

Wampeters, NOMA, and Granfalloon

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Abstract

This study characterizes Stephen Jay Gould's theory of non-overlapping magisteria (NOMA) by borrowing apt terminology from the satire of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. NOMA is really what Vonnegut calls a foma, or 'white lie', in that it underestimates the social power of American fundamentalist Christians, presenting a more comforting picture of relations between science and religion. The arguments for NOMA are unconvincing when one considers the history of Western religion, and the idea of consensus is based on a limited view of religious (and irreligious) experience. In practice, NOMA subjects scientific fact to religious moral authority. Instead of NOMA, a truly modern society must construct a hierarchy of knowledge to avoid future conflict. Falsifiable knowledge should therein take precedence over unverifiable belief. In a secular society, as the United States was intended to be, we have a duty to abandon superstition when making public policy.

Keywords:

NOMA, Stephen Jay Gould, religion, science, evolution, epistemology, fundamentalism, public policy, culture war, Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

I. In Explanation of the Frame

In *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, Stephen Jay Gould asserts that science and religion are not, as many contemporary cultural critics would have it, at war with one another. In fact, he says that science and religion are two non-overlapping magisteria (NOMA), or teaching domains, whose claims to knowledge are separate but equal.¹ Under the NOMA concept, science controls the realms of facts and theories about the natural world, while religion rules the domains of morality and supernatural explanations. This truce has always existed, and only recently have the edges of each magisterium begun to bleed into one another, causing strife. However noble Gould's creation may seem, I believe it is what the great American satirist Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., calls a "foma," or 'little white lie' meant to comfort religious souls.²

Vonnegut told his readers in the preface to his 1974 collection of essays, reviews, and speeches, *Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloon (Opinions)*, that a wampeter is an item around which many people's lives might revolve. His example of this concept was the Holy Grail. Granfalloon is proud but meaningless associations of people – like football boosters, perhaps. And foma, the term omitted from the title of this essay to be replaced by Gould's acronym, NOMA, Vonnegut defines as "harmless truths, intended to comfort simple souls."³

While no scholar who has read his work would call Stephen Jay Gould simple, I stand by the backhanded assertion that NOMA was concocted primarily for the comfort

¹ Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages : Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, 1st ed. (New York: Ballantine Pub. Group, 1999).

² Kurt Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma, & Granfalloon; Opinions of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr* ([New York]: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1974).

³ *Ibid.*, xv.

of religious souls, for it cannot stem from an accurate assessment of the history of religious practice in the Western world. Nor can it come to fruition in any political system but one that is at least partially theocratic, since moral decisions (like gay marriage rights or stem cell research) would be left to the discretion of religious authorities. Indeed, the ascription of NOMA as foma would be inapt, if we were to take Vonnegut literally and demand that NOMA be both harmless and truthful, but fundamentalist readings of texts are a primary cause of NOMA's noble failure.

It is an unfortunate fact that America is becoming more hostile, religious and political beliefs polarizing, but composing frothing polemics will not convince anyone that a given point of view is better. Thus I employ the coined terms of one of the great satirists of our time as a heuristic device to analyze (and make the occasional light-hearted poke at) the way our society has come to terms with multi-modal paradigms of knowledge among voters, pundits, and policy makers. In addition, I wish to offer my own suggestion for how our various systems of knowing can be better evaluated so as to instruct a healthy society, rather than put it at odds with itself. I hope my colleagues will both forgive my occasional fits of irreverence and (dare I hope?) incorporate a similar well-intentioned approach in future discussions of what has until now been primarily an intellectual donnybrook. Moreover, to allege dishonesty in Gould's theory is not my intention – the point is that truths are only as valid as the information gathered in developing them. I will argue that the historical analysis in *Rocks of Ages* is limited by various factors.

A deeper exploration of the analogy between foma and NOMA will be undertaken later in this essay. Indeed, the terms in the title of Vonnegut's collection of essays will

serve as a frame for the discussion first of Gould's conception of NOMA (his foma), second of the expropriation of what one critic has dubbed the Secularist Empire (our granfalloon), and finally as a label for a new hierarchy of knowledge around which secular imperialists such as myself might gather (a wampeter).

In the first section of this essay, I will examine the support Gould offers on behalf of his claim that NOMA is not only historically standard practice – that it exists now and always has – but that it ought to be maintained, as well. His arguments are primarily rooted in the humanistic disciplines (history, theology, and literary studies), and to make them he must roam far from his own magisterium (the sciences). On the field of play Gould has chosen, he is at a disadvantage for several reasons, not least of which is his lack of methodological sophistication.⁴ Once I have registered my objections to Gould's assumptions about what constitutes an ideal society conforming to both religious and scientific practices, I will explore the repercussions of 'othering'⁵ by religious leaders and religious scientists by taking the granfalloon John Polkinghorne has created for his secularist 'others' (that secularists have established for themselves an entire empire!) and leading it back toward its appropriate path. Finally, and as a token of good faith, I will present a different paradigm for the production and maintenance of society's knowledge. This is necessary because any attempt at deconstruction should conclude with a move back toward positive theory-building. Mine will be based whenever possible on *logos* instead of *pathos*. Since my aim is to create a secularist wampeter in the form of this document, every effort should be expended to make it a useful one, one that is as objective as possible.

⁴ Though few would deny that he was a brilliant scientist, this distinction should be perfectly clear: he is neither a historian nor a literary critic.

⁵ That is, marginalizing another (or many others) by voicing one's perceptions of the other's exoticism.

II. On NOMA and Foma

Alleging that NOMA is an example of Vonnegut's foma requires me to address three points. The first is the claim that Gould has approached the topic honestly. With this I do not disagree, but I would like to complicate the issue by analyzing the information Gould brings to the project, in that it was limited significantly, and that he relied heavily on an idea of consensus that is strictly irrelevant and misleading when placed in its proper historical context. The second point is that he tells the truth, or at least that he tells *a* truth. I make the distinction because I do not feel Gould meant to deceive, but the nature of his truth does not correlate to the majority experience in America.⁶ The historical basis of his truth is skewed by *a priori* assumptions interfering with his analysis. The final point is that the truth he tells is a comforting truth for simple souls. While I do not mean to cause offense, I should explain that I, like many Christians I have known, equate religious views with simplicity and find scientific views far worldlier. Often religious thought is framed in dualities, such as good and evil, black and white. The intellectual community, of which scientists are a part, attempts to embrace a more complicated view – what occurs in the natural world is neither good nor evil, but it is merely consistent with the characters of the agents involved. With this established, I will end this section of the essay by expanding on the idea that NOMA could only be seen as a practical solution by

⁶ One reader inquired why the focus of this essay is limited to America. One important reason is that this is done for the purpose of maintaining a parallel with Gould's work, to which this essay is heavily indebted (despite disagreement about the historicity of NOMA). The U.S. is the country Gould focused on, and his arguments regarding majority opinion often reflected a specifically American situation. It is a symptom of many discussions about religion and science that the argument does not reach stasis – the various sides argue at different levels, never truly reaching a common ground. Hopefully the conclusions reached when discussing the American particulars can later be extended to other nations.

those who are comforted by religious leaders making their moral decisions for them, for the definition of NOMA entails they must.

In evaluating the first claim to fomahood, that Gould tells the truth, no supporter of NOMA would argue with my concession that Gould makes an honest attempt to address the issue as he sees it. Where I will stray from the path of accord is in voicing my concern that Gould's perspective on religion is incomplete and often Catholicentric. His argument hinges on the idea of consensus, in that he uses past concessions to religion to prove that it does not compete for the same turf as science does. But "sanity is not statistical," as George Orwell tells us,⁷ and in this case claiming consensus seems more a celebration of silencing of the voice of dissent than anything else.

While I have no wish to point fingers at the Catholic Church, it is well-established that there was a long stretch of time in the West when penalties – sometimes very harsh and permanent penalties – were incurred by those who chose to promote scientific interests over those of the Church. This historically Catholic conception of consensus is really little more than agreement at gunpoint. Moreover, Gould wrongly attempts to use the religiousness of past scientists to prove his claim.⁸ However, most scientific thinkers of the past had no choice but to proclaim religiosity, and this fact does a better job of *disproving* the claim that NOMA has had a long and glorious tradition in Christendom. I doubt anyone truly suspects that a direct and earnest admission of atheism would have benefitted a pre-Enlightenment scientist. That it is all but unheard-of is a powerful argument from omission. While it does not follow that their forced conformity means all

⁷ By means of his protagonist, Winston Smith. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: Penguin, 1984), 179.

⁸ Gould, *Rocks of Ages : Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, 83.

scientists were atheists struggling under religious oppression, we will likely never know how many were.

Beyond the obvious historical problems with Gould's argument from consensus lies a problem of definition. He makes it clear that he must not include "extremists" who want creationism taught in public schools in his study.⁹ According to a July 2006 Pew Research Center poll, this means 58% of Americans are extremists, by Gould's definition.¹⁰ Moreover, Gould also wishes to avoid including "misguided peacemakers," who unrealistically seek harmony at any price, in his consensus.¹¹ It makes one wonder whom, precisely, Gould wishes to include in his sample. Surely it is not the majority of Americans.

Gould seems oblivious to the overwhelming sentiments of the (apparently grossly undereducated) American public. From the heights of the Ivory Tower, it may be easy to overlook *hoi polloi* opinion, but to exclude the majority of a population merely by labeling them extremists is irresponsible at best. At worst, it is shaping the data to support one's pet theory. And while Gould seems unsympathetic to creationism, he insists that it "does not pit science against religion."¹² His illustrations in support of this theory are two anecdotes about his experiences with other (highly educated) religious adherents, and the statement that:

creationism does not raise any unsettled intellectual issues about the nature of biology or the history of life. Creationism is a local and parochial movement, powerful only in the United States among Western nations...

⁹ Ibid., 69-70.

¹⁰ Scott Keeter and Juliana Horowitz, "On Darwin's 200th Birthday, Americans Still Divided About Evolution," <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1107/polling-evolution-creationism>.

¹¹ Gould, *Rocks of Ages : Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, 70.

¹² Stephen Jay Gould, "Nonoverlapping Magisteria," *Natural History* 1997, 17.

creationism based on biblical literalism makes little sense in either Catholicism or Judaism.¹³

This sums up Gould's method. If you are not a Jew or a Catholic, your religious or irreligious experience is peripheral. Similar to the ancient Roman practice of affording diminishing rights, there seems to be a level of importance people have in Gould's work that decreases as we look outward from the center.¹⁴ Gould was born Jewish, so he will include Judaism in his analysis. He grew up around a lot of Catholics, so they are okay, too. Protestants are fine, as long as they are not members of the (majority) "extremist" sects. However, including non-Western religions would be taking things too far. It is not hard to imagine why Islam, the only Abrahamic religion Gould does not wish to talk about, has been excused from the table, despite the growing numbers of Muslims in the West. For Muslims, there is no magisterium but one, and Muhammad is his prophet.

Exclusion really is the name of the game when considering the NOMA manifesto. Atheists are, under no uncertain terms, excluded from moral decision-making processes. One look at the bifurcation of human intellectual pursuits – there is science and there is religion – indicates the limitations Gould applies to the range of human experience. In fact, atheists cannot even live a "complete human life," because they disregard the "necessary" domain of religion.¹⁵ Even if we take Gould's conception of religion in its broadest possible sense, to include all ethical thought and decision-making processes, it is still an insulting formulation for anyone who does not feel the need to believe in a higher power. If "extremists," "peacemakers," and atheists cannot have their say in the

¹³ Loc. cit.

¹⁴ In Rome's case, the most rights were afforded to Romans, then Latins, then Italians, and so on.

¹⁵ Gould, *Rocks of Ages : Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, 58. Comments like these extend the argument well beyond a mere division of the philosophical distinction between fact and value. If Gould's only point was that we cannot derive a value from a fact, then exclusionary language would be unnecessary. Yet it is ubiquitous in his work.

assessment of human values and greater purposes, it is not hard to anticipate questions a naysayer would pose, located just a few feet down the slippery slope: Can Asian people participate? Can women? Can the disabled? This is nothing Gould implied, of course, and it is highly unlikely that he would have, but my hyperbole serves an important purpose: all people have a right to express their well-founded ethical beliefs, and when we begin by excluding some, we do not find it difficult to expand the scope of our disfranchisement later.

This position is as untenable as is Gould's call for mutual respect through "mutual understanding."¹⁶ I wonder if Gould had in mind when writing his book the commonly portrayed happy days of the mid-20th century, when scientists and laymen alike would meet in church every Sunday and participate together in their (genuine or *pro forma*) worship as members of a unified community. Whatever the motivation, the idea that a scientist needs to understand religion to be able to respect the religious is like saying I need to understand quantum mechanics in order to hold those few who truly do in high esteem. Religious sentiment does not alter the characteristics of the natural world, and only through its metaphorical sophistication could it contribute to scientific theory. Why a scientist needs to understand religion to uncover the workings of the natural world is never established, but often assumed in Gould's work.

By the same token, science cannot help explain the supernatural, if such a thing exists. To Eugenie Scott, the fundamental differences between science and religion do not preclude their taking "interest in one another's concerns. Most religions have explanations of the natural world – but as [the philosopher of science Michael] Ruse

¹⁶ Ibid., 26.

points out, science has done a better job than revelation in this realm.”¹⁷ It is also true that religion has inspired many innovations in science and the arts, but much of this inspiration is beginning to become subject to biological explanation. Howard Kaye asks a profound question indeed when he wonders:

How long can the legacy of the religious imagination endure when the despair, guilt, love, and sense of righteousness we experience are unmasked in their evolutionary origins, biological purposes, and psychological “misfirings,” or dismissed as parasitic on biological processes that can be more effectively controlled by pharmacological means?¹⁸

It is frustrating, to say the least, to read a paleontologist (like Gould) who does not understand the issue under similar terms. While the world would be a very boring place if everyone believed the same things, it is not belief that makes the scientific world go around. Science is ruled by knowledge accumulated through the construction of falsifiable theories based on the rational explanation of empirical evidence.¹⁹ The quest for biological explanations for human experiences should at least be given a fair shot before falling back on a ‘god of the gaps’ to fill the holes in our knowledge.

To deal with the second implication of categorizing NOMA as an example of Vonnegut’s foma – the notion of Gould’s truth being harmless – I reiterate that while I

¹⁷ Eugenie Scott, "The Natural & the Supernatural," *Skeptic* 8, no. 2 (2000): 83.

¹⁸ Howard Kaye, "Are Science and Religion Complementary Perspectives?," *Society* 45, no. 2 (2008). There are many examples recently of this type of evolutionary narrative-building in order to explain spiritual urges and their related feelings. One of the most compelling narratives is found in Dennett (2006).

¹⁹ This does not exempt science from reasonable skepticism, however. Science is a human endeavor and is therefore influenced at times by human flaws. The important thing to note is that these flaws are often discovered and addressed by later thinkers.

sincerely believe Gould was attempting to tell a truthful tale about the truce he imagines has existed between science and religion, the historical truth is a much different story, and a misinterpretation could be quite harmful in that if this historical truth is forgotten, it could very well be repeated. Gould realized that history was against him, so he needed to slant his reading of it in an eccentric way. He knew that what he called “the mythical model of warfare between science and religion” needed to be debunked for NOMA to have any ground upon which to stand.²⁰ In order to do this, he would have to take a drastically revisionist view of history, applying an inexplicably projectionist view of “Doubting” Thomas, the Apostle of Jesus, an understated reaction toward Pope John Paul II, and a sort of post-post-colonialist reading of Columbus. I will examine these three examples below.

When calling Gould’s view of Thomas ‘projectionist,’ I mean that Gould projected his own modern scientific mindset onto a person whose scientific knowledge was more than two millennia behind Gould’s own. He uses the figure of Thomas – who, when he heard that Jesus had arisen from the dead, asked for proof – as his first example of science treading on faith’s turf. Allow me to reiterate this with stress on the irony: Thomas *the Apostle* is the first “scientist” Gould uses to illustrate his argument.²¹ Science, in this case, was out of line, because when Thomas’s comrades told him that their dead friend was now floating ghostlike around the Middle East, he asked them to prove it. Thomas’s demand hardly seems unreasonable. Moreover, it should not need much arguing to establish that the factual claim that someone is alive falls within the

²⁰ Gould, *Rocks of Ages : Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, 123.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 15ff.

magisterium of the life sciences. But this is only the first, and oddest, of Gould's interpretations of history (or literature, if you prefer, in this case).

The next oddity in Gould's analysis stems from his interpretation of an address to the Pontifical Academy of Science Pope John Paul II made in 1996. The statement, which "struck [Gould] as entirely unremarkable and fully consistent with long-standing Roman Catholic support for NOMA," exclaimed that Catholics could now believe that the theory of evolution had been all but proven.²² This came forty-six years after Pius XII's encyclical explaining that, while evolution had not been proven, it was a scientific theory that may or may not stand the test of time. Gould's nonchalance in the face of an alarming admission I could chalk up to faith-blindness, or a selective memory of history lessons, up until the point where he used the word "unremarkable" to describe a statement that conjures instantly to my mind a few pointed remarks. What is remarkable to me is that inquiry into any amoral scientific issue should in this day and age involve the papacy in any way – clearly the Pope granting people the right to believe in a scientific theory (especially one that had been unfalsified for 150 years) is a breach of NOMA, if ever there was one. What is remarkable to me is that it took Pius a whole century to half-heartedly admit Darwin's story might have merit, and John Paul another half century to whole-heartedly agree that science had finally reached a consensus. Most of all, I find it remarkable that a religious body has the cheek to even consider they have the right to suggest what is a "legitimate... subject for study" in the academic world.²³

Gould applauds the idea that "[s]incere Christians may now accept evolution" as a fact, citing this as an example of religious non-interference. That they had to wait until

²² Ibid., 75.

²³ Loc. cit.

1996 to do so speaks volumes. It takes an especially convoluted view of history to come to the conclusion that NOMA is somehow supported by such a slight, one-off admission of science's authority in a realm it had clearly taken over a century and a half earlier. That the permission even needed giving is indicative of the Catholic Church's frequent incursions into the magisterium of science, as Gould has it.

The final historical example I would like to discuss is Gould's treatment of Christopher Columbus and the story that he proved to his contemporaries that the Earth was not flat. Gould asserts that this is "[a] fit tale for an intended purpose, but entirely false because few medieval Christian scholars ever doubted the Earth's sphericity."²⁴ True enough, most educated Europeans of the later Middle Ages were aware of the roughly spherical shape of the globe. Yet Gould attributes to this story a sort of malevolent secularist aim, intended to embarrass the Church, an organization that, frankly, needs little help from secularists when it comes to making absurd claims about the natural world. It took the Church 359 years to admit the Earth moved around the sun, but this is neither here nor there.²⁵ What is germane here is that Gould misapprehends the import of the flat Earth tale. He sees it as an attack upon the Church's disposition with regard to knowledge, by scientists who wished to stress the loss of "Greek knowledge"²⁶ during the Dark Ages. However, aptly named are the Christian Dark Ages. It seems odd indeed for someone to object to the idea that Christianity did a poor job of dealing with competing ideas when it held almost universal power in the West. So poor a job, in fact, that the Western world was for the most part unaware of its own intellectual history until Muslim scholars returned it, centuries later, with many improvements of their own.

²⁴ Gould, *Rocks of Ages : Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, 118.

²⁵ Brian R. Farmer, *American Conservatism : History, Theory and Practice* (Newcastle, UK.: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2005), 60.

²⁶ Gould did not have a high opinion of later Roman innovations, it seems.

Gould bemoans a false dichotomy between science and religion, but a dichotomy clearly must exist if science was suppressed when Catholicism held universal power. When the Church's grip began to loosen, the Dark Ages became gradually lighter, until the Enlightenment illuminated the many ills of theocratic Europe. To wonder why the flat-Earth myth surrounded Columbus is to miss the point entirely. The Church has a long history of putting scientists on trial for challenging the existing order, as defined by theologians. It was not that challenges to the Church presented some vague form of torture in a hypothetical afterlife, either; a strong enough challenge meant suffering precise forms of torture in a very real present life, at the hands of the Inquisition.

This leads us to the third, and final, point of contact between NOMA and foma (a white lie) – the idea that to be a foma, NOMA must be intended to comfort simple souls. To a reader familiar with Vonnegut's corpus, this is a clear occasion of the author using sarcasm to carry his point. The example Vonnegut lists, that "prosperity is just around the corner," gives us an indication of the loose criteria for "truth" his "simple souls" require in order to be satisfied.²⁷ It is a safe bet that Vonnegut means what Richard Dawkins likes to call the "wishful thinking" method of ontology.²⁸ On this score, NOMA is clearly a foma.

The most obvious case in which wishful thinking occurs rests in the basis of NOMA's truce – that the separate magisteria should not be encroached upon by adherents of the other method of knowing. Yet one has to wonder what this territory is that religion would not take, if it could get away with it. Gould truly clings to a naïve, ahistoric,

²⁷ Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma, & Granfalloon*; *Opinions of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.*, xv.

²⁸ See especially Richard Dawkins, *A Devil's Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science, and Love* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2003).

apologetic view of religion in imagining that religion would not move to annex all the terrain it can get.

What field of science would go untouched if religion had its way? Surely not medicine, where doctors are fighting a constant battle against Gould's "extremists," who feel they have the right to tell others what procedures they can perform (most often on people who are complete strangers to the religious protesters). Whether we are talking about abortion, stem cell research, do-not-resuscitate orders, or any host of medical issues, many religious groups have positioned themselves to interfere with the doctors who actually have the knowledge and training to know what operations are helpful or harmful to human beings.

This is not a good example of what Gould calls his "Goldilocks Principle," where nothing is too cold or too hot, and everything is just right. While this sounds wonderful in fairytales containing anthropomorphized ursine predators who subsist on cereal grains alone, the real world does not work like this. Bears maul pert little girls who wander into their dens. Besides, if we tried every chair to find the one that was just right for one religious group, three others would complain it was too small. In the meantime, no one would get any rest, what with all the bickering about who gets what chair. But sitting is not the point, nor are fairy stories. People suffer and die when religious groups block the proper course of medicine, as defined by the doctors who take oaths to help their patients.

Really, what Gould is trying to do is create a mental abstraction that sounds nice and comforting (the 'just right' bowl of porridge for religious minds), but when it comes down to it his edentate theory is completely impractical. He is reconciling one dichotomy by creating another, less reasonable one. Because he does not believe that facts of nature

can determine morality, religion gets to determine it by default. This is apt to lead to a negative view of the world, based on original sin pessimism and anthropocentric religious views. To many religious thinkers, we live in a world that is rightly controlled by human beings, one where all the plants and animals are yoked to human service. Yet human beings need to be restrained from their sinful urges. The lunatics are clearly running the asylum down here on planet Earth, and only the hand of God (or its representation in the form of floods, hurricanes, or droughts) exists to lead us back to the path of righteousness, when we stray.

We can even, according to some notable Christian leaders, trace our natural disasters back to very specific events. It is not the least bit shocking that the satirical piece run on *Dateline Hollywood*'s weblog in September of 2005 was taken as genuine by many, after American religious leaders made similar comments about the Muslim terrorist attacks on America four years earlier. The blog post reported that according to Pat Robertson – a perennial stormy petrel to the gay and lesbian community – Hurricane Katrina ripped through the city of New Orleans because the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences selected Ellen Degeneres to host the 2005 Emmy Awards ceremony.²⁹ “By choosing an avowed lesbian for this national event, these Hollywood elites have clearly invited God’s wrath,” he was reported to have told his viewers.

There are two facts that are troubling about this story. First, that it was so characteristic of Robertson’s attitude toward natural disasters (and homosexuals) that few thought to question its validity – most people just assumed it was true. Second, that there are reportedly 7 million viewers of his show per week, and this number is but a drop in

²⁹ Dateline Hollywood, "Robertson Blames Hurricane on Choice of Ellen Degeneres to Host Emmys," (2005).

the bucket of the televangelist market in America.³⁰ Gould may be right that these hellfire and brimstone types are “extremist,” but he is far off base if he thinks they are a small minority among the otherwise rational American public. If the foma of non-overlapping magisteria does indeed comfort some souls, they need to take a closer look at the current state of affairs in our country. Moderates are not the majority; that position has been taken over by people who believe that creationism should be taught in public (that is, secular) schools, and that their god actively interferes in their day-to-day lives. Comforting our souls might need to be put on hold while we take a good, hard look at the damage religious extremists can do to a nation founded on secular values.

III. Granfalloon and Their Discontents

To claim that I am the first, or only, author to poke holes in the thin membrane holding NOMA together is far from the truth. If Stephen Jay Gould were alive today, he should take it as quite a compliment that his words – however mistaken some might think them – have the power to rally so many, both for and against his cause. Like Pompey’s boast that he need but stamp his foot and legions would spring from the ground, Gould needed only to enter a religious debate to summon a similar number of respondents.³¹ John Polkinghorne recently contributed an admirable attempt to complicate the debate. While engaging in his critique of Gould’s conception of separate spheres, however, Polkinghorne has other targets on his mind. Most notably, he attempts to seize the moral high ground from those who practice an “imperialist secularism,” while remaining silent

³⁰ J. Gordon Melton, Phillip Charles Lucas, and Jon R. Stone, *Prime-Time Religion : An Encyclopedia of Religious Broadcasting* (Phoenix, Ariz.: Oryx Press, 1997), 288.

³¹ Plut. *Pomp.* 57.5.

about those who have engaged in the long tradition of brutally imperialist religious practice.³² What his term adds to the topic at hand is an opportunity to reconstruct for its members the constitution of the Empire of Secularism, as he has dubbed it. That is, if purveyors of secular values must be called (pejoratively) “imperialist,” we certainly should make the most of the empire we are accused of having.

I am fully prepared to admit that I, for one, am a member of the Imperial Secularists of whom Polkinghorne speaks. However, this statement requires some clarification, as empires have come under fire in recent decades. The bases for most arguments against empire are that they operate through prejudice, exploitation, and warmongering. The Empire of Secularism is implicated in all of these claims, but not as they were intended. Secularists are prejudiced against beliefs, true, but mainly those that will significantly affect their lives when there is no evidence to support them – secularists prefer testable knowledge to unverifiable belief. Additionally, secularists do tend to exploit all sources of proof before settling on the most likely explanation for any natural phenomenon. And while secularists are not warmongers, they are often another type of monger – indeed, they monger peace. The Empire of Secularism, though it may be a granfalloon (a meaningless association of people) of my own ironic (re)construction, has never begun a war in the name of its unbelief, a claim alarmingly few religions can make.

Yet Polkinghorne’s charge of “imperialist secularism” is a common one, made most often by people with shining cartoon halos dinging overhead. Reference to the brutality of past religious figures has been made *ad nauseum*, so I will refrain from the obvious retort here. (We all know by now that no one expects the Spanish Inquisition, as

³² John Polkinghorne, "The Continuing Interaction of Science and Religion," *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science* 40, no. 1 (2005): 44.

Monty Python would have it, except in discussions about the merits of religious morality.) What I would like to say is that when treated with historical balance, Western secularism is not an attempt at control. Indeed, it is precisely the opposite. The drive toward secularism, especially in America, stems from the mass-migrations of Europeans persecuted by intolerant religious leaders in their home countries, especially Polkinghorne's England. Secularism is partly a refugee's response to the unlivable circumstances that drove him on a perilous trans-Atlantic voyage to begin anew in a strange, but free, new world. It is also partly a response to the verifiable nature of scientific theories which, unlike religion, is supported by evidence.

Irony aside, secularists in America are the oppressed group; the religious empires can and do dominate them at will. But theological Affirmative Action begins now, for the sake of all atheists who are subjected to systemic religionism. It only seems fitting that members of the atheistic granfalloon Polkinghorne has inspired should be afforded some level of preferment in a just society, in order for them to get back on their feet. After all, what minority has been trodden upon, and treated with more scorn, than the irreligious? Even today, open discrimination exists. A recent Gallup poll shows that, when presented with qualified political candidates who are (for instance) black, Jewish, gay, over the age of 72, or atheists, the atheists are the minority group Americans are least likely to vote for.³³ And while being treated with mere scorn and bigotry might be an improvement in the lives of atheists, it is a very recent improvement. Their existence is now tolerated in America. Like the Irish, Chinese, Catholics, women, and Africans before them, groups

³³ Gallup's potentially insensitive categorization, not mine. Jeffrey M. Jones, "Some Americans Reluctant to Vote for Mormon, 72-Year-Old Presidential Candidates: Strong Support for Black, Women, Catholic Candidates," Gallup, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/26611/Some-Americans-Reluctant-Vote-Mormon-72YearOld-Presidential-Candidates.aspx>.

who have now earned their equal standing among the American voting public, we all have to start somewhere. Unfortunately, it tends to be at the bottom.

IV. A Wampeter for the Secular Empire

Because acts of deconstruction, like those I have practiced on NOMA in the first two sections of this essay, are unprofitable for their own sake, any responsible critic must offer a positive counter-claim to the one he has disassembled, in order to participate faithfully in a conversation. What I hope to achieve in this section is to create a wampeter (that central item of focus) for Imperial Secularists like myself to gather around; the item I have in mind is a new hierarchy of thought to rule our judgment on secular issues. To me, as well as the founding fathers of the United States, these secular issues most definitely include federal and local government. In the following pages, I will argue that knowledge and belief are not equal claims to truth in a secular society. Evidence has proven itself more consistent than faith in compiling knowledge, and if we are going to print on our dollar bills that there is anyone in whom we trust, it should not be God but Science. I also assert that morality is a social construct and that a society informed by knowledge instead of belief has the potential to function more smoothly, if given the chance. The superstitious have had a few thousand years to try it their way; it is about time rationalists had a go, and it was the intent of our founding fathers that America would be the first solid attempt.

As I have mentioned above, Western religion seems to advance a pessimistic worldview. I can think of no better example of this than Polkinghorne's assertion that

cancer does not stem from the design of a fallible god, but that it is the price of free will.³⁴ While it is difficult to know exactly how one should take such claims, it is easy enough to see how anything can be turned into a result of “the fall” of mankind from grace.

Nonetheless, it is not religion that needs to go when we construct the new world order – it is the superstitious belief religion encourages. How many educated people truly believe that beams of light from images of Mother Teresa can cure cancer? This patently absurd belief reflects the miraculous basis for Teresa’s beatification, the first step toward sainthood in the Catholic Church. Indeed, it is from a similarly skewed perspective that Mother Teresa saw the poor and sick as no more than means to her end of sainthood and the creation of her own religious order. As Christopher Hitchens says of Teresa’s efforts, “the point is not the honest relief of suffering but the promulgation of a cult based on death and suffering and subjection.”³⁵ Such self-serving and cynical views are not universal among the religious, but are indicative of what can occur when people are allowed to acquire power within any such organization.

Our superstitious beliefs are not always our fault, though – they are often the evolutionary by-products of other, beneficial processes. Terrence Deacon explains that the mind works like a symbol-generator, finding high-order associations wherever it can. We are, in fact, wired to discover deep meaning in everything; it is a genetic bias that can be understood and explored.³⁶ So it is with religion. While many of us may be programmed from birth to seek out the spiritual, that does not mean we need to privilege our superstitions. Nor does it mean we should exempt them from scholarly study, which

³⁴ Polkinghorne, "The Continuing Interaction of Science and Religion," 45.

³⁵ Christopher Hitchens, *The Missionary Position : Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* (London; New York: Verso, 1995), 41.

³⁶ Terrence William Deacon, *The Symbolic Species : The Co-Evolution of Language and the Brain*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 435.

is just the conclusion Daniel Dennett comes to in his 2006 book on the natural origins of religion.³⁷ We are intelligent creatures, for the most part, who have the ability to analyze and even break free from many of our genetic pre-dispositions. If there is a complex of genes that contributes to religious sentiment, we can acknowledge that they exist and do with them what we please. Moreover, if it is true that “culture, not biology, rules” our actions, as Richerson and Boyd assert, then the adaptations of human culture enable us to overcome many of our genetic traits, both for our benefit and our bane.³⁸

This said, I wish to propose a basic hierarchy of knowledge that I encourage all members of a free society to adopt. Atop this hierarchy should sit knowledge. By knowledge, I mean those facts that have been proven, and those theories that have been systematically tested against falsification, that we often call science. Through reason and observation, humanity has climbed out of the Dark Ages – a period unquestioned faith threatens to revisit on mankind. Rational thought has earned the right, through centuries of trial and error, to be called humanity’s most reliable basis of knowing about the world around us.

Once we have exhausted the great many pieces of knowledge we have accumulated as a species, we must learn to deal with incomplete pictures of the world. But to do this, we cannot allow unfounded belief to influence our decisions. There is much that can be inferred by specialists who have been trained in their fields, even though they do not know for certain that their conclusions will hold true under new evidence. Much like the mechanic who can infer that a certain metal-on-metal noise is likely related to worn brakes, humanity needs trained professionals who can at least point

³⁷ Daniel Clement Dennett, *Breaking the Spell : Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006), 31.

³⁸ Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd, *Not by Genes Alone : How Culture Transformed Human Evolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 149.

us in the right direction and begin our investigations with informed judgment. Here is where we allow the experts to do their jobs. Let doctors evaluate the health of their own patients and make recommendations for treatment in cases of moral ambiguity. Allow consenting adults to determine how best to express their own sexuality, for they are the experts in knowing who their partners should be. Allow the people with the most knowledge in a given field to have the most influence in deciding how that field should progress. Most of all, we should be optimistic about human intelligence and cultivate the nobility of human pursuits. For it seems rare indeed that people set out to harm one another in the name of advancing knowledge; most often, it is a lack of knowledge, or an urge to suppress knowledge, that causes conflict.

Finally, when facts have been exhausted, and informed theories run out, when the experts are at a loss, and there is no other explanation forthcoming, then we should reserve judgment, follow probability, and keep open minds. Beliefs are inevitable in human psyches, but most of them, especially religious ones, have little basis in fact – they are merely conjectures. Beliefs are guesses made without the necessary information. They are taken on faith, the very notion of which is antagonistic toward knowledge. Massimo Pigliucci rightly states that “science remains by far the single most successful set of tools to learn about the natural world and to predict its behavior,” but I would take this statement one step further.³⁹ I would say that science cannot even be compared with competing sources of truth, such as feeling, revelation, and intuition. There is no contest in terms of science’s pure explanatory muscle.

By comparison, religion has added little to any field of rational inquiry, and in fact holds back human knowledge-building efforts more often than not. While religious

³⁹ Massimo Pigliucci, "A Case against God," *Skeptic* 6, no. 2 (1998): 66.

figures have made their contributions, this typically occurs in spite of religion, not because of it. If we are to become responsible inheritors of the gift of intellect, we need to begin applying it with forward-thinking determination; no longer can we allow atavistic superstitions and their adherents to prevent the advancement of knowledge. We are unique, as far as we can tell, as a species capable of astounding mental feats. Any force that seeks to suppress the effort to accumulate even greater stores of knowledge for our species serves no other purpose than to deny humanity the expression of its most magnificent trait.

