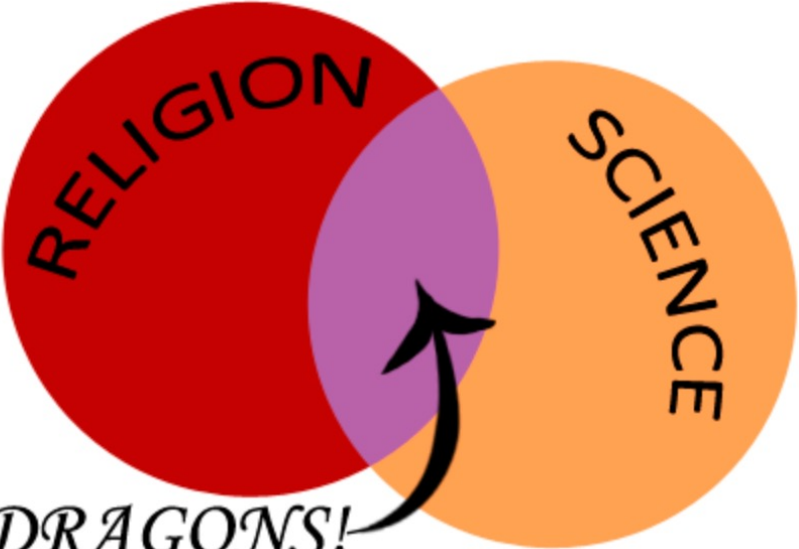


**NOMA
EXPLAINED:**



HERE BE DRAGONS!

FAITH EXPLORERS CLASS

NOMA EXPLAINED

- **Non-Overlapping Magisteria (NOMA)** is a philosophical worldview that places [religion](#) and [science](#) in separate domains of questioning ("magisteria") in order to avoid one contradicting the other. NOMA hopes to provide an end to the [conflict thesis](#) between science and religion by establishing a [demarcation](#).

STEPHEN JAY GOULD

- [Stephen Jay Gould](#) popularized the designation "NOMA" in his book *Rocks of Ages*.
- Gould hoped that the concept could provide a way to eliminate the conflict between [science](#) and [religion](#) by suggesting that both contribute to different areas of [human](#) existence and give meaning to [life](#) in different ways.
- He saw the two "magisteria" as so different that they could not inform, comment on, or criticize each other: science based on [methodological naturalism](#) offers no insight into issues of what is morally [right or wrong](#).
- Gould claimed that although science automatically *assumes* a lack of [supernatural](#) causation in its methods, it does not make any definite statements about the existence of the supernatural.

NOTHING NEW HERE

- The idea is not entirely new; the twelfth-century Muslim philosopher [Averroes](#) used a similar concept.
- To fend off the fierce religious [dogmatic](#) criticism of [Aristotelian](#) schools, he proposed that science and Islam presented two different types of truth, one pertaining to nature, and one to the supernatural.
- Later thinkers, including [Thomas Aquinas](#), vehemently rejected this concept.

UNDERNEATH-IT-ALL STATUS

- The topic was revisited by Barbara Herrnstein Smith in her book *Natural Reflections* (2010) and by Stanley Fish in a review of the same.
- Smith discusses how both religion and science seek what she calls "underneath-it-all status", but states that one should not view the two as competing.

A MATTER OF DEFINITION: SCIENCE

- The question of whether science and religion are in conflict largely hinges on how one defines "science" and "religion".
- The problem of defining science is known as the [problem of demarcation](#) in [philosophy of science](#). Two broad, differing methods of defining science have often been taken by philosophers: Ideal, or prescriptive, definitions – i.e. what science is versus what it ought to be.

A MATTER OF DEFINITION: RELIGION

- One of the biggest problems with the definition of religion vis-a-vis science is whether religion necessarily includes a [supernatural](#) element; a question which effectively gives religion its own "demarcation problem".
- What qualifies as "supernatural" also presents a problem in religions that worship natural phenomena as deities themselves, such as [pantheism](#), where the entire universe is conceived of as [god](#), or sun worship, which has appeared in various forms throughout history.

SEMI-OVERLAPPING MAGISTERIA

- A number of positions fall under the umbrella of what might be called "semi-overlapping magisteria" in which science and religion may or may not conflict to varying degrees.
- Forms of "scientific [theology](#)" in which science and religion answer different questions, but science is claimed to support [theism](#) or science and religion are said to inform each other. Proponents of this view include Alister McGrath, who plainly labels his position "scientific theology", and [Alvin Plantinga](#), who argues that science actually undermines [naturalism](#).
- Science is ultimately [agnostic](#) about the existence of [God](#), but science conflicts with any form of religion that makes [empirical](#) claims about the natural world, i.e., scientific claims.

NOMA: NO CONFLICT, NO OVERLAP

- Science and religion are totally separate, so no conflict is possible. The general strategy used by those who defend this position is to argue that positing a conflict between science and religion is a [category mistake](#).
- This logic underpins [Stephen Jay Gould](#)'s concept of non-overlapping magisteria, where religion's purpose is to answer only [moral](#) questions and the purpose of science is to gather [empirical](#) data about the natural world.
- That is to say, science and religion seek to answer different and unrelated questions.
- Einstein's definitions of science and religion falls similarly.

CRITIQUE OF GOULD'S NOMA

- The proposal is that science and religion describe entirely different things; science describes what is known and religion gives answers to what cannot be known.
- People of faith may argue that science is a good explanation of what things like evolution and gravity are, but religion provides the answer for *why* they exist.
- Provided that one isn't a biblical literalist or an antitheist, this may be an attractive position.¹

INSULATED FROM ONE ANOTHER

- An advocate of NOMA can be confident that their religious beliefs cannot be affected by the materialism of science, and in theory, science can be confident that supernatural entities cannot mess around with its work regarding the understanding of [reality](#).
- Gould in his essay on NOMA says "creationism based on biblical literalism makes little sense in either Catholicism or Judaism for neither religion maintains any extensive tradition for reading the Bible as literal truth rather than illuminating literature", suggesting the separation applies to non-literalist faiths such as Roman Catholicism and mainstream Judaism rather than other more fundamentalist Protestant sects.