Swami Narasimhananda

The putting together in contradistinction of science and religion has been the task of philosophers, religion, sociologists, writers, and anyone who even cares to think, for many centuries now. So, here I would not go into the traditionally discussed aspects of this debate but rather would highlight some less or not discussed aspects. First, when one puts science and religion either on a comparable basis or pits them against one another, there is an oversimplified assumption that the words 'science' and 'religion' have singular meanings. The reality is, as everyone knows, that these two terms mean a loosely-knit group of disciplines that are a conglomeration of paths, sometimes quite opposite to one another. For instance, medicine is definitely science, but works on axioms, many of which are not accepted by quantum physics. Or, neuroscience has researched and made some findings that go against the spirit of many axioms of mathematics, which is also considered science. To make matters complicated, science is often seen by philosophers, as a discipline that maintains scientific temper or the scientific method. However, it is interesting to note that scientific temper or method is a characteristic that many disciplines other than science have shown to possess.

Let us now examine the term 'religion'. Many religious traditions advocate a linear perspective on the creation of universe, there is a beginning and there would be an end. There is a creator God, and in many traditions there is an eternal devil or Satan. Many religious traditions have a
‘believe it or become an infidel’ take on faith and God. Most of them also preach a last prophet or messenger, who alone can liberate people. However, these are not the only religious traditions. There are many religious traditions that emphasise wisdom acquired out of mystical or intuitive experiences. They have a cyclical worldview as opposed to a linear one, and believe that there is really no end or beginning to the universe, soul, or God. This is proof enough for us to believe that science or religion do not point to a single set of paradigms or principles and that they can be as varied as anything can be. Science can be religious. Religion can be scientific. They are more like two lines running alongside and intersecting, also intertwining sometimes, along the way.

If science is variegated, religion is a medley of ideas and practices ranging from the esoteric and mystic to downright abominable practices, ideas ranging from the fine and abstruse to downright idiotic and laughable gibberish. That said, it is not to say that science does not have its share of hare-brained ideas, which explains the frequent diametric reversals in scientific research. The same can be said about superstitions. As Swami Vivekananda pointed out, science has its share of superstitions and religion cannot be solely blamed for blind beliefs. Theories of Albert Einstein, John Tyndall, Thomas Henry Huxley in the past, and those of Stephen Hawking, Roger Penrose, or James Watson are considered gospel truth, irrespective of them being sometimes proven implausible.

Let us now look at the popular refutations of religion both from agnostics, the nones or the spiritual but not religious (SBNR)—those who have nothing against religion, but prefer not to belong to one—and, of course the atheists. All of these categories of people have bashcd religion time and again, but they do not counter or argue against many Eastern religious traditions. All their arguments are against the Judaico-Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Famous atheistic thinkers like Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Stephen Hawking engage only with these three religions and conveniently forget an entire range of Eastern religious traditions that do not suffer any of the limitations that they claim religions suffer. This is a great blind spot the so-called rationalists and scientists continue to maintain even in 2018.

Of course, the same is true of science. Whenever a person obsessed with a faith or religious tradition wants to bash science, they take up the most fixed theories of science and fight that science is dogmatic which changes its results every now and then. They do not go into in-depth studies of science, seldom read a scientific textbook or research paper, and jump to conclusions about science based on popular literature or journalistic writings. Needless to say, the converse is also true, where adherents of science, do not take time to study the various religious traditions spread across the world and rush to sit in value judgements about religion, and throw the baby with the bathwater, labelling religion as useless. If anything, we should by now understand that neither science nor religion is useless. Both have limitations. Both have caused immense good. Both have brought immense misery. Both are here to stay.

We can only approach science and religion as two approaches to truth. Science believes in approaching truth by studying the external and empirical. Religion approaches truth by studying the internal and intrinsic. However, measurability is not an essential characteristic of science as there are many scientific truths that can still not be measured and have to only be postulated mathematically. Neither is religion completely immeasurable and there are various studies that measure the effects of religion and religious practices on individuals and societies.

Of the various Eastern traditions, Vedanta is a good example of a religious tradition coming closest to science. Vedanta is a search for the ultimate truth with the help of the mind, which is untrue. Science too is a search for the ultimate truth with the help of observing this universe, which is untrue. Vedanta requires the practice of various disciplines like discernment, dispassion, forbearance, control of the mind and the senses, and so on; however, all these disciplines are also untrue. During its pursuit of truth, science too discovers newer theories, which at the end are not essential, as proven by quantum physics or particle physics.

In the Mundaka Upanishad, a disciple asks the teacher to tell about that one thing, knowing which all the other things are known. This is the search for the ultimate Truth. Albert Einstein wanted to know that one force, which can explain all the four basic forces, gravitational, electromagnetic, weak force(the force with which the electron in the outermost orbit of an atom is bound to its nucleus), and strong force(the force with which subatomic particles are bound). He called this force the unified field and hence this theory was called the unified field theory. Now, physicists have reduced the basic forces to only three, electromagnetic, weak force, and strong force. They have figured out that the gravitational force is only a kind of electromagnetic force. Superstrings, M-theory, parallel universes, and many other studies in physics are explorations to find that one force. Here too, we see a congruence of inquiry in science and religion.

The study of the origins of the universe is called cosmology in physics. Most of us are taught only the linear model of the creation of the universe, where the universe began with the Big Bang and is since expanding homogenously at a particular rate of acceleration. However, there are many more theories of the early universe, where physicists postulate a universe that was shrinking homogenously at a particular rate of deceleration before converging to a point from where the Big Bang happened. So, according to many cosmologists there was universe before the Big Bang and they are completely aligned to the cyclical nature of the universe propounded by many...
religious traditions, where there is evolution followed by involution, and these two continue in a cyclical manner. Vedanta is one such religious tradition that believes in a cyclical model of the universe.

Science deals with verifiable and repeatable truths. Vedanta too deals with verifiable and repeatable truths. In science nothing is accepted unless it is proven. It is a different matter that the proof might come from a laboratory or from a notebook of mathematical computations. Similarly, in Vedanta no truth is accepted unless it is realised or experienced, albeit in the mind, or beyond the mind. Vedanta assures, as does science, that the truths and experience would be repeated any number of times as long as the required conditions are met. Neither Vedanta nor science is dogmatic in its true spirit.

Coming to the question of the apparent unreality of the universe, Vedanta and quantum physics say the same thing. For instance, according to Pauli’s Exclusion Principle, no two fermions can come into contact. If such contact were to take place, it would lead to a nuclear reaction. Yet, we see things, limbs, people, touching one another. How is it possible? Neuroscience has now proved that our perception of objects or this world in general is quite subjective. Neuroscience has gone a little further and proved that our very notion of the location of a body is an illusion and is just mapped by a particular part of the brain and hence, the idea of body and the nature of its perception is unique for each individual.

Though we share a common perception among ourselves, the specificities of perception are unique to each individual. In other words, the world as a person sees it does not have a completely similar empirical value. That is what you see is not what actually is out there. Quantum physics argues that what we perceive by our senses is just an illusion and that the reality is something else. Classical Newtonian physics, where whatever you saw with your eyes was the truth, has long been given up in favour of quantum physics, where truth is something beyond what you see. The Mandukya Upanishad and the Mandukya Karika prove how a perception is untrue because of the very fact that you perceive it. Thus, both according to Vedanta and quantum physics, and also neuroscience, what you see is not the reality. Yes, I understand that this might be shocking, but as I said earlier, religion and science can be properly understood and engaged with only by an in-depth study.

Now, with the actual observation of the gravitational waves, the whole concept of time has been challenged by physicists. The Nobel Prize for physics for 2017 went to the physicists, who have observed and proved the presence of gravitational waves. This was predicted and later somewhat withdrawn by Albert Einstein. With this, the concept of time-warps has taken a step towards reality. What we earlier read in science fiction is soon to come true. The idea of time being unreal is also a core idea among many religious traditions.

However, the popular perception of science and Vedanta are not as discussed above simply because not all have the patience to study and go into the depths of either discipline. What are we supposed to do then? We can take up either quantum physics or Vedanta and dedicate a whole lifetime of study and practice to it. And, finally, one would realise the ultimate truth. Vedanta would define physics as a path in search of the ultimate truth, albeit in a different manner. Also, Vedanta and quantum physics are not quite as opposite as one might think. Instead of wasting our times on fighting between science and religion and taking either side of the fight, we should just take up one path, the scientific or religious, and plunge into the search for truth. Better still, one could maintain a scientific temper in all pursuits, external and internal; and follow the path of the science for search into the external and follow the path of religion for search into the internal. When we thus continue our journeys in seemingly diametrically opposite paths, we would encounter truth and realise that the external was just appearing as the opposite, while all the time it was just a mirror of the internal, it was the reverse of the obverse that was the internal.