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# The War Between Spirituality and Science Is Over

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**Monday, September 13, 2010**

There are many arenas of cultural and intellectual conflict in the world today, but one of the most controversial of these arenas has disappeared. There is now no conflict between spirituality and science. The war is over, the combatants have gone home, and lilies of peace now decorate the landscape where conflict once raged. Science and spirituality are now at total unperturbed peace.

That paragraph is meaningless, of course, which is entirely the point. Monday's edition of *USA Today* features an opinion column by Chris Mooney, author of *Unscientific America: How Scientific Illiteracy Threatens Our Future*. Mooney sets out to argue that spirituality can serve as a bridge across the science-religion divide.

Mooney is alarmed by the pervasiveness of what he defines as scientific illiteracy among the American public. In his published writings, he associates this "illiteracy" with a "war on science" being fought by anti-evolutionists, those opposed to human embryonic stem cell research, critics of climate change, and assorted others identified as obstacles to scientific advance. Of course, the fact that a large majority of Americans reject evolution only adds fuel to his fire when he cries in his milk over what he can only describe as "illiteracy."



But, if Mooney sees conservative Christians as a serious problem, he sees the so-called "New Atheists" as similarly vexing. It is not that those figures are characterized by scientific illiteracy, but rather that their strident atheism, once associated with science, becomes a further impediment to the public acceptance of evolution and other scientific claims.

In *Unscientific America*, Mooney castigates the New Atheists for their strident atheism — not because he would have them to believe in God, but because he knows that their stridency alienates the public. "The American scientific community gains nothing from the condescending rhetoric of the New Atheists," he argues, "and neither does the stature of science in our culture."

The stridency of their atheism — a hallmark of the New Atheism — alarms the public. "Abrasive atheism can only exacerbate this anxiety and reinforce the misimpression that scientific inquiry leads inevitably to the erosion of religion and values," he writes.

Mooney knows and documents that scientists are far more secular than the general public, and he is well aware that this poses a huge challenge to the public acceptance of their ideas and theories. The New Atheists, including Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, just add fuel to the fire. "If the goal is to create an America more friendly toward science and reason, the combativeness of the New Atheists is strongly counterproductive," he laments.

Why? "America is a very religious nation," he explains, "and if forced to choose between faith and science, vast numbers of Americans will choose the former." He is undoubtedly correct on that score.

But all this brings us to today's column in *USA Today*. Give the strident atheism a rest, he demands, and adopt the language of spirituality. As he tells the atheists, the language of spirituality is utterly compatible with atheism, but it will not scare the public.

In his words:

*Across the Western world — including the United States — traditional religion is in decline, even as there has been a surge of interest in “spirituality.” What's more, the latter concept is increasingly being redefined in our culture so that it refers to something very much separable from, and potentially broader than, religious faith.*

Spirituality can have little or even nothing to do with belief in God, Mooney affirms. “Spirituality is something everyone can have — even atheists.” He explains: “In its most expansive sense, it could simply be taken to refer to any individual's particular quest to discover that which is held sacred.”

Spirituality is completely compatible with atheism, he asserts. It requires no belief in God or the supernatural in any form. As a matter of fact, spirituality requires no beliefs at all. Mooney quotes the French sociologist Emile Durkheim: “By sacred things one must not understand simply those personal beings which are called Gods or spirits; a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word, anything can be sacred.”

Thus, he argues that spirituality “might be the route to finally healing one of the most divisive rifts in Western society — over the relationship between science and religion.”

In its own way, Mooney's column serves to illustrate the vacuity that marks modern spirituality. There is nothing to it — no beliefs, no God, no morality, no doctrine, no discipleship.

Spirituality in this sense is what is left when Christianity disappears and dissipates. It is the perfect religious mode for the postmodern mind. It requires nothing and promises nothing, but it serves as a substitute for authentic beliefs.

Clearly, Chris Mooney sees spirituality as a potential public relations strategy for the advancement of secular science and the naturalistic worldview. He needs prominent scientists like Dawkins and Dennett, along with others like Stephen Hawking, to shut up about atheism and just use the language of spirituality. They can retain their atheism, but they should not sound like atheists to the public.

My guess is that Dawkins, Dennett, and Hawking will ignore Mooney's advice. After all, they have made atheism into a cottage industry, and their books are bestsellers. They are likely to see Mooney's advice as quaint and unnecessary, because they feel that they own the future anyway.

The real question posed by Mooney's *USA Today* column is whether Christians possess the discernment to recognize this postmodern mode of spirituality for what it is — unbelief wearing the language of a bland faith.

Chris Mooney might be on to something here. The American public just might be confused enough to fall for this spirituality ploy. Will Christians do the same?

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Chris Mooney, “[Spirituality Can Bridge Science-Religion Divide](#),” *USA Today*, Monday, September 13, 2010.

Chris Mooney, *Unscientific America: How Scientific Illiteracy Threatens Our Future* (Basic Books, 2009).

