

# Identifying the Conflict between Religion and Science

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**Abstract:** *Inspired by Stephen J. Gould's NOMA thesis, it is commonly maintained among academic theists (and some atheists) that religion and science are not in conflict. This essay will argue, by analogy, that science and religion undeniably are in conflict. It will begin by quickly defining religion and science and then present multiple examples that are unquestionable instances of unscientific reasoning and beliefs and show how they precisely parallel common mainstream orthodox religious reasoning and doctrines. It will then consider objections. In essence, this article will show that religion and science conflict when religion encroaches into the scientific domain. But in closing, it will show that they might also conflict when science encroaches into domains traditionally reserved for religion.*

**Keywords:** Science, Religion, Stephen J. Gould, NOMA, Science-Religion Conflict, Petitionary Prayer, Miracles, Divine Intervention, Phlogiston, the Soul, Skeptical Theism, Sathya Sai Baba, Peter Medawar, The Limits of Science, Mythical Truth, Mystery Therefore Magic

## Introduction

MANY, BOTH THEISTS AND atheists, acknowledge the conflict between religion and science. This includes New Atheists like Richard Dawkins<sup>1</sup> and also academic philosophers, such as John Worall<sup>2</sup> who argues that one cannot be both purely scientifically minded and religious. Others disagree. Stephen Jay Gould (1941–2002) for example, an agnostic, famously defended the NOMA thesis—the idea that science and religion cannot be in conflict because they are about non-overlapping magisteria.<sup>3</sup> His sentiments have been echoed by academic philosophers, such as Del Ratzsch, who argues that the

<sup>1</sup> Richard Dawkins, “You Can’t Have It Both Ways: Irreconcilable Differences,” *Skeptical Inquirer* 23, no. 4 (1999): 62–64, <https://skepticalinquirer.org/1999/07/you-cant-have-it-both-ways-irreconcilable-differences/>.

<sup>2</sup> John Worall, “Science Discredits Religion,” in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael Peterson and Raymond Vanarragon (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 2004), 59–71.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, “Non-Overlapping Magisteria,” *Skeptical Inquirer* 23, no. 4 (1999): 55–61, <https://skepticalinquirer.org/1999/07/non-overlapping-magisteria/>.



conflict between science and religion is greatly exaggerated.<sup>4</sup> Most recently, Alvin Plantinga reiterated this argument.<sup>5</sup> If there is a conflict, Plantinga argues, it is only about minor ideas that are usually popular in small movements—like creationism, which is (according to Plantinga) only popular in certain Christian fundamentalist segments of America.

This is incorrect. Not only is creationism more popular than Plantinga realizes,<sup>6</sup> but contrary to the conclusions of Gould, Ratzsch, and Plantinga, religion conflicts with science, *especially* regarding religious issues, doctrines, beliefs, and thought processes of major significance. This essay will demonstrate why. For brevity, it will concentrate on a few specific Christian doctrines that enjoy near universal agreement, and show how they are unscientific; but it will also be apparent how the argument could be applied to the doctrines of other religions. The argument will be made through analogy by explicating numerous classic examples of unscientific thinking and then showing how the thinking behind particular religious doctrines parallels the examples precisely. The essay will then consider objections.<sup>7</sup> Mainly, we will see that religion and science conflict when religion encroaches into the scientific domain. But in conclusion, we will also see that they can conflict when science encroaches into domains traditionally reserved for religion.

But first, to understand where, why, and how science and religion conflict, both science and religion must be defined.

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<sup>4</sup> Del Ratzsch, “The Alleged Demise of Religion: Greatly Exaggerated Reports from the Science/Religion ‘Wars,’” in *Science and Religion in Dialogue*, ed. Melville Y. Stewart (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010), 69–84, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444317350.ch3>.

<sup>5</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 65–90, [doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199812097.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199812097.001.0001).

<sup>6</sup> Most American Christians believe in some form of creationism or intelligent design, and creationism is becoming more commonplace in Islam. See Drake Bennett, “Islam’s Darwin Problem: In the Muslim World, Creationism is on the Rise,” *Boston Globe*, October 25, 2009, [http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2009/10/25/in\\_the\\_muslim\\_world\\_creationism\\_is\\_on\\_the\\_rise/](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2009/10/25/in_the_muslim_world_creationism_is_on_the_rise/).

<sup>7</sup> My arguments to this effect first appeared in a three-part article for *Scientia Salon* (a blog edited by Massimo Pigliucci). See, David Kyle Johnson, “Identifying the Conflict between Religion and Science—Part I,” *Scientia Salon* (blog), April 8, 2014, <https://scientiasalon.wordpress.com/2014/04/08/identifying-the-conflict-between-religion-and-science-part-i/>.

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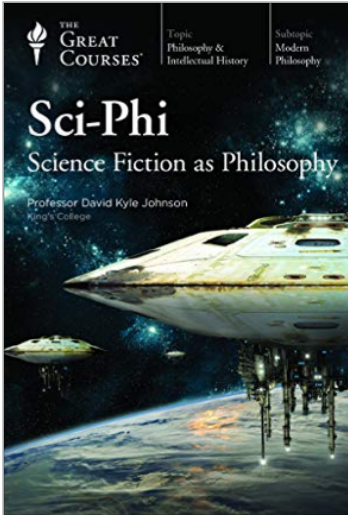
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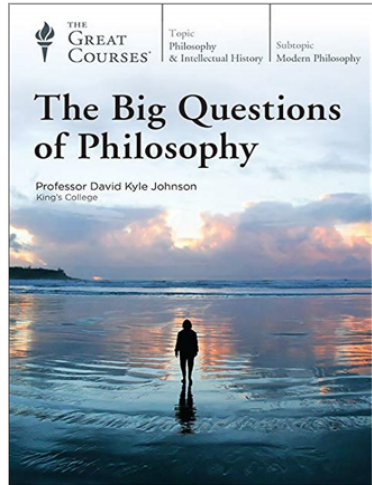
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