

## Challenging the Conflict Paradigm, A Ted Talk Reflection

By

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**ABSTRACT.** This reflection brings various sources into dialogue to demonstrate the variety of ways religion and science may be interpreted to interact. It primarily utilizes a Ted Talk by Bryan Enderle on the compatibility of science and religion to discuss the inadequacy of the conflict paradigm for explaining the interaction of science and religion.

In this reflection, I present the message from a Ted Talk as a starting point to a critique on the conflict paradigm and secularization theory in the scholarship of science and religion. Utilizing a Ted Talk as the basis for reflection is helpful because Ted Talks carry authority in our culture by presenting experts' findings and ideas. In this case, this gives insight into current interpretations of an ages-old debate: are science and religion compatible or in competition with one another in society? This Ted Talk is about how the speaker, Bryan Enderle, views science and God as integrated and dependent on one another for a more complete understanding of the universe. He presents a few theories that use scientific explanations to make God's existence seem more plausible. The central theme of this Ted Talk is the possibility of coexistence and complementarity of science and God. This is relevant to the sociological scholarship of science and religion because it brings into question whether science and religion are contradictory as the conflict paradigm, which is pervasive in our culture, suggests. Enderle's Ted Talk points to a limitation in Peter Berger's theory of religion as a "sacred canopy" (Berger 1967) because it provides an explanation that illustrates science and religion as two complementary and mutually reinforcing, rather than conflicting, logics to understand the world.

In his Ted Talk, Enderle explains how he believes science and religion are both important ways of knowing that can support one another. More specifically, he presents three modern scientific theories: probability, relativity, and entanglement, that parallel mysteries about God: miracles, omniscience, and omnipresence. He explains that since there is a small probability for even highly unlikely events, "we should not be surprised" if God can conduct miracles (4:46-4:48). Since time does not move at the speed of light, God, who is often symbolized by light, may very well be all-knowing across time. Since entangled molecules can communicate with each other across great distances, who is to say God cannot be present all across space at once (Enderle 2013). These phenomena provide a scientific explanation for how God can be God, which may help scientists and others strengthen their faith. He also asks the question "why is this water

boiling?”(10:57-10:59) and provides both the scientific explanation and the practical one: wanting to drink some tea. This analogy serves to support the idea that we can use “both the science explanation and the deeper meaning explanation to get a fuller picture of reality” (Enderle 2013, 11:53-12:00), supporting his view that science and faith in God are not only compatible but both important to a holistic perspective of the universe.

Seeing as the main principle of this Ted Talk is the connection and compatibility of science and religion, it can act as data or evidence against the conflict paradigm and secularization theories. My use of the term “conflict paradigm” refers to the common thread in a discourse of religion and science that these ways of knowing intrinsically conflict with one another. Secularization theories are sociological theories that explain the decline of religion as society progresses. They support the conflict paradigm by presenting science as an agent of rationalization that challenges religious authority by offering alternative explanations to social and scientific phenomena and influencing a decline in religious practice and belief (Tschannen 1991). One of the sociological theories in secularization literature is Peter Berger’s concept of religion as a “sacred canopy” under which people organize their knowledge (Berger 1967). In this concept, religion is constructed by humans as a framework through which to view the world, and thus influences other social institutions and areas of life. In other words, religion is the overarching logic of life and everything else falls under it. The rationalization that is linked to science and industrialization is a secularizing force that begins to permeate social institutions and culture (Tschannen 1991). Under this theory, science acts as an alternative and conflicting canopy, so if more people use science to explain their worldview, this replaces religion and “the realm of the sacred” shrinks (Tschannen 1991:406). Instead of religion dominating education, the state, and other institutions in society, science begins to be the guiding force. Enderle’s perspective refutes this worldview by conceptualizing both science and religion as interconnecting parts of a canopy so to speak, as evidenced by the boiling water analogy I explained above. Enderle uses scientific theories and evidence to rationalize religion and fortify his belief in God, not weaken or replace it as the sacred canopy theory suggests.

Thus far, my goal has been to demonstrate that Enderle’s view of the science and religion interface provides a way for us to embrace both, therefore challenging secularization theory and conflict paradigms. In addition, however, I wish to illustrate that this is not the only way to conceptualize this challenge. For example, in another Ted Talk, Michael Dowd shares his way of understanding science and religion: what he calls sacred realism. In this concept, God essentially is reality. He sees scientific evidence as scripture and scientific discoveries as divine revelations (Dowd 2014). Enderle sees things a bit differently. He does not equate God and reality like Dowd does, but instead considers God or religious or spiritual explanations to be part of the full picture of reality. Evidence is not how God communicates with the world, from this view, but there is scientific evidence that parallels and makes more plausible the great mysteries about God. The main difference here is that Dowd sees science and religion as one, but Enderle sees them as two ways of knowing that can and should be considered as two parts of a whole. This variation among interpretations of how science and religion can interweave in an individuals’ beliefs or worldview sheds light on the complexity and

personalization of reconciliation between science and religion in the face of the conflict paradigm.

Enderle's and others' perspectives dispute the opposition of science and religion to some extent, but do not explain on its own whether science has a secularizing effect overall as it acts in society. What I mean is that even though Enderle and other individuals have demonstrated that science does not have to discount religion, this does not mean that the general population in some societies will see it that way. Sociologically, the social construction of the conflict paradigm as part of a culture, even if its principles are incorrect, can have an impact on people's perception of the compatibility of science and religion. Thus, religiosity may decrease as a result of science, depending on the views of the people in question. For example, in a study of Italian scientists, their religious devotion changed in different ways. Some scientists turned away from religion, others experienced a change in their religious beliefs and practices, and some even experienced an increase of religious involvement (Ecklund 2010). This study more directly challenges the notion of the secularizing effect of science, demonstrating that whether religiosity decreases depends on how religiosity is defined and how science's role in this is measured.

This study, as well as the comparison of the two Ted Talks in the previous paragraph, reveals that the impact of science on religiosity is nuanced. These various efforts to reconcile religious beliefs with science are an example of rationalization, disputing the idea in Berger's theory that rationalization is in opposition to religion. This nuanced relationship leaves room for further sociological study, but also demonstrates that the conflict paradigm is much too narrow to capture the full picture of how people perceive the science and religion interface.

Enderle's conception of the interconnectedness of science and religion demonstrates that these are not inherently incompatible ways of knowing, going against Peter Berger's secularization theory of religion as a "sacred canopy" and the rationalization in science as a necessarily opposing alternative. This Ted Talk is valuable because it brings into question the assumption of the conflict paradigm that science and religion are contrary to one another. It provides one scientist and theologian's perspective that can be used to challenge the conflict paradigm and foster dialogue with other explanations of compatibility. It can also inspire further research questions about how other people view the connection between religion and science. For example, how do people reconcile their beliefs in both science and religion? Does this differ across faith traditions? Across scientific disciplines? These are just some of many next questions to answer in the research on the interface between science and religion.

## REFERENCES

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