



THE TRIPLE HELIX

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Secularism: The Missing Piece in the 'Science and/or Religion' Puzzle

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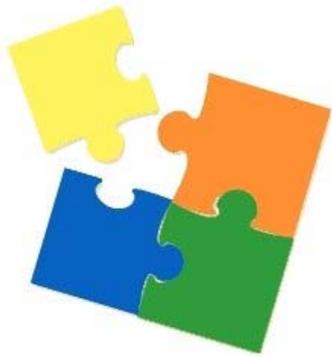
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The controversy over science and religion generates astounding heat in the public media these days. As in similar issues in which public concern is bound up with philosophical ideas, the resulting heat often converts to perplexing zeal and confusion rather than light.

A missing piece in the puzzling controversy is secularism. Advocates of religion or science tend to portray it as a pro-science and an anti-religious sentiment. They seem to forget, however, that deeply religious European and American thinkers conceived the idea of the secular state on the first place. The assumption that science is necessarily secular is similarly misleading, for it is oblivious to an entire tradition of scholarly attempts at taming zealous preachers of scientific progress. A better understanding of secularism will help remove the unnecessary zeal from issues that ought to concern the public debate on science and religion. A detailed analytical definition of secularism follows.



Secularism: The Missing Piece

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Secularism is an ethic of intellectual conduct. It states that people must bear responsibility for their beliefs as they form them, and especially when they seek to share them with others. Responsible conduct implies the acknowledgement that a person's beliefs are a function of circumstances and education, experience and aspirations, cultural background and personal needs and concerns. In this respect, religious and scientific beliefs are on a par with other worldly accomplishments, however abstract or esoteric their content might be.

Conviction and righteousness lead preachers and professors to forsake their responsibility and to portray their beliefs as if these were revealed, warranted, or dictated by a non-personal or superhuman authority such as 'nature', 'God', 'the common-will', or 'reason'. Secularism is a reminder that belief is a human accomplishment that can be shared only voluntarily and by responsible persons.

Secularism implies neither skepticism nor agnosticism with respect to the achievements of science or religion. Rather, it is predicated on the assumption that belief ought to be the outcome of the search for truth, and that the more laborious the search is, the more responsible it must be. In formulating a proposition, as well as in accepting its veracity, a person may act either responsibly or irresponsibly. If the act is irresponsible, the belief is not trustworthy even if it seems to encapsulate the whole truth and nothing but the truth. And if the act is responsible, then the belief is the agent's accomplishment however truthful it may be.

Secularism also plays a significant role in the current controversy between science and religion. It suggests that advocates of science behave irresponsibly when they present facts or theories as if these were revealed by nature, truth, or the physical reality. The dogmatic attitude to science only undermines the growth of science education and literacy. Rather than hiding behind the findings of science, its advocates ought to be able to explain to the public how laborious scientific research is, and what the value of this labor is.

It is about time that the preaching of religious faith follows suit. The history of secularism and religion demonstrates time and again that the message of faith fails to deliver good news whenever it is presented to the public as a divine decree rather than as a compassionate reflection of human beings over the human condition. Indeed, advocates of religion ought to express their current concerns about scientific research or science education in a language that their intended audience can use in a responsible manner.