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SCIENCE AS RELIGION: WHEN SCIENCE BECOMES (TOO) IRRATIONAL

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SUMMARY

Science is expected to be objective: however, since practiced and produced by humans, it has to reflect human flows – prejudices, stubbornness, malice, and the tendency to be misused. No wonder an excellent scientist like John Eccles proclaimed science to be among the most personal activities he had known.

By analysing a few examples from the history of science (in particular the intellectual development of Van Rensselaer Potter, the American onco-biochemist and bioethics pioneer), as well as the current trend of the evidence-based approach, the present paper will try to demonstrate that denying, distrusting, and opposing science for the sake of religion, as seen so many times in human history, has significant similarities to the overestimation of science we more often encounter in our times.

Key words: *science - religion – rationaliti - irrationaliti*

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Religions have some common fundaments, but due to their suprastructure and history, they differ among them so widely that they sometimes fight even over the otherwise potentially quite close interpretations. That is why science is called for to make peace and, like a justful and patient teacher, to lecture the pupils on the Truth. Because, science disposes of methodology to find evidence. But is this methodology really capable of producing evidence for the issues like the beginning of life (not the viability!), death, good or evil, consciousness, coincidence? Is not this „evidence" provided by science based upon nothing else but an „agreement" that we have to live within the limits of our five basic senses? And, once collected, how trustful is that scientific „evidence"? Plagiarism seems to be quite spread: affaires with fired scholars, expelled students, retracted papers, and resigning politicians are well known in Korea and the US, in the Netherlands and Germany as well as in Romania and Croatia. Do we really think we can and do discover each and every case of plagiarism? And if they are not discovered, do not those undiscovered cases construct a falsified pyramid of „evidence" and scientific „knowledge"? What about ignoring (non-citing) others' publications, so beloved within the humanities? Does an „evidence" not exist only because the others are not ready to admit it? Probably this is the reason why John Eccles was opposing the general view of the „objectivity" of science and proclaimed it one of the most personal activities he had known. It was Arthur Schopenhauer who expected from science to cure the man from his arrogance: but the ego of so many scientists seem to listen to other voices.

To be religious, for a scientist, does not necessarily mean to believe in God. Actually, to avoid „simple" religiousness, or to reconcile or combine it with science, several scientists have searched for original ways: Aurelius Augustin admitted „illumination" as a kind of acquiring knowledge alternative to science (even if he did ascribe it to God); together with Karl Popper, Eccles conceived „interactive dualism;" and many initially taugh materaislists and reductionists, like Santiago Ramón y Cajal or Wilder Penfield, ended their careers with far more neo-gnostic than scientistic positions.

That religion can very well co-habitate with a scientific mind, has been proved in many examples. Isaac Newton was known to be a fervent believer and scholar of the Bible and even used to tease his atheist colleagues (like in the case of the „randomly-shaped" model of the Solar system). Abdus Salam, who quoted the Quran also in his Nobel-Prize address, was Muslim, a follower of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the Punjabi Messiah of the 19th century. Particularly interesting is the evolution some exceptional individuals-scientists have demonstrated (and admitted) with respect to religion. To analyse such a phenomenon, we shall take a closer look at bioethics.

It is hard to define bioethics: in its integrative interpretation, it has volontarily and declaratively stepped back from „evidence-based science" (to which so desperatly aims the Georgetown mainstream „new medical ethics"). And while some, like Tristram Engelhardt, try to see advantage in such an indeterminability („[...] often unpreciseness and the lack of clearness allow us to name and contemporarily bring closer many fields of interest. A nice word can shape a rich combination of images and meanings helping us to see relations between the elements of reality [...]") (Engelhardt 1988), it is natural that the same indeterminability does frustrate us and forces us to reconsider the original concepts of Fritz Jahr (1895-1953) and Van Rensselaer Potter (1911-2001).

As it is generally known, Fritz Jahr conceived „his“ bioethics as a kind of broadening-up anthropocentric ethics (especially Kant's categorical imperative) onto animals and plants, while he coined the term almost by playing with Eisler's „Bio-Psychik“ (Eisler 1909). As a person of primarily theological formation and rigorous Lutheran-Protestant Pietist uprising of the Francke Foundation, Jahr, logically, deducted his bioethical ideas from and related to Christian love toward life and world, which does not collide with his occasional unusual openness toward other perspectives (Gesinnungseinstellungen (Jahr 1930); Buddism or Yoga, for instance). In his articles, Jahr consequentially expresses also great, almost naive trust in science (which is one of the major differences with respect to later Potter's teaching), while he takes Christianity (more precisely, Biblical fragments, the life of Francis of Assisi and the works of Luther, Francke, Comenius, Friebel, and other theologians, priests, and religious reformers) (Rinčić & Muzur 2012) as a source of ideas supporting bioethics, but subject to interpretations, criticism, or amendments.

Unlike Jahr, Van Rensselaer Potter passed through an incomparably more complex path of his own relation toward religion. As a young scientist, he advocated liberation of (natural) sciences from any kind of influence of religion promoting „reactionary“ attitudes and hindering quest and research. Later on, nevertheless, in his fifties, Potter broadens up his horizons: he follows lectures by a Lutheran pastor, he formally enters the Unitarian Church, and he is deeply impressed by the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the French-American (not always orthodox) Jesuit advocating dualism at peace with „spiritual evolution of the matter.“ Accepting Wallace's interpretation of religion as a part of the man's fight against general entropy (Wallace 1962), in his Bioethics – Bridge to the Future, Potter discerns a „primitive type of religion, including ignorance, superstition, and magic“ from a „humanist type of religion, including scientific humanism“ (Potter 1971). Teilhard's variation of pantheism was close to other Potter's models as well, like Aldo Leopold, while the idea of the necessity of faith as hope (otherwise characteristic also for Albert Schweitzer, well known to Potter), might have inspired Potter's confession (in a video-taped address, the last before his death, to the conference on Cres, in 2001) that it had been „incorrect and fully inadequate to call bioethics science on anything“ and that he now understood bioethics as a „nature-based religion.“ (Potter was always prone to sudden falling under the influence of immediate readings: this idea, by his own admittance, had been instigated ba „religious naturalism“ of Ursula Goodenough.) (Potter 2012)

In modern bioethics, even greater oscillations are present related to the issue of how much bioethics has been based upon science and religion, respectively. Viewing in it a new way of promoting its own old teachings, the Catholic Church was among the first to embrace bioethics by institutionalising it, by advocating it, but frequently also by monopolising it in several countries like Croatia (V. Pozaić, since 1985), Italy, Brazil, or USA (even if we do not count the role of the Church at founding Kennedy Institute of Ethics, The National Catholic Bioethics Center was founded in Philadelphia as early as 1972). The Church simply could not have allowed that the main issues of its doctrine be discussed without it, but it spotted also the intriguing possibility to gain access to a debate up to then reserved for medico-ethicists (i. e. physicians) (Pozaić 1987, Matulić 2001). (There are some opposite interpretations: Peter Singer, for instance, speaks of the fear by certain religious thinkers, since „bioethics jeopardized the Church monopol on debates on sensitive ethical issues.“ (Singer 1996)). There are, again, some (Catholic) authors denying any significant difference between „lay bioethics“ and „Catholic bioethics“ (Valjan 2004, Lucas 2007) (particularly expressed in Italy and Croatia), as well as those who, with more or less tollerance, do accept the majority of Anglo-Saxon lay authors, still prefering personalist (bio)ethics (Aramini 2009). (To such Catholic bioethicists, like Aramini, the most acceptable layperson is the tollerant Tristram Engelhardt who, by strange destiny, will pass from a „secular bioethicist“ (Engelhardt 1986) to Russian Orthodoxy.). According to a recent issue of the Journal of Medical Ethics, a real war broke out at Oxford over the legacy of bioethical principles like human dignity or „good manners“, considered by the theologian Nigel Biggar Christian (Biggar 2015), and by the scientist Brian Earp philosophical „inventions.“

There are also those who started to PRACTICE bioethics as religion: Calvin DeWitt, the former mayor of the town of Dunn, close to Potter's Madison, and a university professor emeritus of environmental science, first had drafted theoretical foundations of „teaching from Lord's work“ (listing seven major concerns for the Work and seven major dangers threating it), and then, on his farm full with birds and mosquitos, in the restored original form of prairy, as well as on adjacent parcels, started to practice a widely noticed battle for the preservation of environment by a kind of protective planning he calls „land stewardship.“

Obviously, bioethics can function when it is understood and practiced as religion. When one tries to detach it artificially from religion by narrowing bioethics down to a limited number of general principles (Byk 2015) and subdueing it to a methodology closer to „evidence-based science,“ such bioethics seems simplified and forced, like its pragmatic-principlist variations advocated by analytical philosophers (who then, of course, attack the integrative bioethics as „pseudo-science“) (Bracanović 2012, Muzur 2014). However, such an exclusionist choice, imposed to us by our time, between science on the one pole and religion on the other (with philosophy somehow inserted between them), is completely unnecessary, unnatural, and, actually, inexisting. Fritz Jahr does not feel the need to delimit his sources – St. Paul, the theologian Schleiermacher, the philosopher Kant, the writer Voß, the painter Fidus, the composer

Wagner, and the scientist Darwin: for Jahr, they are all equal bearers of equal perspectives which, in its totality, at a certain moment, results in a quantum jump of individual consciousness onto a higher level and in knowledge approximately eaqually distant both from the simplified „evidence-based science," and from dogmatic faith into the absolute supernatural. The example of bioethics thus seems to prove the best the initial conjecture expressed in the present paper: that denying, distrusting, and opposing science for the sake of religion, as seen so many times in human history, has significant similarities to the overestimation of science we more often encounter in our times.

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