

The Text in Science and Religion
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I re-discovered on reading Steve Fuller’s comment—(<http://bit.ly/1K17uXl>) on “A New Look at Known Issues”—that a well-known idea, placed in a new context, can contribute to the birth of an unexpected perspective on the topic at hand. I refer to Fuller’s opinion that both science and religion are tied to texts, and that this feature is essential to both enterprises. Fuller states: “The significance of reality’s ‘textuality’ or even ‘bookishness’ is that it presumes a sense of communicability that overcomes distance in time and space.” Let’s reflect on Fuller’s words, where communication is the key idea.

Communication among whom? In science, we deal primarily with communication among scientists—such is an essential feature of the enterprise. But may we say that communication among believers plays the same role in religion? Of course it “overcomes distance in time and space” but, rather, in a different way? Scriptures are God’s message to believers. Yet, we cannot respond to them, especially in printed form, as we do with scientific texts.

People’s communication with God is of a quite another kind. It is not a dialog. A believer addresses God with prayer, which is accompanied by numerous conventions—a specific place, time, body position, voice, facial expression and so on. Churches are built, icons painted, and many church officials play the role of intermediaries between man and God. Many rituals exist that must be fulfilled in order to address, and be heard by, God.

We are accustomed to take part in the functioning of this complex structure or to, at least, watch it. And usually we do not notice that the inner life in the frame of religion cannot be rationally understood in its emotional, spiritual features that are, meanwhile, the main part of the communication between man and God. We believe that the acts of sorcerers, shamans and representatives of small sects are senseless. We do not want to see that their actions are essentially of the same nature as the rituals and norms of conduct in traditional religions.

May we say that when Christians cross themselves that they establish communication with God that can be understood rationally? I think the answer is no. The communication both between a believer and God, and among other believers, is quite different in comparison with the relationships among scientists, in the scientific communities, that are realized through texts. Through religion, people seek to get into the spiritual world. In result they create religions, which can be considered as part of culture. Religion focuses on the spiritual world. Science, on the contrary, focuses on the material world.

Up to this point, I have referred to the modern period—the 17th to the end of 20th century. However, in recent decades, we have witnessed a radical turn in the development of science that is especially evident in the social epistemology and in the study of scientific knowledge. I refer to Fuller’s works as an important transformation in contemporary scientific thinking. To my mind, the main feature of this trend is that a new knowledge retains the way of its origin in the head of a scientist. This origin is the most difficult object of study and it is not removed from the result of scientific activity. Consequently

nature, which was dead up to this point, acquires the ability to communicate. Nature becomes alive to some extent.

At the same time, religion is increasingly embedded in social structures—not always in a positive way. The Crusades brought violence and grief to conquered countries, but their banner was to bring a true faith to all peoples. Currently, certain extreme elements of Islam seek to change daily life and social structures. Such activities are directed first at worldly affairs that are far from belief in God. These elements of Islam are materialized, in a certain sense, while science seeks to eliminate its total dependence on the material world. These changes in science and religion give rise to many serious problems in philosophy and sociology that require study.

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References

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