

***Religion Science and Democracy.* By Lisa Stenmark. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013. 230 pp. \$63.00 Cloth**

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Walter Feinberg
University of Illinois

In *Religion, Science and Democracy: A Disputational Friendship*, Lisa Stenmark seeks to promote a discourse between science and religion where each side is on equal footing. She believes that the concern to resolve clashing truth claims between science and religion distorts religious reason, limits constructive engagement, and diminishes the quality of public discourse. For Stenmark, the goal of discourse should not be to reconcile conflicting truth claims, nor should it be simply securing agreement. Rather, discourse should attempt to establish and maintain mutual respect for the distinctive role of each even in the midst of doctrinal disputes. She refers to this goal as “a disputational friendship”; achieving it requires that neither religious nor scientific truth claims be given *prima facie* priority over the other, and that the truth claims of both religion and science should be given equal respect (8). Following Hannah Arendt, Stenmark proposes that the goal is not to reach definitive conclusions but “to talk with our fellow citizens so that we can make sound judgment and maintain a world that is fit for human habitation” (8). This goal leads Stenmark to propose that “both religion and science need to be kept out of politics,” and that the truth claims of neither science nor religion can “be given special weight as a matter of course” (8).

But what could it mean in specific cases to not assign priority? Do the restrictions she proposes regarding political speech go too far? Would they violate the First Amendment? Does she mean that we must give the same weight, say, to the claim by many scientists that global warming is real, and that humans are responsible for much of it, as we would to the counter-claim of some fundamentalists who reject such a view on religious grounds? Or that both must express their views outside of the political arena? If so, then her proposal should be rejected. But there is another way to apply the claim that seems to me more defensible.

Stenmark’s claim that neither scientific nor religious truth claims can “be given special weight as a matter of course” could be understood as

a requirement for democracy (rather than a restriction on science or religion), one intended to promote an inclusive public discourse in which neither set of claims dictate political action (8). Here it would simply mean that any political action claims — say placement of a carbon tax on pollution — would not be supported without public discussion.

If this is the intended meaning of Stenmark's proposal, then it implies, correctly, that in the political arena both religious and scientific claims are more than just claims about the facts. They also involve conclusions about action, and in a democracy these conclusions need to be engaged by the larger public. In other words, if politics is taken to include action proposals as well as fact claims, then any political reason needs to engage the public without assuming one is superior to the other. This interpretation would account for Stenmark's concern that pluralism is stunted when science claims are given epistemic priority over religious claims because science is mistakenly taken as the paradigm of neutrality. Not only is this wrong, she argues, but it leads to feelings of resentment and exclusion for religious people, many of whom ultimately withdraw from public life (4).

Given the prominent public role of evangelical and fundamentalist denominations, I find this concern puzzling, and Stenmark offers little evidence to support it. Religious politics has taken over a significant segment of the Republican Party and influences much of its agenda. To the extent that Stenmark is correct, however, I am not convinced that science is the driving force for this exclusion. Nor am I convinced that we should aim at some kind of parity between science and religion. Certainly civic friendship is not served when people feel excluded; yet neither is it served when well-supported claims are omitted from politics out of concern that some groups may as a result feel marginalized. If the earth is warming and human activity is responsible, then a religious counter-claim does not change that, nor does it change the fact that this is a strong reason to take effective action to curtail it. Stenmark would likely agree, but her proposal to keep science out of politics or to give religious reasons the same status as scientific ones leads to troubling conclusions. It is also useful to remember that some exclusion (e.g., Amish, ultra-Orthodox Jews) is self-imposed and has very little to do with the purported supremacy of science.

Nevertheless, Stenmark is correct that if disputational friendship is to be developed, many issues need to be deliberated beyond the level of expert consensus. She is also correct in worrying whether the purported priority given to scientific rationality *unnecessarily* serves to alienate and exclude those at the margins (205). The solution, however, is not to place religious

and science claims on a par, although it may be, as she proposes, to “ge[t] people together to talk and to describe how the world appears to them and telling their stories, we create zones of trust” (205). But while talk and trust are important goals, it is important also to note that this talk, when it is honest and authentic, involves truth claims, and when such claims are made in order to guide public practice, decisions may need to be made and priority assigned.

It is also important to note that science’s claim to epistemic priority does not necessarily rest on the claim that science is neutral (43). If it did, then Stenmark would have a case that the priority given to science rests on a faulty foundation. True enough, as Stenmark claims, science is not theory-free fact, but there are other grounds for accepting the findings of science. A good scientific theory is good not because it is neutral but because it is vulnerable to counter evidence, and supports productive research programs. Evolution is taught to the exclusion of intelligent design in biology classes not only because it expresses the scientific consensus and thus has been supported by the courts, but rather it represents the scientific consensus because it underlies most productive research programs in the life sciences.

Nevertheless, Stenmark cannot be faulted for wanting more dialogue for the sake of improving public discourse. Without it, possibilities for disputational friendship, if not reconciliation, may be missed. The disputation between science and religion certainly deserves the heightened attention that Stenmark wants to give it, but there are many plural voices within religion and little consensus about how they might be reconciled. Even within a single religious tradition like Christianity, with which Stenmark seems most concerned, there are many voices and many different ways to relate to science. Consider the following scenario:

Group one rejects well-established scientific claims. Its members continue to believe that biblical creation stories are literal accounts of how and when the earth and the beings in it were formed. When evidence is provided to the contrary they find a biblical source as a definitive refutation. This group accepts the fact that congregants may have private doubts about the literal interpretation of the Bible but believes that those doubts should remain private. To publicly question established religious beliefs leads to ostracism.

Group two accepts scientific claims, such as evolution, as a constraint on their religious beliefs. Its members see much wisdom in the biblical texts but do not believe that every word is historically accurate. While they accept the constraints of science, they also believe that religious sources are excellent guides in moral and religious matters.

Group three accepts many scientific claims but denies that they have much relevance for their own established beliefs and practices. For example they accept the claims of animal science that same sex relations are a common trait among many mammal species, but continue to hold that homosexual behavior among humans is a mortal sin, arguing that moral or religious prohibitions on such behavior are what distinguish humans from animals.

Group four rejects any significant contact with other religions and with non-believers as corrupting.

Each of these examples has a different implication for any dialogue between science and religion. Some, such as group four, are not only uninterested in such a dialogue but actively discourage it. Others, such as group one, are not open to dialogue but may feel the need to enter into a conversation for the purpose of converting people of other beliefs. Only group two seems open to a dialogue where minds may be changed and truth claims amended.

Certainly there is more to a religion than its truth claims. To appreciate the communal, the poetic, the inspirational, and the comforting side of religion involves a sensitivity that goes beyond a disputation. And Stenmark is correct when it comes to the potential hegemonic impact of science in some fields. In my area, education, the reliance on science, especially psychology and economics, has led to the neglect of moral issues and an uncritical acceptance of the larger political and economic frame in which today's schools operate. I do not think that the solution to this over reliance rests on providing a stronger voice to religion in public schools, though I do believe that more courses in religion could be valuable.

Strictly speaking, all of this may seem irrelevant to Stenmark's project. After all, she has written her thoughtful, provocative book to promote dialogue not for the sake of agreement but rather for the sake of disputational friendship and in the hope of enriching of the public sphere. I wonder, however, whether a discussion that focuses attention on religion or science represents the best way to pursue this goal, or whether it might not just call for multiple points of connection, many of which would be outside of religious or scientific engagements. It is not necessary to agree about evolutionary science, or the age of the earth, or the sinfulness of stem cell research in order to root for the same teams, to work together to solve problems of the homeless, or to respond to the need of others. Nevertheless Stenmark is correct that if democracy is to work, it needs multiple authorities, and these authorities need to be engaged with each other so that fundamental disagreement about *the* Proper Authority does not impede public friendship.