a matter, then, of "evidence" and reason on one side, and blind faith on the other. As Eagleton says, "Only positivists think that 'rational' means 'scientific.'"

The 20th-century English theologian Austin Farrer made an important and helpful distinction between scientific thinking and other modes of thought when he noted that a scientist can analyze the chemical composition of the paints used in a work of art but, as a scientist, can say nothing about why the painting was painted.

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To the Editor:

In suggesting that "religion and science are independent approaches to knowledge, and neither can be reduced to the other," Richard Sloan misses the mark by a single word: independent. The two means of inquiry are indeed different, but they are not independent. They are two aspects of a complete picture of reality, and thus inextricably linked.

There is every reason to apply scientific inquiry to the measurable elements of religious behavior, just as there is to apply religious (some would prefer "spiritual") inquiry to the teleological goals of scientific pursuit. To do so does not reduce one to the other; it expands the context in which each one operates and illuminates their respective movements.

We enrich and broaden the realm of human knowledge by integrating these approaches, rather than squandering their unique strengths by setting them against one another. ... So long as we avoid the futility of seeking a complete picture through either method, we can only benefit.

Ken Dow
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***To the Editor:

Several opinion pieces over the past year or so have recommended improving communication between scientists and the public through clarifying the fundamental difference between science and society's values, including its religious values (Richard Sloan's essay; Alan I. Leshner's "Science and Public Engagement," *The Chronicle Review*, October 13; and Sanford Lakoff's "The Disconnect Between Scientists and the Public," *The Chronicle Review*, May 6, 2005). We think this recommendation is laudable, yet we also believe that the authors' strong emphasis on the conventional distinction between scientists, as concerned with objective knowledge of the natural world, and the general public, as concerned with subjective values, constructs an unnecessary obstacle to communication.

To us, this distinction leads to problems ... because it overemphasizes differences between science and society's values, and underestimates similarities between them. Science resembles society in the sense that it is a social activity, like any other human behavior. It involves human values in peer review, competition for grants, public advocacy for research funds, and so on. And religion resembles science in the sense that it deals with reality and the natural world; religious doctrine makes claims about the nature of the world, and religious practice is a consequence of religious belief. We believe that the tension between science and society might be lessened if there were more attention given to similarities, and less to differences.

In addition, we suggest that scientists pay more attention to how little scientific knowledge there is about the nature of science. It is entirely possible that further scientific research on the nature and practice of science will reveal more similarities between science and society -- as, for example, in the psychology of scientific beliefs and religious beliefs. Even scientists like **Marc Hauser**, author of **Moral Minds** (HarperCollins, 2006), who believes that research on the evolution of animal behavior could facilitate our understanding of human moral beliefs, and B.F. Skinner, who believed that research on the science of behavior might reveal how society should be re-engineered, say little about how such research might inform our understanding of scientific behavior.

We recommend that scientists improve their communication with the public by thinking more about the fact that they, too, are members of the public.

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To the Editor:

Why should Richard Sloan be so reticent about recommending one flavor of prayer over another, if it could be shown to have medical benefits? Wouldn't one hypothesis be that God prefers that version and is more likely to respond to it?

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