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Book Review

Magisteria: The Entangled Histories of Science & Religion

Nicholas Spencer

London: Oneworld Publications, 2023. Ebook.

In our secular age, many find the presence of religion problematic. If science now seems to be the source of truth in our world, why do we still have people who hold superstitious beliefs and even worse, try to bring them to the public square? What's an enlightened society to do?

For some, the best response is to hope that religious people will either come to their senses or disappear. For the more sympathetic, it's a question of keeping religion a purely personal matter so that it can be kept neatly separated from serious worldly concerns. Luckily, not everyone is prepared to dismiss religion as an eccentric set of beliefs that is best relegated to the personal.

Nicholas Spencer is a prolific author, podcaster and public commentator who has demonstrated a certain fearlessness in examining the contribution that religion makes to society, exploring such thorny issues as faith and politics. A senior fellow at the UK based think tank *Theos*, his work reflects *Theos'* mission to explore the positive role that faith, particularly Christian faith, can play in the public square.

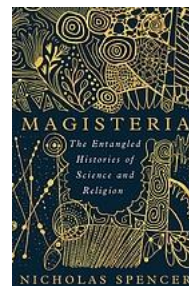
His most recent book *Magisteria: The Entangled Histories of Science and Religion* tackles another equally thorny issue. A follow-up to Spencer's 2019 BBC Radio 4 series, *The Secret History of Science and Religion*, his book challenges our contemporary understanding of the history of science and religion as the story of two warring factions. In a sweeping examination that takes the reader from the early days of Christianity to the modern day, as well as detailed forays into Judaism and Islam, Spencer tells a compelling story that demonstrates the complexity of the relationship.

Spencer's goal is clear. His work is designed to challenge the popular notion that the history of faith and science is one of constant conflict. According to this version of events, during the periods that religion dominated society, it also dominated science and forced those working in the field to deny their findings or curb their research. The Enlightenment allowed western society to throw off the shackles of religion and saw science take its rightful place as the source of truth.

Spencer takes issue with what he calls this "popular history of hostility and conflict, of comprehensive victory and humiliating defeat", noting that the "single coherent narrative we have been sold fragments, on closer inspection, into a mess of variously connected tales." (intro., para. 6)

Throughout the book, Spencer demonstrates the many instances where faith encouraged science. Although understanding the nature of God might begin with scripture, studying his creation was seen by many as a way of both enhancing our knowledge of the creator as well as glorifying him, often enriching religious thought in the process. "In actual fact", Spencer concludes, "for much of history, religion wasn't just 'not at war' with science, but it actively supported it, serving to legitimize, preserve, encourage and develop scientific ideas and activities." (intro., para. 13)

Although we may have grown accustomed to high profile scientists dismissing religion as nonsense, this is much more of a contemporary phenomenon. The book contains



numerous profiles of individuals of great faith who were also leading scientific thinkers, many of them also holding clerical positions. For them, science was a way of responding to God's call.

This was even true for the Enlightenment. Despite its popular portrayal as a period where society rejected religion in favour of the "truth" of scientific inquiry, the history of that period reveals something far different. Instead of being at odds with each other, science and religion often worked hand in hand. Many of the leading thinkers of the period were people of faith who saw their work helping us gain a better appreciation of God's power and wisdom. Spencer reminds us of Isaac Newton's words in *Principia*: "This most elegant system of the sun, planets, and comets could not have arisen without the design and dominion of an intelligent and powerful being." (chap. 8, para. 5)

Although anxious to correct the record, Spencer's goal is not to argue that science and religion have not had their conflicts. Over the centuries there are examples where religious forces have worked to silence science and Spencer is not shy in highlighting those instances. In many cases, however, he argues that the stories are more complex than previously thought and there were often other agendas at work.

To illustrate this point, he opens his book with three famous clashes between religion and science: the trial of Galileo; the 1860 Huxley-Wilberforce debate on evolution; and the Scopes trial. Although all three are often presented as great period dramas pitting religion against science, Spencer shows that they were in fact complex situations with many other factors at play and do not represent monumental defeats for either side.

Spencer's work challenges another, perhaps more charitable view of the relationship of science and religion – that the two are entirely different subjects and any tension between them is artificial. At first blush, this perspective, held by such leading thinkers as American paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould, appears to hold the key to allowing science and religion to cohabitate in peace. Science, according to this approach, is about establishing the facts of the universe while religion focuses on "the realm of 'ultimate meaning and moral value'". As Spencer explains, Gould believed that "science and religion were NOMA: non-overlapping magisteria" - helping to inspire the title of the book. (chap. 18, para. 40)

Spencer reveals the flaws of this seemingly elegant approach. Despite the complexity of the science-religion relationship, much of the hostility between them has focused on two related questions. The first is around authority – does science have the last word on questions related to the world around us? And as Spencer points out, this question of authority is never more controversial than when combined with the second question – "the concept of the human – our makeup, origins, purpose, dignity and uniqueness (or lack thereof)." (intro., para. 23)

Although there is no precise moment where science and religion began to go their separate ways, Spencer believes this tension over authority and our understanding of the concept of being human helped spur a drifting apart that began in the nineteenth century. As science became more professionalized and debates over concepts like evolution became more heated, rifts began to appear. Unfortunately for us, these rifts found their way into popular histories from the period that tried to portray the two subjects as always having been in conflict – histories that have shaped current thinking.

According to Spencer, this question of authority and the nature of being human reached a peak with the rise of sociobiology that began in the 1970s. A number of prominent scientists began to argue that human behaviour was pre-ordained by our genes or to use the

words of the scientist (and leading “New Atheist”) Richard Dawkins, our body is “really a machine blindly programmed by its selfish gene”. (chap. 18, para. 17) If humans were simply happy (or unhappy) accidents of evolution, what about questions of agency or personal morality which have a decidedly religious aspect to them? Suddenly, the idea of a clear division between the two subjects disappears.

In his final chapter Spencer draws a line between this discussion and one of the most pressing issues facing our society: Artificial Intelligence. As we develop machines that mirror the human brain, crucial questions emerge of direct concern to religion. What is the nature of these new beings? To what extent is something that is as intelligent or even more intelligent than us, “human”? How do we navigate the ethical minefields associated with their existence? In Spencer’s opinion, these questions are ripe for dialogue between science and religion, perhaps setting the stage for the next phase of this complex relationship.

Spencer’s book is well-written, and his use of humour serves to lighten some heavy topics. He systematically covers a great deal of ground, even taking a fascinating detour into the unsuccessful attempts by the Soviet Union to replace religion with science. Although an enjoyable read, a detailed conclusion might have helped the reader understand that voyage that they have just taken.

Similarly, although Spencer explores contemporary issues like artificial intelligence, he ignores others. The book is silent, for example, on the role that science has played in changing our understanding of sexual orientation, often in opposition to traditional religious views. As the focus shifts to transgender issues, with many religious voices raising objections, we have witnessed both sides appeal to science to make their case. Once again, Spencer’s questions about the nature of being human and who has the final say are at the core of a debate where more measured discussion is desperately needed.

Despite the complexity of our age, our society seems to like simple explanations, even when it comes to history. Yet, our love of these simplistic narratives does little to help us understand our contemporary world and how to move forward. By “busting” myths about the supposed “war” between religion and science, Nicholas Spencer has done far more than set the record straight. By exploring the complexities of the relationship and demonstrating the way the two can cooperate (as well as be at odds with each other) his work has once again allowed us to understand the positive role that faith can play in the public square.

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