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## Finding a Middle Ground: Science vs. Religion and the Harms of Extremism

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## Finding a Middle Ground: Science vs. Religion and the Harms of Extremism

### Abstract

**Overview:** Human beings have an innate desire for a sense of purpose. They want to understand the world around them, where they came from, why they exist, and what certain natural events mean. From these desires stem two very different concepts: science and religion. Both religion and science are used to explain where everything came from and to why huge disasters (such as storms or pandemics) occur. Science provides similar explanations for these concepts, However, science and religion provide answers in very different ways: religion is faith based, while science is evidence based. As a result of their differences, scientists and people of faith have often been in conflict. During the scientific revolution in Europe, many scientists, such as Galileo, were persecuted by the Catholic church for their discoveries. These discoveries, such as the fact that the Earth isn't the center of the universe, and that it's not flat, could potentially challenge the authority of the church. If they were wrong about one thing, they could potentially be wrong about more things.

**Author's reflection:** My name is Elizabeth Wunsch, and I am currently a junior nursing major here at Fisher. I wrote this paper back in the spring of 2020, just as the pandemic hit. It explores the relationship between science and nature through the dystopian novel, *Future Home of the Living God*. Science has always been a favorite subject of mine, but I've always been fascinated by religion as well. I would consider myself to be an agnostic atheist, but I love learning about different belief systems. These two interests of mine are what inspired this paper, along with the content of the novel. In my free time, I like watching documentaries and listening to music. I also enjoy some reading and writing here and there. I have a passion for health science and learning, which is why I'm going into nursing. I hope whoever reads my paper enjoys it.

Elizabeth Wunsch

ENGL 199-02

Professor Uman

1st May 2020

### Finding a Middle Ground: Science vs. Religion and the Harms of Extremism

Human beings have an innate desire for a sense of purpose. They want to understand the world around them, where they came from, why they exist, and what certain natural events mean. From these desires stem two very different concepts: science and religion. Both religion and science are used to explain where everything came from and to why huge disasters (such as storms or pandemics) occur. Science provides similar explanations for these concepts, However, science and religion provide answers in very different ways: religion is faith based, while science is evidence based. As a result of their differences, scientists and people of faith have often been in conflict. During the scientific revolution in Europe, many scientists, such as Galileo, were persecuted by the Catholic church for their discoveries. These discoveries, such as the fact that the Earth isn't the center of the universe, and that it's not flat, could potentially challenge the authority of the church. If they were wrong about one thing, they could potentially be wrong about more things.

This conflict between religion and science continues, most notably regarding evolution and the origin of species. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries especially, there was great debate over whether or not Darwin's theory should be taught in American public schools, as it contradicts traditional Christian theology. Some people continue to believe that God created everything as it is today, despite the fact that the theory of evolution has been observed and proven over and over again.

Other people intertwine their faith with scientific knowledge; they avoid partaking in extremist behavior by having this mindset. This perspective appears many times throughout Louise Erdrich's book, *Future Home of the Living God*. This dystopian novel is written from the perspective of Cedar Songmaker, a twenty-six-year-old pregnant woman living in Minneapolis. In her society, evolution seems to be running backwards, and the future of humanity is at stake. Reproduction has become a government concern, and pregnant women soon become fugitives, expected to turn themselves in. In the midst of all of this, Cedar decides to visit her biological family on the Ojibwe reservation to learn about potential genetic diseases. All the while, she ponders the state of the world and evolution, and she intertwines it with her faith. She seems to believe in both the concepts of science and evolution, as well as the teachings of Catholicism. However, the damaging actions of the religious government, as well as the harmful scientific research conducted, seem to represent the opposition to this potential unity. By portraying various perspectives in the science-religion debate, Louise Erdrich highlights the harmful nature of the extremism present on both sides, while also advocating for an ideal middle ground. Scientific and religious entities aren't always acting against each other directly; the debate itself might not be harmful, but each side's method of furthering their own agenda is. Her novel serves as commentary on the debate because these two sides have a tendency to conflict, and Cedar acts as representation of the ideal mindset: a balance between the scientific and religious thought. This is important because both of these forms of extremism can be seen in our world today, and the innocent people who get caught up in them end up getting hurt. This could be avoided if we learned to see from each other's points of view.

Erdrich makes the connection between religious and scientific language at the very beginning of the novel, stating that "our world is running backward. Or forward. Or maybe

sideways, in a way as yet ungrasped. I am sure somebody will come up with a name for what is happening...What is happening involves the invisible, the quanta of which we are created...a perilous time in the history of creation” (4). Through her use of repetition, Erdrich highlights the uncertainty that drives people to turn towards either science or religion for answers. She continues to have the character re-explain “what is happening,” as if she’s unsure of what the correct answer is. She also uses scientific language while attempting to describe the current phenomena by using the word “quanta.” In physics, this refers to the smallest quantity of radiant energy. She juxtaposes this use of scientific language with two variations of the word “create”, which has a Biblical connotation. It implies that life on Earth has an intelligent designer, and that everything that exists was created intentionally. By placing scientific and Biblical language within the same passage, Erdrich is expressing the idea that these two things can coexist peacefully. Someone can rely on the certainty and evidence of science while also believing that there’s a creator watching over them. Someone can have both a scientific and a spiritual side.

The idea that one can be both scientific and spiritual is supported by Elisabeth Settelmaier in her paper, “The Conflict of Genesis: Building an Integral Bridge Between Creation and Evolution.” She discusses the idea of viewing evolution and religion from an integral point of view, stating that “If both creationists and evolutionists were to adopt an integral view, they might realize that a person can look at the world from both perspectives, science and religion, and depending on the purpose arrive at different forms of knowledge” (Settelmaier 248). This is very much in line with Cedar’s beliefs: she clearly values both Biblical and scientific knowledge, and she thinks that both have relevance and meaning.

Erdrich continues to demonstrate Cedar’s inner conflict, and how she answers her questions with both science and religion. She also begins to bring up the potentially damaging

aspects of religion, but continually emphasizes unity over division. While on her drive to the Ojibwe reservation, Cedar continues to make observations about the world around her, and how it's changing. She then passes a large sign in an empty field that states, "*Future Home of the Living God.*" This sign, and some other things she sees while driving, trigger a series of questions for Cedar:

If it is true that every particle that I can see and not see, and all that is living and perhaps unliving too, is trimming its sails and coming about and heading back to port, what does that mean? Where are we bound? Is it any different, in fact, from where we were going in the first place? Perhaps all of creation from the coddling moth to elephant was just a grandly detailed thought that God was engrossed in elaborating upon, when suddenly God fell asleep. We are an idea, then. Maybe God has decided that we are an idea not worth thinking anymore. (Erdrich 13)

In this passage, Cedar certainly seems to think that the concept of evolution, as well as its reversal, are possible. She asks many questions about it in a row; these rhetorical questions represent her thinking through what she's unsure of. She uses a long, complex sentence at the beginning of the passage, demonstrating the fact that there's a lot going through her mind in that moment. She clearly has a complex set of beliefs, and this is represented through the length of her sentences. Erdrich also uses a metaphor to represent the reversal of evolution: "trimming its sails" represents devolving, and "heading back to port" represents every creature going back to its most basic evolutionary state. Her use of this metaphor demonstrates the fluidity of her thought process and her beliefs: she believes in complexity, and that two different beliefs can be intertwined. She also seems to think of evolution as an ongoing process, like a voyage on a ship. She thinks that as with any voyage, there can be interruptions or disasters. She continues to

demonstrate this thought process by asking questions about where life is bound, what this all means, and if it's any different "from where we were going in the first place." This last question implies that she thinks that life has an evolutionary destination, and that it has been evolving and changing for as long as it has existed. She's also simply expressing uncertainty. She doesn't know what will happen to life on Earth, or what the future holds for humanity. In her questions to herself, she goes over her scientific thoughts, and she then switches to spiritual ones.

Erdrich juxtaposes Cedar's questions about the nature of the world with thoughts about God. She uses another metaphor to potentially explain life by stating that it's a thought or idea of God's. She then explains the sudden change by suggesting that God fell asleep, and that he's decided that life on Earth isn't worth thinking about anymore. These thoughts, which closely follow her questions, demonstrate her coming to conclusions. She seems to think that science and God are intertwined, and that the answer to all of her questions isn't a simple one. Both spirituality and science can provide an answer, and these thoughts are shared by Pierre W. Whalon, author of "Religion and Science Fiction." In his paper, Whalon seems to encourage a complex perspective, stating that "It is when we experience a moment of awe, something sublime, and inquire in ourselves about it that we begin to do theology and science...The common point of origin - the Big Bang, if you will - of religion and science should be explored much more deeply than it has been, and imaginative stories set in other times and places allow us to do that without fear of doing violence either to real religion or science" (Whalon 388). He's advocating for a similar perspective as Erdrich is (through Cedar's character), and he makes it clear that science fiction is a good vessel for providing this perspective. This paper is clearly in support of Erdrich's efforts.

Cedar's integration of scientific and spiritual thought demonstrates her opinion on the science vs. evolution debate: she clearly believes that people are complex and capable of many different thought processes. People shouldn't be forced to pick one side or another; it's possible to embrace both sides. These passages set the stage for Erdrich demonstrating the damaging nature of extremism on both sides. A group (whether it's extreme in a scientific or religious context) pushing to further their own agenda can really hurt the people they wish to influence. Scientific *or* religious extremism can be dangerous to those they impact--it can be both mentally and physically detrimental.

Issues of both religious and scientific extremism are referenced throughout *Future Home of the Living God*. As the issues plaguing her world continue, Cedar notices that people have become more and more paranoid. Consequently, many turned to religion for a sense of comfort and control. This results in Cedar's neighborhood being taken over by a group called the Unites, and they strongly urge her and Phil (her baby's father) to come to picnic to register with the new residential authority. When Cedar asks Phil about where they need to go, she ends up learning some new information:

When Phil came home...I show him the invitation and ask where True Manna Park is located.

"I would guess it's the park around the corner"...

"That's Manito Park."

"There's new names," he says. Then he informs me that two or three mornings ago everything had new names. All the street signs were changed overnight. It was a massive project, impressive. Even the streets with numbers got switched.

"They are now..." He stumbles. "Well, they're Bible verses."

“I don’t live on Boutwell Street anymore?”

“Well, you do according to the U.S. Postal Service. They’re still operating under a secular postmaster general. Otherwise, you live on Proverbs 10:7.”... “The memory of the righteous is a blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot”...

Phil and I sit down together on the couch, contemplating the fact that someone wants our names, which are probably classed as wicked, to rot. (Erdrich 101)

This dialogue demonstrates the harmful nature of religious extremism. In this book, both sides (the religious and scientists) are pushing to further their own agenda without considering the harm they could be causing. While this example didn’t cause them actual bodily harm, it did make Cedar and Phil feel like they were in greater danger. The fact that the street signs were changed in a matter of one night demonstrates just how serious these religious groups are, and how much influence they have. The Bible verse that her street happens to be named after has a significant meaning to Cedar as well. “The name of the wicked will rot” suggests that those who go against the religious extremists will suffer, and Cedar realizes this as she’s sitting on the couch with Phil. She knows that someone wants to know who they are and what their status is regarding pregnancy. Pregnant women essentially have a bounty on their heads at this point, and she knows that these people won’t hesitate to turn her in; they view her as “wicked.” This has the potential to be very damaging to their mental health: they don’t feel secure, and they know that the only other option is to turn themselves in to some organization that might actually harm them. Religious extremism has a way of making people feel unsafe and inferior, and these feelings are demonstrated in this passage.

The concepts of extremism discussed in the book have relevance in our reality. Religious extremism has been a part of the real world for as long as religion has existed. Different religions

have clashed many times throughout history, and non-believers have been victims of extremism as well. This idea is backed up by Vine Deloria, who points out that many religions throughout history have involved “blood sacrifices and genocidal tendencies” (136). This violence, while different from what may have happened in the past, still continues. A relevant situation in America today regarding this concept would be the abortion debate: many conservative politicians who don’t support abortion use religion to explain and defend their views. Many claim that all life has value, even unborn fetuses. However, this view has the potential to become extremely harmful in certain cases. During 2019, many American states began passing abortion laws in an attempt to get a case to the Supreme Court; many people want to challenge *Roe v. Wade*. According to a news article from *The Hill*, some of the laws, known as “heartbeat” laws, were extremely restrictive, and didn’t allow for exceptions in cases of rape or incest (Campisi et al.). Arguably, these lawmakers are forcing their beliefs onto the American people, and they’re not letting them make the choice that’s best for them. This also has the potential to create immense trauma: if these laws were put into place, women who got pregnant due to rape would be forced to go through with their pregnancy.

Another more obvious form of religious extremism comes in the form of radical Islamic terrorist groups. Groups like these have committed horrific atrocities in the name of their religion, with one of the most famous being the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. In addition to that, in many Muslim-majority countries, homosexuality is an offense punishable by death. In other cases, according to BBC, gay people may be forced to change their gender, which is something that happens frequently in Iran (Hamedani). All of these things have the potential to really damage the mental and physical health of those affected. Without the influence of science and healthcare, religion can be taken to the point where it really damages people.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, there appears to be a lot of scientific extremism throughout the novel, and this proves to be harmful to many of the characters. While the religious population seems concerned with the eternal salvation of humanity, the scientists want to understand what is actively happening to developing humans. However, the scientists go about this in a way that disregards the rights and well beings of pregnant women. This starts with when Cedar learns about what's been happening in terms of human development: "Men in dark suits staring at large-screen ultrasound images. Men in dark suits peering at freeze-framed ultrasound babies and speculating about just what the abnormalities in the neocortex could mean in terms of cognition" (Erdrich 69). This passage represents the beginning of institutions using science for extreme and harmful purposes. Cedar repeats the phrase "men in dark suits" twice, which has an insidious tone behind it. The language is very cold and scientific, implying that these men care only about the quality of the offspring, not the bond that the mothers would have with their children. These scientists are ultimately heading in the direction of prioritizing their knowledge and ability to preserve the human race over the health of the mothers. This was seen when Cedar learns some more information from Phil: that the government is "offering rewards now for anyone who turns in a pregnant neighbor, acquaintance, family member, whatever," and that, when it comes to the babies, "they keep some of them" (Erdrich 85). This implies that the government is potentially using science to determine if the babies are fit to live, and whether or not they will benefit the population. This idea of not valuing every life, but only those seem ideal, is one based purely on logic, data, and economics. However, it completely disregards the feelings of the mothers who would be involved in this: in the name of gaining scientific knowledge, women would be kidnapped, imprisoned, and potentially forced to give up their babies. Later on in the novel, Cedar learns that many women don't ever leave these centers, and

this only increases her fear. Perfectly scientific pursuits have the power to bring tremendous harm, so bringing up this point could be Erdrich's way of calling for a balance between scientific and religious thought. Without a little bit of influence from "less scientific" concepts such as spirituality, religion, or even ethics, science has the potential to be used for extreme cruelty, which can be seen in both the novel and the real world.

The control over human reproduction that occurs in *Future Home of the Living God* seems to somewhat resemble the concept of eugenics, an arguably extremely unethical scientific movement designed to optimize the human gene pool. The scientists in the book are worried about the cognitive capabilities of these future infants, and whether or not they'll be up to par with current humans. In his paper, "Future Human Evolution: Eugenics in the Twenty-First Century," H. F. Mataré reports that eugenics has been described as the vision of human betterment, and that throughout Europe and the U.S. in the 1930s, the question of selective reproduction was thoroughly discussed. This involved questioning how much society was expected to be paid for the life of an unproductive and incapacitated member, and if they should be allowed to reproduce and spread these tendencies to a future generation (402). Control over human reproduction has been taken to levels that violate people's rights and emotional well beings. According to Mataré, after Gregor Mendel's concepts regarding the "rule of inheritance and the negative effects of race-mixing with less evolved stock" were popularized, controlled marriage licenses were introduced in Germany. Certain illnesses were seen as hindrances for procreation, and those with undesirable genetic traits were discouraged from reproducing (402). By imposing these restrictions on those with genetic illnesses, governments deny people autonomy and the right to have control over their bodies. Denying support to those who can't support themselves would be incredibly painful for not only those people, but their loved ones.

Allowing those who “aren’t worthy of living” die out in the name of science and human betterment would leave their loved ones in emotional turmoil. This serves to show how unchecked, scientific research, or pursuit of goals in the name of science, can become incredibly unethical and harmful. Religion could potentially be the thing that “checks” science by reminding them that all humans have equal value in the eyes of some sort of creator.

Louise Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God* clearly illustrates the harms of extremism, both in the name of religion and science. By exposing these harms, she seems to comment on the science-religion debate: Cedar’s character clearly portrays an ideal middle ground between scientific and spiritual/religious thought. She shows that the extremism on both sides hurts many ordinary people, like herself and all the other pregnant women in the novel. When everyone’s moderate, in the middle, and can understand both sides, then people are far less likely to get hurt. This carries over into the real world as well: science and religion continue to conflict, and both are used to justify terrible actions. These actions only pit the two entities against each other more. But maybe the best belief system to live by isn’t one or the other. As Morgan Freeman states in *The Story of God*: “It’s easy to get caught up, pitting science against religion; the rational versus the spiritual, but...there is room for scientific feelings without discounting subjective feelings of the divine. As Carl Sagan once said, ‘the notion that science and spirituality are mutually exclusive does a disservice to both’” (“Visions of God”). By pitting these two entities against each other, or by pushing to further one side’s agenda without consideration for the other, we only cause more harm to everybody.

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