

## Book Review

**Gregg Caruso, ed. *Science and Religion: 5 Questions*. New York: Automatic Press/VIP, 2014, 264pp., ISBN 13: 978-87-92130-51-8**

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If you could ask some of the most prominent scholars across the humanities and sciences the same five questions about science and religion, what would you ask? This opportunity came to philosopher Gregg D. Caruso, thanks to a publisher whose “5 Questions” series is permitting readers to examine direct answers on all sorts of topics from today’s premier public intellectuals. Reading the answers about science and religion in this volume is consistently informative and inspirational, and frequently revealing in stunning ways. Comparing the answers from the impressive figures in the book takes readers on a journey through truly deep and important issues with honesty and clarity.

This collection of 33 interviews starts from Dr. Caruso’s selection of just five questions, and his plan to invite influential thinkers renowned for their work in philosophy, theology, history, anthropology, psychology, biology, physics, and cosmology. The interviews with these thinkers proceed chapter by chapter in alphabetical order by last name. Among them are many ardent defenders of religion and theological systems, situated next to outspoken critics of religion and skeptical voices against God. Several scientists display congeniality towards much of religion without any tone of condescension, and several theologians sincerely find science necessary for being fully religious.

The lineup of names included is impressive: Simon Blackburn, Susan Blackmore, Sean Carroll, William Lane Craig, William Dembski, Daniel C. Dennett, George F.R. Ellis, Owen Flanagan, Owen Gingerich, Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, John F. Haught, Muzafer Iqbal, Lawrence Krauss, Colin McGinn, Alister McGrath, Mary Midgley, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Timothy O’Connor, Massimo Pigliucci, John Polk-

inghorne, James “The Amazing” Randi, Alex Rosenberg, Michael Ruse, Robert John Russell, John Searle, Michael Shermer, Victor Stenger, Robert Thurman, Michael Tooley, Charles Townes, Peter van Inwagen, Keith Ward, and David Wolpe. Nonreligious readers will recognize many atheists and skeptics; religious readers can see a representative voice or two from their denomination or religious tradition.

No one can better praise the impressive qualifications of his interview participants than Caruso himself. “The contributors include influential and prominent philosophers, scientists, theologians, apologists, and atheists, including a Nobel Prize winning physicist, three Templeton Prize winners, two ‘Humanist of the Year’ winners, the Most Influential Rabbi in America (Newsweek, 2012), the leading American expert on Tibetan Buddhism (The New York Times), a National Humanities Medal winner, a National Medal of Science winner, a Star of South Africa Medal winner, a Carl Sagan Award winner, a National Science Board’s Public Service Medal winner, a MacArthur Fellow, a Lakatos Award winner, an Erasmus Prize winner, a Friend of Darwin Award winner, a Distinguished Skeptic Award winner, the first Muslim to deliver the prestigious Gifford Lectures, and many more.” (Accessed at <https://www.corning-cc.edu/news/academic/ccp-prof-edits-new-book>, dated April 16, 2014.)

So, what are the five questions that Caruso asked? Two questions help us understand the backgrounds and motivation of the thinkers themselves: “What initially drew you to theorizing about science and religion?” and “What do you consider to be your own most important contribution(s) to theorizing about science and religion?” These are entirely appropriate

and helpful questions to pose. Each personal narrative, however brief as some of them are, is a helpful window into the personal worlds that they came to inhabit, and simultaneously a perspective on the wider academic and cultural forces that have shaped their careers. One may get surprised (but shouldn't be) at the frequency of scientists and philosophers with appreciative religious backgrounds, and the number of theologians with sound scientific credentials. Opportunities to understand the unique intellectual journeys that profound thinkers have taken, spoken in the first person while still among the living, are regrettably infrequent nowadays.

The third question is a mouthful: "Do you think science and religion are compatible when it comes to understanding cosmology (the origin of the universe), biology (the origin of life and of the human species), ethics, and/or the human mind (minds, brains, souls, and free will)?" Caruso's volume is worth every penny and more due to the answers given to this question alone. Comparative assessments of the answers from thinker to thinker would require more additional space than the total pages of this book. Pick any two interviews at random for comparison on just the answers to this one question can supply almost endless fruitful deliberation and debate.

Take some scientists—Carroll, Krauss, and Stenger, say—and the subtle and not-so-subtle differences are surprising and provocative. Science can't answer questions of meaning or ethics, says Carroll. Yet religion has no authority over morality, says Krauss. Stenger suggests that morality arose from human trial-and-error experimentation long ago. Lists of immoralities and indecencies in scripture and Church history are repeatedly provided. Yet none of them can claim that science will decide matters of ethics. Many admit that science by itself won't yield definitive answers to consciousness or free will. But they do express their confidence that religion has no solid answers here at all.

The nonreligious philosophers tend to agree with the scientists about religion's incompetence. The commonest answer among them (excepting McGinn and Pigliucci, who espouse atheism) to the "science and religion compatibility" question basically says that compatibility is a simple matter, since religion has no right to make claims about reality in the first place. Religion is just a cultural phenomenon established for social functions, many point out. By contrast, the

outspoken skeptics and atheists were more likely to forcefully declare that science has largely contradicted and refuted the falsities and irrationalities to religious views.

Selecting out any pairing or small group among the defenders of religion similarly provides plenty of opportunities for discerning thought-provoking similarities and disagreements. They uniformly agree that science won't have all the factual answers about the cosmos, or ever be much help with questions of meaning or morality. The theologians are especially explicit and detailed about their judgments that one or another type of scientific knowledge is not just compatible with, but supportive of, theological views of God. All that detail tends to make the interviews with theologians about twice as long as interviews with scientists (e.g. Carroll's chapter is 6 pages; the next chapter is Craig's at 13 pages). The theologians tend to rely heavily on their acquaintance with one or another scientific field. Polkinghorne talks at length about neuroscience and cosmology, while Dembski relays his views on biology, for example. Peter van Inwagen stands out in this crowd by asserting that science's discoveries are irrelevant to learning whether God exists.

These interviews constantly return to the fundamental relationship between science and religion. The fourth question puts the matter this way: "Some theorists maintain that science and religion occupy non-overlapping magisteria—i.e., that science and religion each have a legitimate magisterium, or domain of teaching authority, and these two domains do not overlap. Do you agree?" The interviews can't be slotted into tidy categories here, and the pro- and anti-science thinkers can find themselves in agreement on one or another perspective. Those who perceive compatibility may depict religion as entirely normative, avoiding contact with science's descriptions. Other compatibilists judge that science and religion cooperate to forge metaphysical answers together, while still other compatibilists are simply content to say that science and religion can't contradict each other, so they must be compatible in some thinly logical sense. A couple of compatibilists can't find anything informative or useful in religion at all, which also yields a default compatibilism.

Among the incompatibilists, none dare to suggest that science has so little utility that religion and theology must override it. Not even the proponents of

intelligent design are so bold, perhaps because they need scientific information to get started. The religious incompatibilists instead tend to take science as a comprehensive worldview (such as materialism or naturalism), and point out alleged ways that this scientific worldview must be inadequate or hostile to the fulfilment of human potential and the moral progress of civilization. Most of the straightforward incompatibilists are almost entirely among the severe skeptics and staunch atheists, but there is lingering disagreement even there. Some depict religion as essentially about quasi-scientific hypotheses which dramatically fail at empirical confirmation. Others portray religion as an odd collection of immature imaginative notions that were destined to be replaced by the first discoveries of empirical science.

The fifth and final question is perhaps the most revealing of all: “What are the most important open questions, problems, or challenges confronting the relationship between science and religion, and what are the prospects for progress?” Among science’s defenders, answers vary widely. Some provide lists of scientific inquiries to undertake for eventually justifying naturalism’s pre-eminence. Others have little to say here. Dennett’s lone open question ponders how long we must wait for religion’s retreat in complete surren-

der. Krauss can’t offer any important open questions; religion is too unreliable to participate in reputable inquiries. Religion’s defenders display little uniformity, either. Some need science to back down and naturalism to back off before productive dialogue between religion and science can make progress. Others are hopeful that more and more sound science can only assist religious worldviews develop towards the comprehensiveness they need for flourishing in coming decades and centuries. The most common suggestion raised by both camps urges an intense interest in the cognitive and neurosciences for comprehending why and how the human mind can be religious and prone to profound experiences.

*Science and Religion: 5 Questions* is an accessible volume equally at home with a book discussion club or an undergraduate course. Advanced students and scholars can confidently recommend this book as an efficient way for anyone to get up to speed on both the breadth and depth to the important questions aroused by the intersections of science and religion. At a time when what counts as the “right” answers to those questions appears to only be narrowing and rigidifying, an eye-opening collection like this one could only be useful and timely.