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Ennio C. Rossi

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Religion and Science

ENNIO C. ROSSI, M.D.

Over the centuries religion and science have had frequent, occasionally violent, arguments. Science viewed the church as a merciless oppressor while the church saw science as an immoral challenger who dared to question religious doctrine. However, the church survived the questions and science survived the oppression. Today we recognize that science never truly challenged religion or faith in God. Instead, the seeds of conflict were sown when the church placed moral and religious implications where they were not relevant. Thus an earth revolving around a stationary sun seemed a crushing defeat for christianity (and possibly a day of glory for sun-worshippers) only for as long as we persisted in the belief that celestial arrangements had moral or religious implications. All the "retreats" forced upon religion by the advance of science have been equally inconsequential. The central issue of the existence of God has never been attacked. Only suppositions concerning the material world which religious teaching invested with moral implications have been forced to give ground.

Fortunately, time and intellectual enlightenment have dispelled much of the mutual distrust that separated religion and science. Conflicts are being resolved by better understanding of both the limitations of science and the particular relevance of religion. Indeed many would deny that conflict exists today between religion

and science. However, this may not be entirely true. Although open hostilities have ceased, conflict may still exist beneath a facade of amiability. Certainly the ingredients for conflict are still there. When religious dogma contradict man's best organized observations, science feels set upon. And, when science extrapolates itself to a way of life either by assuming an intrinsic morality or denouncing morality as man-made artefact, it is overmatching itself and asking for defeat.

An indicator of unresolved issues between religion and science might be the increasing number of polemics concerning science and moral values since the beginning of the nuclear age. Science has greatly increased man's ability to destroy. This new capability for destruction shocks our moral sense and makes us ask whether a science that leads to such ends can be good. The fault, of course, is not in science "but in ourselves." To complain that science is eroding moral values is like blaming the hammer for striking the thumb. Science is only a method for obtaining knowledge and to inveigh against science because it may lead to catastrophe is as sensible as to inveigh against automobiles because of our highway slaughter. *Morality*

Dr. Rossi received his B.A. in 1951 and his M.D. in 1954, both from the University of Wisconsin. He has been on the Marquette faculty since 1963 and at present is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Medicine.

is a quality of man not of science.

There are many who feel that there is a dangerous moral laxness in modern man. This issue raised with frightening suddenness by the atomic explosions of World War II has been further aggravated by the nerve shattering changes in every day life brought about by our astonishingly successful modern technology. Man has become impressed by his ability to change his environment. The pragmatic idea has reached full fruition and its success would appear to vindicate those who felt that epistemology and abstract philosophies have little importance. But before we criticize man for this sin of pride we must realize that while he might be impressed by his success he is also frightened by it. His image of God no longer fits the world he knows. He is confused and frightened by those who say "God is Dead" because he is afraid it might be true.

I submit that one of the reasons for this moral confusion is the persistence of religion-science conflict within individuals. It is an insidious, ephemeral conflict that does not arise from active rejection of either religion or science but rather from successful participation in one which seems to exclude the need for the other. Putting aside any comparison between religious and scientific truth, we must nonetheless accept that both religion and science are equipped to satisfy certain needs of men. While we might prevent internal conflict by considering religious and scientific pursuits as directed towards spiritual and material needs respectively, many men, par-

ticularly members of the intellectual community, would synthesize these two needs into a single composite—the need to know. Then, unless religion and science are effectively blended, such men must choose either the religious or scientific means of fulfilling this need. Frequently their choice is determined by early experiences. If a man has had strong religious training, he may be attracted to moral and human problems, and scientific questions may appear trivial. If, on the other hand, a man has had the experience of answering his own questions by performing controlled observations, he may be attracted to problems that submit to such inquiry, and dismiss moral questions because their answers are based on uninformed opinion. Thus religion and science compete for man's mind and his need to know.

Science will never succeed by itself to satisfy man's need to know. There will always be moral questions inaccessible to scientific inquiry. For this reason, the domination of the pragmatic scientific method, unaccompanied by moral concerns, was bound to lead to moral confusion.

The scientific and technological community has constructed a world that is capable of many beneficial activities. However, these capabilities have been accompanied by confusion. Writers speak of modern man's search for identity and wonder to what extent men will be replaced by machines. Intellectual and moral leaders worry that open minded scientific inquiry may be applied to moral issues and transform

moral values into a sea of gray. They wonder whether the line between right and wrong may become faded and encourage pursuit of the expedient. While skepticism is essential for scientific development, uncertainty on moral issues may have deleterious effects on spiritual health, and lead to confusion. Whether this confusion is due to the technologic and scientific community's lack of concern with moral questions, or to the religious community's lack of involvement in modern technological development depends, of course, upon one's point of view. In any case the fundamental defect seems clear. Technological development was not synchronized with restatements of moral values. Scientific leaders changed the world for no other reason than because they could, and moral leaders remained somewhat apart and distrusting. As a consequence we have indeed changed the face of the earth but now we are groping for good purposes. In this country we fight poverty and consider establishing a minimum income per family. In other parts of the world, groups travel about healing bodies only to be followed by other groups considering methods for sterilizing those bodies. It would seem that moral leaders capable of synthesizing the potentials of our modern technological society with lasting moral values are badly needed.

The Ecumenical movement pro-

vides an encouraging note for those who are anxious for the church to assume a more prominent role in the course of man's everyday life. However, Catholic education and particularly its institutions of higher learning may have to change to accomplish this goal. Catholic universities must seek more than moral preparation of students if they wish to affect the moral tone of our scientific and intellectual communities. They must strive for student excellence in the scientific and technical fields that are the coin of modern man's realm. Without compromising their teaching of moral values, they must encourage and develop in their students the restless spirit that makes man strive for new knowledge. Students who can deal effectively with both scientific and moral questions may succeed in avoiding the conflicts that led to the moral confusion we have today. If graduates of Catholic universities can be prepared for, and assume more prominent roles in scientific institutions, they may provide the scientific and intellectual community with the moral leadership some feel is lacking. Our medical schools in particular must be given greater opportunities for scientific development. Medicine is the area where technological capability and moral questions are most frequently at odds. Here then also lies our greatest opportunity to blend scientific ability and religious purpose.