Over the last few decades, especially since John Hedley Brooke published his monumental book *Science and Religion: Some historical perspectives* in 1991, historians of science have agreed that it is not possible to construct a master narrative of science and religion. ‘Complexity’ is the least bad way to characterize the historical relation between the two. Many case studies have since confirmed Brooke’s ‘complexity thesis.’ Nevertheless there is a desire to ‘simplify complexity,’ as Ronald L. Numbers formulated it during a conference on the occasion of Brooke’s retirement in 2007. In recent years, Peter Harrison has been one of the few historians of science who have not hesitated to propose more general theses. His latest book is based on his Gifford Lectures, delivered at the University of Edinburgh in 2011, and can be seen as the culmination of earlier work. The book displays
great erudition and is very readable; it carries the promise to give the debate about science and religion a new twist, not only in academia, but also among the general public.

If one wants to relate a ‘historical master narrative’ about science and religion, one of the difficulties is, of course, that one cannot speak about the relation between ‘science’ and ‘religion’ referring to periods preceding the development of the modern categories. It is anachronistic to apply modern categories to pre-modern times. Harrison tries to overcome this problem by several approaches, which he introduces in the first two chapters, and which he works out in the remainder of the book. Inspired by the method of Begriffsgeschichte – conceptual history –, he traces the concepts of scientia and religio from antiquity to the 19th century, when they transformed into categories more or less similar to the modern categories of ‘science’ and ‘religion.’

In focusing on religio and scientia, Harrison considers concepts that are linguistically close to ‘religion’ and ‘science.’ Additionally, he looks at other categories, such as ‘theology’ and ‘natural philosophy.’ His aim is to make it clear when the ‘modern western categories of science and religion’ began to emerge and to analyse how the way in which they emerged can provide insight into their present relation.

So, what is the general picture that arises from this analysis? Harrison’s main claim is that originally both religio and scientia were viewed as strongly linked to interior virtues; they were ways of life rather than bodies of knowledge. Scientia referred to the intellectual habit that characterized the ancient natural philosopher whose calling was moral and theological in nature. The Greek philosophers were not looking for a naturalist, rationalist investigation of the cosmos per se, but for the good life. Interestingly, the early Christians incorporated many elements of this ancient philosophy. Their religio referred to virtues, the right worship and a certain way of life. The declaration ‘I believe’ was not primarily about propositional truths, but was an expression of trust between persons. Doctrines and creeds were there to direct spiritual growth. It was not until the 16th century that the concept of religion as we know it today began to emerge: an intellectualized ‘system of belief.’

In the same period radical changes took place in the study of nature. In Harrison’s words: ‘During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, both religion and science were literally turned inside out’ (p. 16). They underwent similar transitions from inner virtues into sets of thoughts and beliefs.

Harrison develops several subtheses, which fit within this general view. In Chapter 3 he follows up on his earlier work on the relation between Protestantism and the study of nature, including the idea that the more literal interpretation of the Bible of the Reformers – instead of an allegorical reading – caused a more ‘literal’ reading of nature. This can also be viewed as a way of externalization, because allegory, both applied to Scripture and nature had been a way to contemplate God and was connected to inner virtues. However, the changes in ‘scientia’ did not immediately result in the appearance of our modern idea of ‘science.’ The new experimental natural philosophy was still closely linked to religion and metaphysical values. It was not until the 19th century, that ‘science’ came to be constructed in a way that resembled the earlier construction of the idea of ‘religion.’ Science became a set of practices, associated with a distinct group of professionals. From now on, it was possible to speak of a relation between ‘science’ as a body of knowledge, and ‘religion,’ as propositional content. In the process of emerging, science and religion invented their own histories, including – in the case of science – the history of the perennial warfare with religion.

Strengths of the book include the fact that both ‘science’ and ‘religion’ are handled as historical categories so that it becomes very clear how they mutually shaped each other when they emerged. Moreover, Harrison does not only deconstruct the conflict thesis, as many other historians have done before – but in a certain sense provides us with a new master narrative, albeit not a traditional one about a ‘relation’ between science and religion. Harrison’s ‘inside-out’-thesis is able to guide historians, but also the general reader, through a complex history. Although this approach may still be too ‘complex’ and subtle to
play a direct role in the polarized public debate about science and religion, it may nevertheless be helpful for participants in the debate to analyse the different positions at a deeper level.

As befits a challenging thesis like Harrison’s, it will evoke criticism and it will undoubtedly stimulate follow-up research in various directions. I wonder, for example, whether the transformation from interior to exterior religion is not painted too black and white, despite all the nuances that Harrison adds himself. Was, for example, the Early Church, when formulating very precisely the creeds and doctrines at the ecumenical councils, really mainly interested in the right worship and piety? Has Christianity not simply been a mixture of interior piety and exterior doctrines from the beginning? Although Harrison convincingly sketches a certain shift, the changes may have been less radical than he suggests. Another follow-up theme might be to link this intellectual history to a more contextual approach, which is only incidentally referred to in the book. In sum, Harrison’s ‘inside-out’ thesis is an invitation to think through ‘the history of science and religion’ from a refreshing perspective, a milestone in the historiography of science and religion.

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