There is widespread belief in the minds of many that there is a conflict between science and religion. But there is no fundamental issue between the two. While the conflict has been waged long and furiously, it has been on issues utterly unrelated either to religion or to science. The conflict has been largely one of trespassing, and as soon as religion and science discover their legitimate spheres the conflict ceases.

Religion, of course, has been very slow and loath to surrender its claim to sovereignty in all departments of human life, and science overjoyed with recent victories, has been quick to lay claim to a similar sovereignty. Hence the conflict.

But there was never a conflict between religion and science as such. There cannot be. Their respective worlds are different. Their methods are dissimilar and their immediate objectives are not the same. The method of science is observation, that of religion contemplation. Science investigates. Religion interprets. One seeks causes, the other ends. Science thinks in terms of history, religion in terms of teleology. One is a survey, the other an outlook.

The conflict was always between superstition disguised as religion and materialism disguised as science, between pseudo-science and pseudo-religion.

Religion and science are two hemispheres of human thought. They are different though converging truths. Both science and religion spring from the same seeds of vital human needs.

Science is the response to the human need of knowledge and power. Religion is the response to the human need for hope and certitude. One is an outreaching for mastery, the other for perfection. Both are man-made, and like man himself, are hedged about with limitations. Neither science nor religion, by itself, is sufficient for man. Science is not civilization. Science is organized knowledge, but civilization which is the art of noble and progressive communal living requires much more than knowledge. It needs beauty which is art, and faith and moral aspiration which are religion. It needs artistic and spiritual values along with the intellectual.

Man cannot live by facts alone. What we know is little enough. What we are likely to know will always be little in comparison with what there is to know. But man has a wish-life which must build inverted pyramids upon the apexes of known facts. This is not logical. It is, however, psychological.

Science and religion are not rivals. It is only when one attempts to be the oracle at the others’ shrines that confusion arises. When the scientist from his laboratory, on the basis of alleged scientific knowledge presumes to issue pronouncements on God, on the origin and destiny of life, and on man’s place in the scheme of things he is [passing?] out worthless checks. When the religious deliver ultimatums to the scientist on the basis of certain cosmologies embedded in the sacred text then he is a sorry spectacle indeed.
When religion, however, on the strength of its own postulates, speaks to men of God and the moral order of the universe, when it utters its prophetic burden of justice and love and holiness and peace, then its voice is the voice of the eternal spiritual truth, irrefutable and invincible.

TD CSKC. Sermon file, folder 50, Sermons Not Preached

“The Purpose of Religion”

[September 1948–May 1951]

[Chester, Pa.]

What is the purpose of religion? Is it to perpetuate an idea about God? Is it totally dependent upon revelation? What part does psychological experience play? Is religion synonymous with theology?

Harry Emerson Fosdick says that the most hopeful thing about any system of theology is that it will not last. This statement will shock some. But is the purpose of religion the perpetuation of theological ideas? Religion is not validated by ideas, but by experience.

This automatically raises the question of salvation. Is the basis for salvation in creeds and dogmas or in experience? Catholics would have us believe the former. For them, the church, its creeds, its popes and bishops have recited the essence of religion and that is all there is to it. On the other hand we say that each soul must make its own reconciliation to God, that no creed can take the place of that personal experience. This was expressed by Paul Tillich when he said, “There is natural religion which belongs to man by nature. But there is also a revealed religion which man receives from a supernatural reality.” Relevant religion therefore, comes through revelation from God, on the one hand, and through repentance and acceptance of salvation on the other hand. Dogma as an agent in salvation has no essential place.

This is the secret of our religion. This is what makes the saints move on in spite of problems and perplexities of life that they must face. This religion of experience

1 King may have also considered the purpose of religion in a Morehouse paper that is no longer extant, as he began a third Morehouse paper, “Last week we attempted to discuss the purpose of religion” (King, “The Purpose of Education,” September 1946–February 1947, in Papers 1 122).

2 “Harry Emerson Fosdick” in American Spiritual Autobiographies: Fifteen Self-Portraits, ed Louis Finkelstein (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), p 114. “The theology of any generation cannot be understood, apart from the conditioning social matrix in which it is formulated. All systems of theology are as transient as the cultures they are patterned from.”

3 King further developed this theme in his dissertation. “[Tillich] finds a basis for God’s transcendence in the conception of God as abyss. There is a basic inconsistency in Tillich’s thought at this point. On the one hand he speaks as a religious naturalist making God wholly immanent in nature. On the other hand he speaks as an extreme supernaturalist making God almost comparable to the Barthian ‘wholly other’” (King, “A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman,” 15 April 1955, in Papers 2 555).

4 Commas were added after the words “religion” and “salvation.”