



Harnessing Science and Religion Productively


Debates between science and religion have been going on for generations and reality maintains that they will most likely endure forever, in one aspect or another. The key strategy therefore is not to fight these matters of reality in hopes of complete integration of scientific and religious views, rather to find ways to harness the two antithetical fields only long enough for one to utilize their personal and/ or political advantages. Jonathan Boyarin, author of "Waiting for a Jew: Marginal Redemption at the Eighth Street Shul," discusses the use of anthropology as a "*transcultural*" knowledge across traditional Judaism. In his, "What does the dreaded 'E' word *mean* anyway? A Reverie for the Opening of the Hayden Planetarium," Stephen J. Gould explicates the contradictory meanings of evolution, and the relation of part of that contradiction to the Christian doctrine. Further, in "The Ganges' Next Life," Alexander Stille portrays his model of the relationship between science and Hinduism by revealing the complex double identity of Mishra- a prominent religious figure, and also a professor of hydraulic engineering in India. These exact discussions, explications, and portrayals that deal with the sometimes tense relationship between science and religion have all been successful in leading to the discovery of economics, marginality, language, and flexibility and adaptability of a given culture, as noteworthy approaches for harnessing both science and religion productively for a given situation in society. 

To begin, economics plays a major role in determining the relationship between science and religion. In "The Gange's Next Life," Stille brings out numerous instances of India's adaptability to science in terms of its' religious aspects. As one such instance, Stille mentions, "the building of an electric crematorium...in order to cut back on the traditional funerals...seems to be working, for the lines in front of the brick crematorium are much longer than the ones in front of the firewood sellers" (604). Why? Well, in order to answer this question, Stille quotes Mishra in stating, "The reasons are economic. A traditional funeral today will cost between fifteen hundred and two thousand rupees, and the charge


for the electric crematorium is seventy rupees" (604). This statement directly implies that economics is an important factor in establishing a relationship between science and religion. Further maintaining the idea, Gould has stated, "The antievolution laws of the Scopes era...were never strictly enforced, but their existence cast a pall over American education, as textbook publishers capitulated to produce 'least common denominator' versions acceptable in all states" (323). This statement depicts a broadening of the gap between science and religion due to the facts of economics, since the books without the inclusion of 'evolution' as demanded by religion would sell more than the books with the contents of 'evolution.' Considering these overlying concepts of economics, when it is possible for the goal of religion to be achieved by science as in India's case, the access to scientific approach should be made cheaper than the religious approach. In carrying out the religious goal with the scientific approach, a close complementary relationship between science and religion would be established.

 Economics is undertaken by marginality as another factor involved in leading to the collaboration of science and religion. Based on his experiences, Boyarin discusses much in terms of marginality, even mentioning towards the end, " The fact that I have found a religious community that needs me because of its marginality and will tolerate me because of a generosity born of tradition is what I mean by the marginal redemption of one Jew" (164). This statement emphasizes that the religious community of the shul tolerated, as in accepted Boyarin, in part because of its marginality—its desperate need for another member, which is what allowed his "marginal redemption." Accordingly, from Stille's essay it can be inferred that India is now seeking the help of science in cleaning up the Ganges, (its holy river), mainly because the river is seemingly on its marginality. In support to the fact of the river's marginality, Stille has stated, " In some places at Varanasi, the fecal-coliform count has been known to reach a hundred and seventy million bacteria per hundred milliliters of water—a terrifying three hundred and forty thousand times the acceptable level of five hundred per hundred milliliters...Some five hundred million people—one out of every

twelve people in the world—now live in the basin of the Ganges and its tributaries. A hundred and fourteen cities dump their raw sewage directly into the river...Not surprisingly, waterborne illnesses—hepatitis, amebic dysentery, typhoid, and cholera—are common killers, helping to account for the deaths of more than two million Indian children each year” (599). This statement not only emphasizes the level of marginality the Ganges has come upon, by providing factual data pertaining to the harshly polluted condition of the river, but also recognizes the extent to which the problem is spread across; affecting the lives of an enormous amount of population. Acknowledging the marginality of the river, and realizing that before India had come upon this acknowledgement, it did not seek any apparent extensive scientific approach in solving its problem (as no such recollections exist), it can well be maintained that if it wasn't for its river's marginality, India would not have considered incorporating science into its procedure for solving matters connected to its religious acts, thus the cooperation between science and religion would not have subsisted, at least in this case.

 Besides economics and marginality, language—particularly its expression, is another dominant feature involved in determining the relationship between science and religion. As support, Stille has quoted Mishra's perspective as to how science and religion can be meshed together to save the Ganges: “The western approach based on fear of a possible ecological disaster will not work. If you go to people who have a living relationship with Ganga and you say, ‘Ganga is polluted, the water is dirty,’ they will say, ‘Stop saying that. Ganga is not polluted. You are abusing the river.’ But if you say ‘Ganga is our mother. Come and see what is being thrown on the body of our mother—sewage and filth. Should we tolerate sewage being smeared on the body of our mother?’ you will get a very different reaction, and you can harness that energy” (610). Clearly, in stating this, Mishra is implying that instead of offending the unit of concern, (Ganga in this case), one should alter his language to instead praise the unit of concern and if anything, offend the factors leading to the concern, not the unit of concern itself; which then will yield the expected positive energy

that can be utilized as intended. The focus on language in Gould's essay, however, is not to alter the entire statement, rather to simply modify, or to refrain from using a particular word, ('evolution' in this case), that can be used to prevent any possible clash between science and religion, thus ensure their cooperation in that manner. As evidence, Gould had stated, " Darwin never used the 'e' word extensively in his writings...never used the word 'evolution' in the title of any book—and he chose in his book on human history, to emphasize the genealogical 'descent' of our species, not our 'ascent' to higher levels of consciousness" (326). This fact depicts that Darwin understood the power of language, as he refrained from using a word that he understood would not be accepted by his society. Nevertheless, he did adhere to his views, simply stating them in a 'community friendly' language. Thus, language is an effective method in preventing tension between two groups, thus sustaining their cooperativeness.

 The actual overall extent to which economics, marginality, and language will affect the relationship between science and religion, however, is manifested in the flexibility and adaptability of a given culture. As stated by Stille, "It seems typical of India's uncanny ability to preserve its' culture while surviving countless foreign occupations and absorbing new influences" (609). In preserving its' culture while also absorbing new influences, India has shown the great flexibility of its' culture. This great flexibility has in turn allowed India to be able to adapt to science with much more ease. For instance, as Stille mentions, "Indians have adapted new technology to their own traditional purposes. When Indian television broadcast a movie version of the Ramayana, many Indian families moved their sets up onto their household altars and worshipped before them...these people were not worshipping the television; they were worshipping their gods" (610). Thus, with the flexibility of India's culture that doesn't restrict Indians to worshipping only a statue or portrait of their Gods, Indians were successfully able to incorporate science into their practice of religion. Although it did not occur with as much population as of India's, the survival of the shul, as Boyarin refers to it, was made possible, "because of the many

individuals who have recognized the creative possibilities of a situation that demands that they create a new unity while allowing each of them to retain their otherness" (164). This statement implies that the shul's flexibility allowed it to adapt to the many individuals who had created a new unity even while retaining their otherness. In other words, different individuals were able to persist together because of their shul's flexibility. Considering how the flexibility can allow for the cohesive survival of distinct ideas, it can well be expected to allow the harnessing of two the distinct areas: science and religion.

As aforementioned, science and religion can be harnessed effectively in today's society through the means of economics, marginality, language, and the flexibility and adaptability of a given culture. Of course knowing which one is the right strategy for the right situation, at the right time is equally important.

