

Rocks of Ages, by Stephen Jay Gould

reviewed by [Stephen J. Pope](#) in the [June 2, 1999](#) issue

**Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life.**

*By Stephen Jay Gould. Ballantine, 222 pp.*

We could avoid all sorts of nasty fights, Stephen Jay Gould argues, if we would stop expecting science to provide validating evidence for religious dogmas or biblical events. Nor ought we to turn to religion to resolve questions of a properly scientific nature. He wants no more natural theology, no more "anthropic principle," no more attempts to find scientific confirmation for religious beliefs, and no more fundamentalist "creation science." In short, "science gets the age of rocks, and religion the rock of ages; science studies how the heavens go, religion how to go to heaven."

Gould's thesis is that, at their best, science and religion occupy separate intellectual spheres and have usually pursued a policy of peaceful coexistence summarized in the acronym "NOMA," or "Non-Overlapping Magisteria." (By "magisterium" he means only something like a distinctive zone of reflection, discussion and debate.) His position flows from an apparently straightforward claim: that science concerns itself with empirical realities, whereas religion addresses matters of meaning, ultimacy and moral values. Gould argues that conflict between science and religion has more often than not been the result of a misdirected desire to resolve anxiety about our place in the universe, and that this conflict is psychologically, ethically, scientifically and religiously unnecessary.

Gould's argument is informed by a deep suspicion of ideological appeals to nature, especially in the guise of anything resembling Social Darwinism. He insists that we ought not to give ethical authority to science; rather, "we must simply admit that nature offers no moral instruction at all." Yet even if this is true, our ideas and normative perspectives often function to direct our observation of nature and our ascertainment of relevant facts. Consequently, Gould's dichotomy of value-free science versus value-invested religion may not be sufficiently complex.

The appeal of *Rocks of Ages* lies in its commonsense moderation. Readers braced for something like Richard Dawkins's vehement denunciations of the "emptiness of theology" or familiar with E. O. Wilson's substitution of evolution for religion will find Gould refreshingly irenic, nuanced and broad-minded. Rather than repeating the tired cliché that the Roman Catholic Church is simply a bastion of anti-intellectual dogmatism and antiscientific authoritarianism, for example, Gould sees that it has been a cautious defender of science in general and evolutionary theory in particular. Similarly, he portrays William Jennings Bryan, who led the anti-Darwinian attack at the Scopes "monkey trial," not as a raving Yahoo but as the progressive populist and principled (if, in this case, misguided) moralist that he was.

NOMA has its critics, and the book is disappointing in its failure to take them seriously. Phillip Johnson, professor of law and author of *Darwinism on Trial*, attacked Gould's earlier presentations of NOMA for advocating an anachronistic and artificial separation of morality and reality. Moral claims are highly dependent on descriptive beliefs and assumptions regarding human conduct. In fact, Gould's own book on the IQ controversy, *The Mismeasure of Man*, amply demonstrates how dependent moral positions are on premises about what are purported to be descriptive realities. Moreover, Johnson argues, Christian religious affirmations concerning God, Jesus Christ and eternal life (to name a few) clearly are not about some vague "meaning" but refer to realities, even if revealed and deeply mysterious ones.

Johnson is right that a great deal of religion is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Christianity, for example, describes the way the world is-created, fallen and redeemed—not just the way we ought to act within it. Yet even though concepts like the "fall" and "redemption" concern what is "real" in some sense, they cannot be classified as simply "empirical," as if they could be addressed through lab work or field studies. The truth and meaning of Christian beliefs cannot be established or even directly examined by means of scientific investigation. They are not, however, completely independent of what neuroscience teaches us about humanity, any more than what we think about creation is utterly independent of what we know from ecological science.

Gould also fails to address the criticisms leveled at NOMA from the other end of the spectrum. Dawkins has been harshly critical of Gould—even accusing him of "self-serving dishonesty"—for pulling his punches when it comes to religion. He takes Gould to task for downplaying the extent and depth of direct contradiction between science and religion. According to Dawkins, religious claims about such things as the

resurrection of Jesus or the last judgment refer to events that cannot be accepted by a scientifically educated person. The "realities" which these beliefs affirm lie within the domain of science, claims Dawkins. If Gould were to admit this he could no longer affirm the NOMA principle.

Gould attempts to strike an admirable balance between his own self-professed agnosticism and even skepticism, on the one hand, and respect for the consciences of religious people and the moral contributions made by religious communities, on the other. He is not, however, as strict an interpreter of NOMA as one might initially assume. He thinks that science can act as a check on religious claims, at least inasmuch as religion makes empirical claims about nature, human behavior and the world.

Gould should actually have called his principle "POMA," for "Partially Overlapping Magisteria"—a position which would be both more interesting and trickier to defend. POMA is exemplified in his decision to rule out miracles and other forms of divine intervention on the principle that since they are not accessible to science, they cannot be true. In taking aim at "creation science," he actually targets something much wider—the belief in a God who cares for and orders creation. Gould does not think that theism is intellectually tenable, at least if taken to affirm the existence and activity of a personal, benevolent and almighty God whose will orders history and nature. He not only accepts the standard methodological restriction of science to nature ("science isn't concerned with God, only with nature"), but denies that logic or evidence gives any support for belief in "supernature" or the transcendent. So, Dawkins asks, why respect it?

Yet Gould certainly communicates a serious appreciation for the functional value of religion in the lives of millions of people, even if he does not happen to share their piety. He is also aware that science cannot answer the big and inescapable existential questions that we all encounter. Gould's modesty in this regard is admirable, especially when contrasted with E. O. Wilson's overly confident substitution of evolutionary mythology and morality for religion or with Dawkins's dismissal of religious questions as silly anachronisms.

In a world increasingly explained by science, Gould strives mightily to make room for religion. Yet readers will be surprised that someone as historically minded as he is ignores the immense complexity and diversity of "religion." For him, the term includes not Mayan witchdoctors, Iranian Imams or Appalachian snake handlers, but

only bourgeois Westerners who embrace the liberal values of compassion, tolerance and equality. There is, however, no such thing as generic "religion," only Lutheranism and Syrian Orthodoxy, Reform Judaism and Jainism, and so forth. It is, therefore, exceedingly difficult for anyone to formulate substantive global generalizations about the relation between "science" and "religion" as such.

Neither Johnson nor Dawkins provide knockout blows to NOMA. But by not taking the opportunity to respond to their criticisms, Gould limits the usefulness and persuasiveness of his book. Readers participating in, or at least seriously committed to, the religion-science dialogue will enjoy and learn from *Rocks of Ages*, but they will not find in it a fully coherent and deeply satisfying theory of the proper relation between these major human endeavors.