

Does science make belief in God obsolete?



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No, not at all.

As a physician and researcher, I employ science to decipher human biology and treat disease. As a person of faith, I look to my religious tradition for the touchstones of a moral life. Neither science nor faith need contradict the other; in fact, if one appreciates

the essence of each, they can enrich each other in a person's life.

So, the question of obsolescence is miscast, because science and faith should exist in separate realms. Science uses logic and experimental methods to measure and describe the material world. It yields knowledge about the workings of molecules and machines, mitosis and momentum. Science has no moral valence. It is neutral. DNA technology can craft a cure for a cancer or produce a weapon of bioterrorism. It is only a person's application of science that takes on a moral dimension.

In that light, an atheist creates his or her own moral precepts in the absence of God. A believer looks to religious texts for guidance in what is right and what is wrong. Right and wrong, for both, do not come from physics or chemistry or biology. Science does not instruct how to treat one's neighbor as oneself, how to clothe the naked and feed the hungry, why it is wrong to murder, steal, bear false witness, honor one's father and mother, and perhaps most difficult of all, subsume envy and covetousness. There are no Ten Commandments in thermodynamics or molecular biology, no path to righteousness and charity and love in Euclidean geometry or atomic physics. The truths of mathematics, biology, chemistry, and physics are different from the truths we seek in human behavior and human choices. The truths of science can be measured and experimentally verified; the truths of a moral life are matters of belief—whether you are an atheist or a religious person. Religion should view science as a way to

improve the world; science should see religion not as a threat but as a deeply felt path taken by some.

So why are we bombarded with polemics from extremists on both sides of this issue? Why is the question of obsolescence asked about God, who is not material and therefore doesn't "age"?

The clash comes from the two extremes.

Fundamentalist religious believers in the United States want to change the Constitution so that it includes injunctions about sex and prayer from the Bible. In the Middle East and in parts of Asia, their counterparts, the Wahhabis, press for *sharia*, Islamic law, to prevail over a liberal society.

Atheists have their own fundamentalists who characterize people of faith as naïve, infantile, and neurotic in their rituals, too irrational to live by the light of pure logic. The polemics of believers show an ignorance of science, what it offers to improve life, and the polemics of fundamentalist atheists ignore the wisdom found in religious texts. Both seem threatened by diversity and wish to erase any doubt under a blanket of blind belief.

There is another way, a "third way" of articulating the benefits of science and faith. On this middle ground, a person can hold two different sensibilities, two different types of thought, feeling, and action. Yes, there are times when a scientist like myself who believes in God is filled with doubt. But that should be expected. As the esteemed Protestant theologian Paul Tillich once observed, the basis of true faith is such doubt. Similarly, atheists should sometimes doubt their negation of God, because it is not a matter of proof but of subjective belief on their part.

In my own tradition, the rabbi, philosopher, and physician Maimonides, also known as the Rambam, embodied an apparent cognitive dissonance. He was a scholar of the Bible and Talmud while, at the same time, a scholar of scientific medical practice. He was a person of faith who rejected magic and sorcery as nonsense. He viewed the natural world as governed by laws familiar to us through physics and chemistry. But he also

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contended that each of us makes a personal decision about whether or not to believe in God. There is no need for mental gymnastics to generate a proof of God's existence; it is a futile exercise. God is axiomatic or not. Faith is not deduced but felt. Religion, at its best, becomes a vehicle to arrive at the good—the good for oneself, the good for others and for the world.

Tolerance is actually a tenet of my tradition. The Hebrew Bible asserts more than thirty times that we should respect the stranger and treat him with dignity, because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. The stranger represents “the Other”—what

is foreign and different and at times threatening to our beliefs. There is no need to conquer or erase differences in culture or perspective. The same tolerance should be found among atheists. They should not belittle or ridicule as fools those who struggle to find meaning in life, to confront mystery, based on a belief in the Divine. Science does not threaten faith, and faith need not reject science. Neither will ever be obsolete.

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