

## Science and Religion: What Is It All For?



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What is the meaning of our existence? What, if anything, is the point of all our efforts to live for more than mere physical survival? Why are our dreams of a world founded on beauty, truth, and peace so compelling? And why do we ask so many questions and drive ourselves to meet impossible challenges?

Many, if not all of us, have encountered an irresistible urge to commit ourselves to a lifelong search for answers to questions such as these. Moreover, in the moment of commitment we have felt the adrenaline flow and our pulses race as our hearts beat faster. Instinctively, we recognize that we are not choosing an easy option, that the journey will involve incalculable risk, that the search will require “blood, toil, tears and sweat,” and that the best we have to offer of ourselves will be scarcely sufficient for the task.

In the beginning, we do not even know exactly what it is that we are seeking. Like the knights of King Arthur in search of the Holy Grail, we have to enter the forest at the darkest place where there is no path.

We are not in competition with one another; the quest will take each of us along a different way. Although we learn constantly from those around us, in the end we are responsible for faithfully following our own paths, for it is only by so doing that each of us will make our unique contribution to the sum total of human knowledge and insight.

The qualities which have long been recognized as essential in such a quest include courage, vision, integrity, perseverance, respect for others, commitment, humility, and that all-encompassing, multifaceted attribute, love. These are words laden with poetic overtones. But they are also the everyday ideals which we have come to expect everyone to live up to, whether they are company directors, scientists, artists, theologians, explorers, artisans, nurses, or politicians.

The knights of King Arthur, as well as great religious thinkers and philosophers, knew that unless we aspire to such virtues, none of us can hope to reach our full potential. As St. Paul implied in his letter to the Corinthians, we may acquire faith enough to move mountains and we may come to understand all mysteries, but if we are without love, all our labor, all our effort, and all our pain are worth precisely nothing.

Our shared experiences bind us together and far outweigh our differences. Whatever our calling, all our searches for meaning are conceived in the mists where the unknown beckons us with all its potential and infinite possibility. We all struggle to express our fleeting, dreamlike understanding of reality.

For some, those first contemplations are transformed into the posing of a question or a series of experiments; others express them in music or sculpting; and yet more of us interpret them as an encounter with the living God. Our need to come to terms with our creative gifts commits us all to the search for articulate expression through which we can share our experience with others. We persevere at every level to find the precise note, the true color, the exact word, the definitive experiment.

Moreover, the conversion of our dreams to reality exposes us all to the possibility of failure, of disclosing our inadequacy, of corrupting what appeared pure and incorruptible before our attempts to grasp, define, and give form to that which we experienced in the mist. Small wonder that the moment of commitment to the quest is sometimes terrifying, is always awe-inspiring, invariably requires courage, and needs to be accompanied by a vision of what could be achieved.

Further, to enrich and develop our own contribution it is essential for us to share our experiences with those whose paths are different from our own. For the scientist and the religious person to engage in a dis-

cussion in which there is a meeting of minds is no trivial task. Courage, vision, integrity, perseverance, respect for others, commitment, humility, and love are never more needed than when we contemplate sharing something infinitely precious to us with someone whom we believe may not appreciate it or, worse still, may despise it.

Our generation is engaged in the large-scale compartmentalization of knowledge. Ours is an age of specialists, and information overload is a daily reality. It is safer to stay with the systems we know best, where we have authority and insight. However, the fundamental question “What is all our increased knowledge for?” needs addressing urgently, and by us all. We have to dare to talk to one another, even to risk having to change our ideas in the light of new information. If we are to understand even a little of the essence of the universe, the nature of God, or what it means to be a human being, we need to combine all the insights we can derive from our various perspectives.

Science has opened up undreamed-of vistas in fields such as communication, space exploration, genetic engineering, robotics, and medicine. The great religions of the world are a priceless heritage which, uniquely, have the potential to integrate and express every aspect of human experience through poetry, art, music, symbol, and ritual. They can evolve to accommodate the deepest hopes and aspirations of each new generation. But for this to happen we all need to reflect on the current knowledge emerging from our particular discipline and to relate this to the innermost needs of the human spirit.



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