



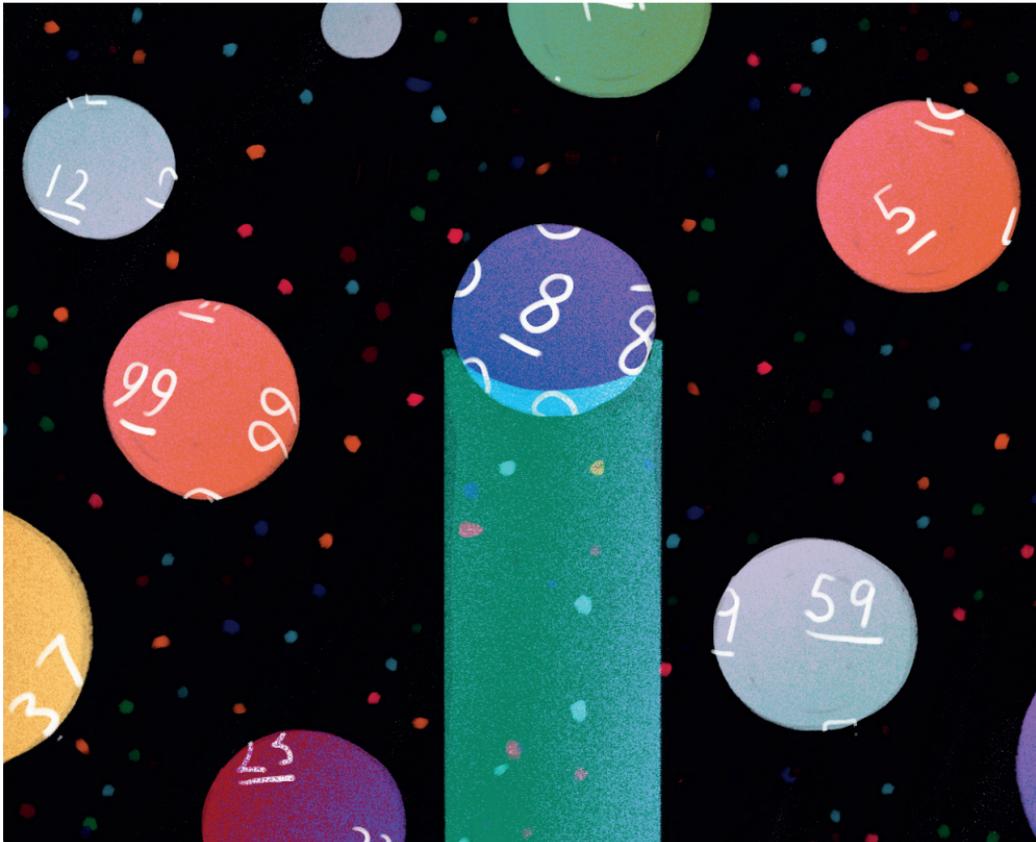
Report

‘Science and Religion’: Moving away from the shallow end

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Executive Summary



The angry hostility towards religion engineered by the New Atheist movement is over.

About 15 years ago (around the time that Theos and The Faraday Institute were launched), a ComRes poll found that 42% (!) of UK adults agreed that “faith is one of the world’s great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate.” Today, that figure is 20%.

By comparison, 46% of people today agree that “all religions have some element of truth in them”, 49% that “humans are at heart spiritual beings”, and 64% of people agree that “there are some things that science will never be able to explain.”

This shift was typified by one of our expert interviewees, a strong atheist, who said (unprompted):

“I want it on record, don’t just list me as an atheist in the Richard Dawkins type. Because I am not an atheist like him at all.” (#63¹)

The movement has, however, left (or arguably fortified) a legacy of antagonism, particularly around science and religion.

The British public are more likely, by a proportion of 2:1, to think that science and religion are incompatible (57%) than compatible (30%).

There is an even more pronounced difference (3:1) between those who think they are *strongly* incompatible (22%) than those who think they are *strongly* compatible (7%).

This issue has a noticeable gendered and ethnic dimension.

Men are more likely to voice an opinion on this matter and to be hostile than are women.

Conversely, respondents from non-white ethnic groups are more likely to be positive than white respondents.² Of those who expressed an opinion, 68% of white respondents were on balance ‘incompatible’, compared with 48% of those from non-white ethnic groups respondents.

In effect, white men are the group most likely to have a negative view of science and religion.

On closer inspection, tension with *specific* sciences is much less than with ‘science’ in general.

If you ask people about their view of religion and science (see above), they are likely to lean towards incompatible. If you ask them about religion and a *specific science*, e.g. neuroscience, medical science, chemistry, psychology, geology or even cosmology, they are more likely to say that, on balance, it doesn’t make it hard to be religious.

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A similar point can be made for *specific religions*. The perception of hostility between ‘science and religion’ is greater than it is between ‘science and Christianity’ or ‘science and Islam’. In other words, this seems to be a conflict of image rather than substance.

Perhaps most tellingly, **although much of the science and religion debate has been focused around evolution, the data show that only a small minority of people (including religious people) reject evolution.**

When asked whether there is “strong, reliable evidence to support the theory of evolution”, 74% of people agree (42% strongly) compared with 6% who disagree (3% strongly)

Religious people and even regular worshippers are only marginally more antagonistic to the theory of evolution than non-religious.

Even among strict biblical literalists, a small group (3%) who are traditionally the most hostile to Darwinism, only just over a third rejects evolution.

More generally, the religious are no more antagonistic towards science itself than are the non-religious.

When asked whether they agreed that “the dangers of science outweigh its benefits”, 9% of the total population agreed or strongly agreed (hereafter: strongly/agreed), whereas 65% disagreed or strongly disagreed (hereafter: disagreed/strongly). In comparison, 12% of the religious strongly/agreed that “the dangers of science outweigh its benefits” whereas 61% disagreed/strongly.

Only the small number of textual literalists³ differed (22% agreed/strongly that science’s dangers outweigh its benefits vs 31% of people disagreed/strongly).

In short, **much of the science and religion ‘battle’ has been smoke** – and there has been a lot of smoke – **but without much real fire.**

For this research project, **we conducted over a hundred in-depth expert interviews** (with scientists, philosophers, sociologists) **and commissioned a YouGov survey of more than 5,000 UK adults**, to ascertain both the depth and the breadth of the science and religion debate. Details of these are

given in appendices. All data given in the report are from these surveys, unless otherwise stated.

The contention of this report is that the science and religion debate has been distorted by being viewed primarily through a few narrow lenses – in particular, evolution (“vs creation(ism)”), the Big Bang (“vs God”), and neuroscience (“vs religious experiences”) – and because these are ‘conflictual’ lenses, the resulting picture is one of wholesale conflict, a conflict that the public *feels* but finds it hard to locate or explain.

This is *not* to deny that there are still tensions and conflicts in the debate (chapter 3 explores where these lie). It is, rather, to claim that the debate so far has too often been a ‘shallow end’ one. The familiar issues are essentially surface ones that float on much more substantial, or deeper, concerns. The report highlights six of these:

Epistemology: how do we know what (we think) we know?

Metaphysics: what is the fundamental nature of reality?

Hermeneutics: how do we read texts, particularly authoritative religious ones?

Anthropology: what does it mean to be human?

Ethics: what is good and how do we progress as a society?

Politics: who gets to decide?

These are key to the science and religion debate and for each one we argue, on the basis of our expert interviews, that we need to move away from the shallow end and towards a ‘deep end’, where the debate is messier but more honest

(and more interesting). To give examples from our expert interviewees:

Epistemology

"I think there are different ways of arriving at knowledge about the world... we arrive at knowledge about the world, about ourselves, about other people, in different ways." (#15)

Metaphysics

"Quite often, this debate that religion is supernatural, science is natural, which you tend to hear quite a lot in my job, I don't necessarily think it does exist." (#99)

Hermeneutics

"I think the world is a bit messier than simply an either-or about texts and textual history. It depends what the boundaries you set are for interpretation." (#65)

Anthropology

"Although there are tensions within modern thinking, I don't think they're specifically problems for religious belief, they're problems for our ways of thinking about ourselves as human beings." (#5)

Ethics

"I think there is a real tension [here] but I think it's an area, having said that, where having religious people and scientists together discussing it can be very interesting and possibly fruitful." (#47)

Politics

"Who has authority? Who are the priests in a society? Is it people with neuro in front of their name, or is it the Archbishop

of Canterbury? Is it the chief medical officer, speaking into a pandemic or is it some religious professional? Who's going to listen to whom?" (#84)

It may well be – indeed it will be – that after considering all these different dimensions, many people will still find themselves in a position of ‘incompatibility’ in the science and religion debate. Others may be more positively disposed. Either way, we hope that everyone will be where they are on the basis of a deeper and more nuanced discussion.

- 1 All interviews conducted for this project have been anonymised. A full list of interviewees can be found in Appendix 1.
- 2 The sample size for non-white respondents was 695, compared to a total of 4,458.
- 3 This phrase is used throughout (instead of fundamentalist) to denote those respondents who agreed that the Bible [or the Qur'an] is "the actual word of God and to be taken literally, word for word."