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# Religion and Science in a Time of COVID-19: Allies or Adversaries?

Despite what some believe, they can work effectively together

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By Sima Barmania, Michael J. Reiss on June 11, 2020



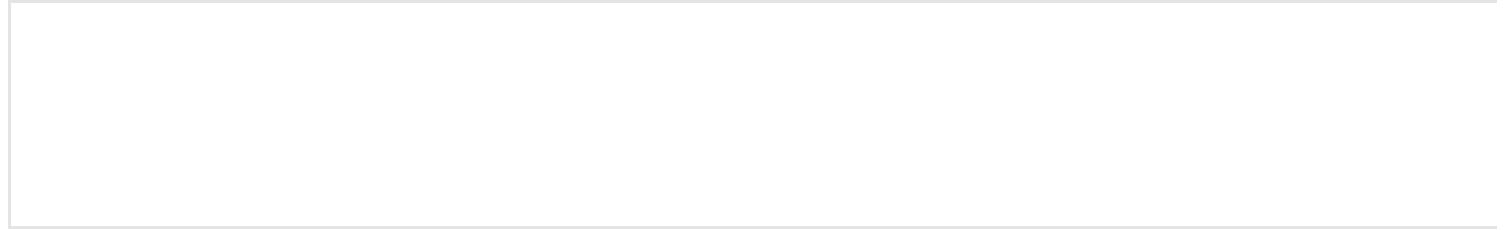
Credit: Simone De Marchi *Getty Images*

When the Black Death spread across Europe starting 1346, science didn't yet exist; to cope with the bubonic plague, people relied on superstition, rumor and religion. Nowadays we have the advantage of modern medical science, but religion continues to be a cornerstone of many people's lives as they struggle to understand awful events.

This is not necessarily a good thing. The Black Death was widely blamed on Jews and the advent of COVID-19 has led some people of religious faith to point the finger of blame at others. Israeli Rabbi Meir Mazuz, former spiritual leader of Israel's Yachad party, for example has blamed gay pride marches, calling them "a parade against nature, and when someone goes against nature, the one who created nature takes revenge on him."

Such incidents exemplify the tensions that often surround discussions regarding science and

religion. Throughout history, it has been a common trope that science and religion are in conflict. Episodes such Galileo's struggles with the Catholic Church and the Huxley-Wilberforce Oxford debate on evolution in 1860 are regularly trotted out as exemplars of this antagonistic relationship.



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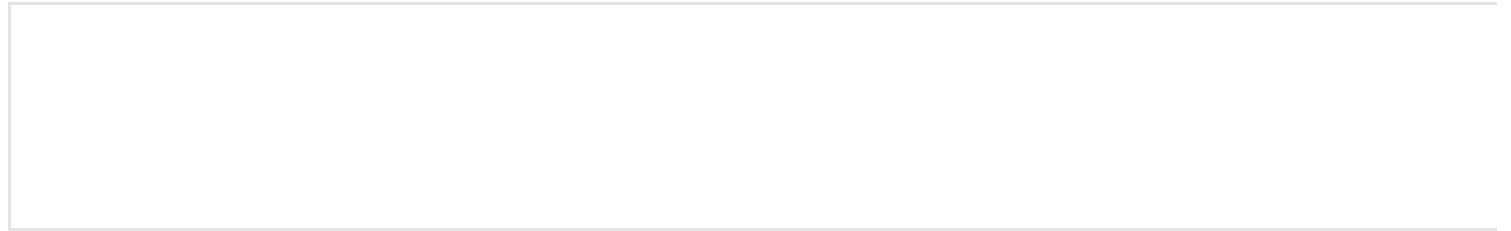
The current zeitgeist tells us that we must pick a side, as we do in sports or politics; one cannot be an adherent of both. Either choose secular science, which is rational and rigorous; or religion, a matter of personal belief.

But perhaps this narrative represents a false dichotomy. Does the tension between science and religion really exist? And in the context of COVID-19, is it inconceivable that a scientist can wholeheartedly pray for a cure for a loved one whilst also working to develop a vaccine? For the rest of us, is it hypocritical to pray for good health whilst also taking all necessary public health precautions, grounded as they are in scientific evidence?

In fact, history is replete with examples of scholars who were comfortable with matters pertaining to both science and religion. The physicians of the past were typically knowledgeable in medicine but also in philosophy and literature, and were nearly always religious believers. In the 19th century, Michael Faraday established the basis for the concept of the electromagnetic field in physics, and discovered benzene; the principles of electromagnetic induction; and the laws of electrolysis. He was also a devout Christian who served as a deacon and an elder in his local Church. He believed that nature and the Bible had the same author, so that “the natural works of God can never by any possibility come into contradiction with the higher things that belong to our future existence ...”

In the Middle Ages, science flourished during the Islamic Golden Age. Avicenna (Ibn Sina) is considered a pioneer of early medicine but is also revered as a scholar of Islam. Ibn Sina wrote the Canon of Medicine in 1025 and proposed that there should be a quarantine period of 40 days to halt the spread of infectious disease.

Furthermore, some traditionally religious practices have been proven to be scientifically effective. For example, male circumcision in Judaism, Islam and some branches of Orthodox Christianity has been performed for centuries, primarily as a mark of the covenant between God and his people. Yet, in recent years there has been compelling scientific evidence proving the benefits to health for boys and protection as men from HIV infection. We can also look further East for examples; for instance, the Buddhist practice of meditation has now been refashioned for a secular audience with evidence suggesting that regular sessions can prevent relapses into depression and anxiety.



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Perhaps there is no better current example of someone who adheres to the values of both science and religion than Francis Collins, who on the 20<sup>th</sup> of May won the prestigious Templeton Prize—an accolade bestowed on those who try to bridge the gap between science and faith. Collins is the Director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and is currently working all his waking hours, as he puts it, to find a vaccine for COVID-19. He is also a born-again Christian and has written about his path from atheism to faith as a medical student, when he encountered life and death on a daily basis.

It goes the other way as well: the Catholic Church, for example, has affirmed many times that it acknowledges the fact of evolution, the Big Bang model of cosmology and the possible existence of extraterrestrial life. And the Dalai Lama has long championed the idea of a dialogue between science and religion.

The reality is that religion and science can complement one another, as indeed they are already doing by reinforcing public health messages during the current pandemic. Perhaps we can take solace from the observation that after President Trump's declaration shortly before the start of the Memorial Day weekend that states must open up places of worship, some Christian leaders urged caution about returning to church, asking congregants to wait instead until it's safe to do so. Over a range of different religions, many believers have had times when they have been unable to attend collective worship for persecution or other reasons. Such times can strengthen a community's

faith.

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