



# Religion and science: A short history of the existing skirmish and implications for Christianity today

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## Abstract

Science and Religion are two separate entities that deal with the study of knowledge applying different methods. Science as a discipline sprang up among theologians and philosophers especially those who are Christians. This is evident in that, the earliest known scientists were devoted Christians (Newton, Galileo, Darwin and others). In spite of the existing relationship between these two disciplines, there has been a serious controversy ranging from evolution-creation conversation to planetary movement, structure of the earth and other areas in which both disciplines have overlapped each other. This paper briefly traces the long skirmish between religion and science to scientific inventions and the development of scientific knowledge. There has been a momentous effort among scientists and religious leaders to harmonize religion and science. Although, these efforts have proved abortive because of the nature of religion and science. Science relies on proof or evidence of facts while religion depends on faith and belief. The unquestionable aspects of religion have been questioned by science objectively with the aid of modern critical tools. Besides, religion have also espoused to some extent the modern critical tools introduced by science for hermeneutical purpose. Nevertheless, the focus of this paper was to exhume the existing skirmish between religion (Christianity) and science with the aim to pinpointing the areas where both coincided. Thus, this paper concluded that while religion is pointing to God, science is taking us back to God.

**Keywords:** Religion, Science, Christianity, Skirmish and Implication.

## Introduction

From the time immemorial, the relationship between science and religion has always been a rough one (Draper, 1875: 158). Sporadically, they overlap with each other in some areas. Before the advent of science, religion has been widely regarded and considered as answers to problems that are beyond human comprehension, even to the extent that religion gained a 'concrete trust' attributing all physical and biological events (settlement of firmament, sun, rainfall, natural changes, reproductive system, evil, and diseases etc.) to all-knowing God, immortal being who supersedes human knowledge, a transcendent being (Brooke, 1991: 349-350). In those pre-scientific eras, religion served both scientific purposes and religious purposes. It was a period when religion sustained a worldview that is acceptable to everyone without questioning (Draper, 1875: 182).

As time went on, with the growth and development of scientific knowledge, especially during the time of Galileo, Newton, Darwin and other prominent scientists, the liberty enjoyed by religion was shaken off (Draper, 1875:183). During the sixteenth century, science become widely known and it is subjected to verifiable facts and data (Armstrong, 1978: 12). Science, basically deals with the study of nature (Barr, 2003: 20).



Looking critically at science, one would notice that the nature of science and its aim, and conditions are interconnected. Conversely, religion deals with matters of faith. Religion involves the belief in and worship of a supernatural controlling power. The emergence of conflict between religion and science is due to the areas where both overlap with each other. In view of this, this paper will undertake a brief historical review of the existing skirmish between religion and science to elucidate some aspects. In the same vein, it will discuss the implications of the relationship between religion and science.

### **What Science is all about**

Etymologically, the term “science” is rooted in Latin word “Scientia” which connotes the meaning “knowledge”.<sup>1</sup> Initially, what we perceive today as “science” was founded as “natural philosophy”. Scientist as a term was first used by William Whewell (a naturalist-theologian) in 1834 and later, it was extended to those who sought knowledge and study of nature (Harrison, 2015: 21). In the ancient domain, beginning with Aristotle to the 19th century, the practice of studying and understanding nature was frequently referred to as “natural philosophy” (Grant, 1990).

During the 19th century, science received its modern shape from what it was before. As a result, new concepts began to emerge and these concepts include; biology and biologist, physics and physicist etc. Among other areas of science, institutions and communities were established in the society which propel the new applications to and interactions with other core areas in the society. Science as a discipline deals with the study of nature, it forces, processes and development. It is not vague to say that science is the pursuit and application of knowledge and understanding of the natural and social world following a systematic methodology based on evidence (Nongbri, 2013:10).

Science is inherently based on the investigation of evidence. It deals specifically with ‘working hypothesis’ subjected to critical scrutiny due to natural causes, and not through divine intervention. Science does not intrude in the matters of morality, faith, existence and nature of deity and spirituality. Science is methodic. As such, it follows some lay down rules. Empirical science has been the most prominent and impressive since the sixteenth century (Van Fraassen, 2002:10). To define the scope of science is not an easy task neither is it difficult. Science has no univocal definition same also goes for religion. Therefore, how can we characterize the nature of science?

Jacques Monod in this regard, accentuates that “nature is objective when dealing with scientific issues”. Explanatorily, he avers that true knowledge could be ascertained by interpreting the nature of final causes (Monod, 1971:21). In the same manner, Chemist Walther (the German Chemist) also elucidates that “science requires an infinite universe by definition. Thereby he suggests that the Big Bang Theory, as he claims is not science (Von Weizsacker, 1964:151). Logically, science is subjected to testable, verifiable, observable facts. Science does not condone assumption instead a testable hypothesis which can be later subjected to verifiable fact or discarded fact.

The methodology of science includes the following:

- Objective observation: Measurement and data (possibly although not necessarily using mathematics as a tool).
- Evidence: Scientific findings or facts are based on valid proof.
- Experiment and/or observation as benchmarks for testing hypotheses.
- Induction: reasoning to establish general rules or conclusions drawn from facts or examples

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<sup>1</sup> [www.etymonline.com/science](http://www.etymonline.com/science). Accessed September 15, 2019.



- Repetition: Scientific findings are subjected to repetition, that is, it can be tested severally to obtain reliability and validity.
- Critical analysis: science is critical and rigorous naturally.
- Verification and testing: critical exposure to scrutiny, peer review and assessment (Von Weizsacker, 1964:154).

### **What Religion is all about**

Religion has no univocal definition or precise definition. The concept of religion has been undertaken by various scholars from various perspectives. Scholars from different disciplines like theology, philosophy, ethnology, sociology, psychology have defined the study of religion in several dimensions. The root of the term “Religion” is derived from the Latin word “*Religare*” meaning, “*to bind together*”. In this respect, Ronald L. Johnstone contextualized the concept of religion to mean association or fellowship of group of people (Johnstone, 1992:7). Religion involves matters of belief and practice. It is universal social phenomenon which adequately deals with everything about mankind. A general conception of religion as understood by many people is a belief in the Supernatural being and their relationship with the world and nature that surrounds them. Although, not all religions subscribe to theistic belief or are involved in the belief of all-knowing, powerful God or Supreme being.

Religion is generally centered on revelation from a Supreme being or a deity via oral communication from generation to generation, either recorded in a sacred text like the Bible and the Qur’an. It can also be revealed to people through prayers. Religion majorly deals with morality and how to live. Nearly all theistic religions on earth speak about the existence of one or more deities who have created and designed the universe, and continue to manage the operations and affairs of this universe. Miracles are peculiar to religious characteristics and only acceptable to religion (Gosling, 2012:162). Science does not condone or subject any supernatural occurrence to miracle, thereby ascribing the cause of these events to all-knowing Supreme Being. Countlessly, religion bypasses the laws of nature to create miracles. We can actually categorize the main role of religion to be teaching of moral principles, man’s relationship with gods or goddess (es), human behavior and spiritual issues. The nature of religion has a subject of controversy among religious scholars and host of others. Some scholars have actually submitted that the “proposition that there is an intelligent designer of the living world is purely religion”, not science. In New Testament scripture, the book of James, it was stated and we read that even the devils believe that God exists and shiver.

### **Religion and Science**

Historically, the relationship between science and religion is full of conflicts and concords. As such, it can be attributed to several reasons. However, this is not to say that there are no other areas where religion converges with science. The long skirmish between science and religion has been ascribed to different factors ranging from creationism, evolutionism, Galileo scientific discoveries etc. Also, religious claims especially the concept of prayer has been challenged scientifically by scientists in respect to miracles. Many scientists have argued that religion and science are not compatible critically looking at both disciplines’ methods of inquiry (revelation and empirical evidence). The earliest known conflict between religion and science was the one that surfaced in the ancient Babylon now Iraq (White, 1993:10). As a result of scientific discoveries to the cause of lunar eclipse which has been attributed to restlessness of the gods by their priests, conflict set in between religion and science.

The major source of conflict between science and religion is the issue of creation and evolution (Obasola & Shogunle, 2014:86). Ever since the development of science in nineteenth century, religious claims and languages have been scrutinized by science using scientific methodologies. Science is based on observation, empirical, critical analysis while religion is based on revelation and sacred book.



The inerrancy of the Holy Book of Christianity and also of Islam has brought about another conflict between science and religion. The rise and development of liberal Christians in the nineteenth century to adapt Christianity into modern intellectual science, thereby interpreting the Bible in the light of modern hermeneutic tools used for other ancient writings and histories and subjected biblical claims to scientific methodologies and verification which has also constituted the conflict between science and religion.

The liberalists are people who could be seen as a typical example of conflicting factions between science and religion who tend to place scriptural texts side by side with scientific findings. They employ the use of reasoning, empirical evidence as basis for interpreting the Bible, life and theology. Liberalists grew out consequent to their acceptance of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection. The innovative work of Charles Darwin on the "*Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*" has brought about conflict between the spheres of religion and science (Obasola, Omomia and Ajedokun, 2016:70). Throughout the twentieth century, antagonists of evolutionism, many of these opponents are conservative Christians, either tried to eliminate the teaching of Darwin's theory from public school science curricula or urged science instructors also to teach a version of the creation story found in the biblical book of Genesis.<sup>2</sup>

Religious adherents and leaders had always attributed everything to religious claims and thereby make statements about these claims. These claims include the structure of the universe, planetary activities, rainfall, cosmological events and recreation. Scientists as usual subject all these claims to empirical evidence and are not satisfied with all these religious claims. Isaac Newton in this regard and his contemporaries invented what is known now as "god of the gaps" to supplement facts that are vague to scientists at their time. The conflict between religion and science was as a result of scientific findings in that these findings cross religious path inadvertently. It was also the time of Galileo and Newton in the 17th century that science brutally attacked religion with their works - Newton and Galileo's scientific discovery. (Larma, 2002).

Some of the scientific findings of these two men confronted many biblical claims and assumptions. As such, it led to a new phase in interpretation of the scriptures (Obasola, Omomia & Ajedokun, 2016: 72). This new scientific discovery challenged the biblical standpoint on the creation of the universe. Not until the time of Charles Darwin in the 19th century, were religious claim on the settings of the universe been held by many. In antiquity, use of reason and revelation formed the basis for any claim that is, the conjunction of Greek philosophy and biblical faith.

Also, in the area of medicine, there is conflict between religion and science. Religious group have attributed healing processes to supernatural being that is beyond mere modern science. In contrast, scientists have disagreed with the above assertion thereby rejecting the efficacy of prayer. Other issues under medicine include abortion and physician assisted suicide. The practice of homosexuality has also been subjected to scientific scrutiny. The position of the bible on the issue of homosexuality is that, homosexuality is abnormal, unnatural, chosen and not genetically determined (Ukleja, 1983).

In the same vein, they believe that this practice can be changed through prayer and counseling. Contrarily, scientists have examined the cause of homosexuality and conclude that the practice of homosexuality is normal for a small size of the human race, that it is natural, and cannot be chosen, and is mainly caused by genes. The nitty-gritty of this scientific discovery about homosexuality is that, it cannot be changed through prayer and counseling.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pewforum.org/2009/02/04/overview-the-conflict-between-religion-and-evolution/> Accessed September 17, 2019.



Noteworthy is the biblical influence on the growth and development of science which cannot be left untold. Cohen rightly contends for a biblical stimulus on early modern science as he presented Hooykaa's argument on the connection between modern science and Greek rationalism which is from a biblical worldview (Cohen, 1994:21). He contends further that the combination of Greek powers of reasoning in addition to biblical humility to accepting the unscientific laws of nature coupled with the fact that man was a replicate of God's image gave rise to the realm of modern science. Corroborating the above view, Eugene M. Klareen contends that, science was subjected to a genuine belief in divine creation in seventeenth-century England which became central in the dealings of science (Brooke, 1991:19). As such, Christian doctrines of creation have been connected with empiricism (science).

In the earliest days of Christianity, science before it became modernized as it is known today and was regarded as a "waste". Early church fathers then were excited that church leaders were men of little intellect. Even in those earliest periods that science has not been reckoned with, church fathers tried to wipe away the secular knowledge and as a result, gave instructions that all non-Christian books must be burnt. Later, religious leaders from different religions try to synthesize religion, philosophy and natural sciences. After the quick rejection of scientific knowledge by early church fathers, attempt to harmonize science and religion was made by some religious leaders. For instance, the great Christian philosopher Augustine of Hippo whose interest for development of philosophy had influenced his writings with Islamic philosopher Averroes and Jewish philosopher Maimonides sought for convergence of science and religion (Augustine, 1974). Regarding the above statement, these philosophers held that if by chance or no chance religious teachings were found to refute certain explicit observations about the natural world, then it would be necessary to reconsider either the interpretation of the scientific facts or that of scriptures. It is quite unclear the reasons for skeptical views of religious leaders regarding the stance of scripture on the nature and that of scientific findings. Although, some of these religious leaders like Augustine of Hippo is known for sustaining a philosophical worldview based on his Greek background (Gilson, 1960). However, these religious leaders were not explicit enough to reject any scientific finding that contradicts religious teachings. Instead, suggestion was made for re-evaluation of either such scientific finding or the scripture. This indeed reveals the zeal some religious leaders had for natural philosophy which later metamorphosed into what is known as modern science today. It would not be a baseless argument to account for biblical influence rather religious influence on the development of modern scientific knowledge.

Another noteworthy feature of biblical influence on science is the fact that most of these religious leaders were philosophers before. The influence of the biblical world on the growth and development of science now calls for a line of demarcation between religion and science. Science was not totally rejected by early church fathers but when a scientific finding contradicts the scripture (Stillman, 1999: 292).

Notably, Galileo's scientific findings clash with the scriptures. Galileo was a churchman and a devoted one for that matter. He was a scientist but not an atheist. The time of Galileo was a period when religion especially Christianity enjoyed a monopoly that was acceptable to all and sundry without any questioning. As such, all natural causes were attributed to all-knowing God. This is not to say that there is no little amount of science among believers. There are natural theologians and natural philosophers like Aristotle, he was a Greek philosopher and polymath during the Classical period in Ancient Greece (Barnes, 1982). He established a school of philosophy and Aristotelian tradition. Because of his allegiance to his teacher Plato, he enjoyed a strong support from catholic Christians and as such, he has been referred to as "Father of Western Philosophy" (Barnes, 1982). With the great influence of early church father, Aristotelian ideas were accepted by many including his "geocentric view" that the earth was at the center of the universe and the sun revolves around it that substantiates the scriptural notion of the movement of the sun in Psalms.



The Mighty One, God, the LORD, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets. From Zion, perfect in beauty, God shines forth. Our God comes and will not be silent; a fire devours before him, and around him a tempest rages (Psalm 50:1-3).<sup>3</sup>

Galileo's scientific discoveries also had influence on modern science and some of his findings were accepted by the early church fathers just some that some contradict the biblical stance. The findings could be classified into three; the first scientific discovery of Galileo was celebrated and accepted by all and sundry including the church fathers. Galileo invented the telescope and thermometer, with his intellectual achievement on the discovery of these instruments, the movement of the stars and others were discovered. Aside from this first finding, other findings of Galileo ran into contrast with biblical teachings. The second scientific finding that led to difficulties among theologians and natural philosophers was the cause of the tides, he argued that the tides were evidence for the motion of the Earth and not as a result of any spiritual influence as it was in those times. Even the second finding did not get him into serious trouble like that of his third finding that got him into trouble not only with the Catholic church but also with Aristotelians and other people that held a concrete belief in the geocentric view of the earth.

The principal finding of Galileo that led to serious confusion within the church was the position of the sun. With the invention of the telescope, Galileo went further as to say that the sun is at the centre of the universe and that the earth revolves round it. His finding actually corroborates the stance taken by 'heliocentrists', who had an astronomical model in which the Earth and planets revolve around the Sun at the center of the Solar System. According to history, heliocentric was thus opposed to geocentric (Aristotelian) ideas, which placed the Earth at the center. This idea that the Earth revolves around the Sun had been proposed as early as the 3rd century BC by Aristarchus of Samos (Dreyer, 1953: 38-39). The work of Aristarchus's in which he proposed his heliocentric system has not survived. Galileo's core finding of the position of the sun came in contrast with that of the scripture which led him into serious problem. The Church fathers decided and put him on house arrest until his death.

Also, many scientists have promoted the hypothesis that life started from molecules which later forms into DNA. In pursuance of establishing a solution to the creation-evolution issue among scientists, many theories of evolution-creation have been generated. However, some of these have been debunked as others arose. The creation story of the universe cannot be substantiated without acknowledging the existence of God and the creation of man in his own image. Although, some scientists like Thomas Aquinas have popularized that, the belief that God created the world and therefore humans, can lead to the view that he arranged for humans to the world (Morreall & Sonn, 2013:12-17). From the above, the existing skirmish between religion and science could be attributed to the long existing relationship between theologians and natural philosophers who were devoted Christians encumbered with a Greek abstract sense of reasoning. Science has long time been tamed by early church fathers among the early Christians who were natural philosophers but yet, its growth and development has been attributed to religion.

Plausibly, when some religious statements are assessed with scientific tools, they are found to be false not true, likewise scientific findings when they are examined with religious methodology. All the above mentioned have constituted to the skirmish between religion and science till today especially the creation-evolution controversy, which is the major source of conflict between religion and science. However, these conflicting areas between these two disciplines have led to different implications.

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<sup>3</sup> Psalms 50:1-3, Revised Standard Version.



## **Implications of the Existing Skirmish for Christianity Today**

Having discussed the history of the existing skirmish between religion and science, it is pertinent to equally examine the implications of the skirmish for Christianity being the largest contributor to modern science as established in the earlier part of this work. As we have noted earlier, the major area of conflict is creation and evolution discourse. These conflicting areas between religion and science have resulted to different criticisms, fallibility of the bible, religious languages/claims, irreconcilability between religion and science. These implications would be discussed succinctly.

### **Fallibility of the Scripture (Bible) - Creation Story**

In this scope, the creation story depicted in the scripture has been subjected to various criticisms. Conservative Christians who believe in the infallibility of the bible and biblical assertions have resented scientific discoveries for contradicting the biblical stance. Hence, calls for re-evaluation of scriptural teachings. Although, there are different schools of thought regarding the issue of creation. Many see the biblical creation story and interpret it literally (conservative Christians). As such, accepting the literal interpretation of Genesis in Old Testament to mean that God created the world within the period of six days, 144-hour period, 4004 and 8000 BCE. Conversely, many cosmologists have reached a compromise that the universe is about 14 billion years old and the planet Earth joined about 4.5 billion years ago (White, 1993:2). In the same manner, biblical record has it that plants and animals were created on the sixth day. In contrast, scientists subscribe to the belief that different species evolved over billions of years. All these scientific discoveries have actually negated religious teachings especially on the issue of creation versus evolution. Although, today, the creation story version of the scripture is still being taught in schools and different gatherings while the scientific version is still being taught as well. The findings of science on the issue of creation have opened another possibility on the origin of the universe.

### **Miracle versus Scientific Evidence**

Both disciplines have differing views concerning miracles that is, spiritual healing and miracle aspects. Scientists and religious leaders are both interested in unexplainable and extraordinary events for different reasons. Scientists are being skeptic as to the tenability of miracle due to the fact that, scientific claims are subjected to critical analysis. Scientists look for a natural cause and allow their scientific tools drive them towards a reasonable answer. Unlike, religious believers who claim that any unnatural event can only be manifested through divine intervention. This religious statement has actually helped in perpetuating the positive emotional states that the beliefs produce. However, it should be noted that it is not observation or proof that causes believers to accept the concept of a miracle rather, it's a preconceived notion that God is capable of performing and creates miracles. In this regard, scientists have provided scientific proof for healing which has set religious notion of miracle and that of science on the same scale. Almost all diseases have been sourced for through a scientific lens with causes, symptoms and a remedy if there is any.

### **Religious Claims**

Religious believers have always been attributing immoral acts to evil. For example, homosexuality which Christians have attached to evil and believe it can be modified through prayers and counseling. In contrast, sexuality therapists have carried out a research and reveal that, homosexuality is a minority sexual orientation, is normal and caused by genes. It is unchosen, thus natural and cannot be changed. Another noteworthy idea is abortion. Religious believers have claimed that life begins immediately one is conceived contrasting scientific worldview. Scientists claim that life does not begin immediately at conception of



pregnancy, but rather life begins with formation of cells and later in pregnancy. Due to this conflicting area, religion and science have always been contradicting one another.

### **Irreconcilability**

Due to different methodical elements found in religion and science, scholars have proposed incompatibility between these two terms. In this regard, some scientists posit that the historical conflict between scientific findings on evolution and religion is central and the two cannot be compatible. Thus, they propose incompatibility between scientific rationalism/empiricism and the belief in supernatural causation. Jerry Coyne, (2009), an evolutionary biologist, accentuates that levels of religiosity in some countries, along with some books explaining compatibility between evolution and religion, indicate that people have problems in believing both (religion and science) at the same time.<sup>4</sup> As such, proposing incompatibility between the two disciplines. Also, Peter Atkins (n.d.) submits that religion disdains the usefulness of human comprehension. However, science respects human knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Cosmologists, evolutionist and astrophysicists submit that the issue of compatibility and incompatibility between religion and science is theological concern and not a scientific concern. Scientific development has created a form of tension for Christianity which Christians have been battling with. It is also worth noting that science has given answers to unresolved problems of religion which are not destructive for Christian norms and teachings.

### **Conclusion**

The issue of religion and science has been a recurring issue. Both are found to varying extents within each other. The scientific realm was developed as a result of religious dogma and languages. The quest for knowledge and truth led to the development of science in the 16th century. Science is highly methodical while religion is based essentially on faith. These two are distinct characteristically. Religion and science cannot go together technically based on their natures, or indeed methods of observations. In a narrow sense, however, religion and science are doing the same thing in that, religion is pointing to God while science is taking us back to God. Science is expanding the scope of religion, where religion ends, science starts. As religious believers, we cannot ask some questions especially questions that are spiritual because religion is inherently based on assumption. Whereas, science is not based on assumptions but rather on facts, they are derivable from certain laid down principles. In conclusion, this paper suggests that both religion and science have to collaborate, however, examination of the two concepts becomes critical to do. The major implication of the conflict between religion and science is that, religious believers are now less dogmatic and they now call for a line of demarcation between science and religion. Today, scientific findings cannot be abandoned except if the findings are baseless. This is not to say that science does not have limits but its findings are one that can change the faith of a believer if care is not taken.

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<sup>4</sup> J. Coyne. "Does The Empirical Nature of Science Contradict the Revelatory Nature Of Faith?" ([http://www.edge.org/3rd\\_culture/coyne09/coyne09\\_index.html](http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/coyne09/coyne09_index.html)). Edge. Accessed September 18, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Atkins, Peter. "Who Really Works Hardest to Banish Ignorance?" [http://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php?section=library&page=atkins\\_18\\_2](http://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php?section=library&page=atkins_18_2)). Council for Secular Humanism. Accessed on 30th September, 2019.



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