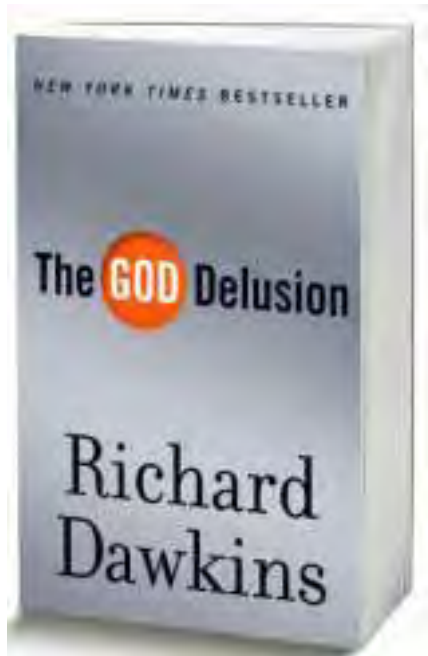


## A Step Toward a “Unity” of Science and Religion

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The “unity” of science and religion is one of the central theses of Unificationism. In the Divine Principle, the “unity” of science and religion is discussed as one of the characteristics of “new truth” disclosed by the Principle. In practice, beginning in 1972, Rev. Moon held a series of International Conferences on the Unity of the Sciences (ICUS) in order to bridge science and religion. The sciences include natural, social, and human sciences, and religion includes Judeo-Christian and Islamic monotheism, non-Western religions, and various spiritual paths. Both in theory and practice, Unificationism seeks the integration of all knowledge within a theistic framework and the idea of a “unity” of science and religion is part of this endeavor.



Recent atheist movements led by Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris have been undermining religion on the basis of “science.” Religious apologetics similarly attempt to justify their beliefs based upon “science.” Before we approach the question of the “unity” of science and religion, we need to clarify the nature of scientific knowledge as well as that of religious knowledge.

I challenge the popular belief that science is interpretation-free, a-historical, non-social knowledge, and argue that both science and religion have interpretive dimensions (whether there is any knowledge free from interpretation is a separate and open question). If science and religion are two types of interpretive theories, their frameworks of interpretation, including presuppositions and assumptions, require rigorous scrutiny. The hermeneutic structure of human understanding, the dynamic part-and-whole relationship between each element and the framework of interpretation, may be the most fundamental element in any human understanding.

### What Does the “Unity” of Science and Religion Mean?

There are two contrasting attitudes towards religion: one apologetic and another anti-religious. Others are somewhere in-between. Religious people often take an apologetic stance and try to find supportive evidence in the sciences. For them, “unity” means compatibility between or a justification of faith by science.

The anti-religious position, in its extreme form, denies the value and validity of faith on the basis of scientific “evidence.” From this position, the issue of “unity” does not exist because it takes science as solely valid. Authors such as Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), Michael Shermer (*The Believing Brain*), and Sam Harris (*The End of Faith*) hold this anti-religious naturalist position. Dawkins’ depiction of faith as “one of the world’s great evils” well expresses their hostile stance toward religion.

It is popularly believed that science, natural science in particular, is an interpretation-free, objective, value neutral form of knowledge. Contrary to this popular belief, philosophers of science have noted the interpretive dimensions of science.

### **Is Science Interpretation-free?**

In the early 20th century, a group of intellectuals created a group called the Vienna Circle. They argued that a statement/claim is meaningful if and only if it is verifiable by empirical sciences. Based upon this criterion, they divided knowledge (statements) into three groups: 1) knowledge verifiable by empirical sciences; 2) logic and mathematics; 3) anything else. (This tripartite division originated from David Hume; the Vienna Circle recapitulated Hume’s ideas.) Religious/ethical knowledge and their statements/claims, they argued, belong to the third group together with literature and art.

From this perspective, claims/statements in religion/ethics have poetic or literary values but they are (cognitively) meaningless. For knowledge to be valid, its truth or falsity has to be determined by empirical science. Claims/statements of religion/ethics are apparently neither proven nor disproven; such claims are not tested by empirical science. Hence, they argued that propositions of religion/ethics are cognitively meaningless. Their position was known as “logical positivism.”

A number of philosophers criticized this position, including Karl Popper (1902-94), Norwood Russell Hanson (1924–67), and Thomas Kuhn (1922-96).

Popper argued that what makes a theory scientific is not “verifiability” (a possibility of verification) but “falsifiability,” a possibility to be proven false. He argued that any theory can easily find some “evidence” to support the theory. Even astrology can find some “evidence.” What characterizes and distinguishes a scientific theory from non-scientific theory, he argued, is its openness for falsification. Scientific theory is tentative and open to disproof and change. (The issue of distinction between science and non-science is known as the “problem of demarcation.”)

When Popper applied this criterion to “scientific” theories, he found that some were outside of science. Popper listed Marxism and psychoanalysis (Sigmund Freud and others) as non-scientific theories because their hypotheses are not refutable in principle. There is always a way to explain any counter-evidence without changing its hypotheses.

The problem, however, was much deeper. Falsification of genuine scientific theory is also not as easy as Popper argued. Every scientific theory is built upon a number of hypotheses. As one of Popper’s critics pointed out, counter-evidence cannot easily identify which hypothesis is wrong. A scientific theory was, in reality, far “fuzzier” than many believed.

Hanson approached the issue from a different angle. He argued that “data” in science is not free from a theory but it is theory-loaded (“theory-laden”). For example, the term “120 volt” is meaningful only in reference to electro-magnetic theory. This data itself is driven by the theory. In other words, data in science is not a theory-neutral quantity but is meaningful only in reference to a relevant theory.

Kuhn, known for the introduction of the concept of “paradigm,” further developed the line of thought held by Hanson. Arguing against logical positivism, Kuhn observed the social, historical, and interpretive dimensions of science. He noted that new paradigms led to the revolutionary development of scientific theories, and that scientists came up with new paradigms from a variety of sources including intuition, inspiration, and others. Such paradigm shifts were comparable to a religious conversion.

One may still argue that scientific knowledge is neutral and objective based on its methodologies, testing procedures and norms. Although this argument is partially true, Kuhn argued, what is considered as “valid” as to the norms and procedures is determined by current practices in scientific communities, which evolve over time. In short, scientific knowledge is not knowledge that is interpretation-free, a-historical, and non-social. What counts as “scientific” is socially, historically conditioned and scientific theory has a structure of interpretation. Later in his career, Kuhn rephrased the term paradigm as a “hermeneutic core” in his efforts to discover the common characteristic amongst natural, social, and human sciences.

### **Interpretive Dimension of Religious Knowledge**

What then is the nature of religious knowledge? Is it God-given, infallible, transcendent, interpretation-free knowledge? Or is religious knowledge laden with interpretive, social, and historical dimensions? Whether or not there is knowledge free from interpretation is an open question that requires a separate discussion. Nevertheless, religious knowledge has an interpretive dimension. From antiquity, reading texts, signs, divinations, dreams, and revelations has been the task of high priests, shamans, and religious scholars. Hermeneutics, a theory of interpretation, has been a part of religious and legal knowledge (laws require interpretation).

Some may argue that revelation is direct, un-mediated knowledge from God. To take a “message” as “revelation,” however, requires interpretation. For example, Genesis 22:5 and 22:8 describe Abraham’s offering of his son Isaac. Killing one’s own son is an awful and unethical command. If someone received this kind of “message,” how could he or she take it as God’s message? It is quite possible to set it aside as a bad dream or Devil’s whisper. To take the “message” as “revelation” is an act of interpretation. (In his *Fear and Trembling*, Søren Kierkegaard, a 19th century Danish philosopher, analyzed Abraham’s process of interpretation.)

Interpretation is essential to religion. From ritual to texts and religious symbolism, it is interpretation that makes religious acts/texts “meaningful.”

### **On Interpretation**

An endeavor toward the integration of knowledge, expressed as the unity of science and religion in Unificationism, reveals the presence of the interpretive dimension in knowledge. Why and how is interpretation (hermeneutics) so fundamental to knowledge? How can the Divine Principle answer this question?

Interpretation is basically a dynamic interaction between the parts (items of interpretation) and the whole (horizon, framework, and context of interpretation). The part-and-whole is one of the most fundamental concepts in the Divine Principle. With this concept, Unificationism ontologically views the world as an organic whole consisting of numerous part-whole relationships. When this concept is applied to the purpose of human life, it appears as the “purpose for the whole” (i.e., “living for the sake of others”) and “the purpose for the individual.” When this concept is applied to human understanding, it appears as hermeneutics.

In other words, human understanding is carried out as a dynamic part-whole relationship between an item of interpretation and its context or horizon of interpretation. Furthermore, because this concept is working at a root level in human thought, it drives us to unify/integrate diverse knowledge (parts) into a coherent whole (whole).

Although there is no explicit explanation of interpretation (hermeneutics) anywhere in the Principle, this concept is embedded into the Principle. Developing a theory of interpretation is a worthy project as a step toward the “unity” of science and religion.

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