

Astrology as religion

by David Hamblin

This was originally published in the 'Letters' section of the Astrological Journal Vol. 32 No. 6; November/December 1990, pp. 406 – 7 (change of page is shown below by number in square brackets).

When it appeared David was well-known in the astrological community, primarily as a former Chairman of the UK's Astrological Association, and as the author of Harmonic Charts (Wellingborough: Aquarian, 1983). More biographical details, and articles by David, can be found at his website: davidhamblin.net

A slightly edited version of the letter was subsequently published on Rudolf Smit's website: astrology-and-science.com/p-reli2.htm

Two postscripts were included in the latter; these are also reproduced below.

For some time I have found Geoffrey Dean's letters, and the replies to them by Dennis Elwell and others, by far the most entertaining part of both the Journal and of Correlation, and so I feel moved to contribute to the debate myself, in the hope of inspiring another riposte from Geoffrey or from Dennis.

It seems to me that the reason why many astrologers are reluctant to take part in research is that they expect, and fear, that the research would come up with negative results. When I first came into astrology from an academic background I was very keen on research, and I spent a great deal of time doing little research projects on my own, trying to prove (to my own satisfaction) a correlation between particular astrological factors and particular personality traits or occupational characteristics. The pattern was always the same: for the first fifty (or maybe a hundred) charts I would seem to be coming up with very exciting results, but as I increased the size of the sample the effect would fade away, until by the time I had looked at (say) two hundred charts there would be no correlation whatsoever.

After many experiences of this kind, I began to find astrological research a pretty depressing activity, and my enthusiasm for it became blunted. And, in the end, my enthusiasm for astrology became blunted. For a long time I had tried to convince myself that astrology was valid in spite of the lack of research evidence, and that the need was for better tests. If astrology was true in the way that astrologers claim that it is true, then the simplest and most unsophisticated piece of research would be able to demonstrate a correlation between (for instance) Ascendant sign and personality traits. Since these correlations have not been demonstrated, it is plain that astrology does not work in the way that most astrologers say that it works, even if it may possibly work in some other way.

Hence, for the time being, I have given up astrology. Maybe Geoffrey will be pleased to know that there is at least one astrologer (or rather two: myself and Terry Dwyer) who has given up astrology because of the lack of research evidence for its validity.

And yet I want to add a rider to this. There are of course many people (including many scientists!) who are Christians, in spite of the lack of historical evidence that Christ rose from the dead and the lack of research evidence for the efficacy of prayer; and the same applies for the adherents of other religions and spiritual movements. Maybe Geoffrey would urge Christians, as he urges astrologers, to be constantly looking for better tests. But I believe myself that the religious or spiritual dimension is very necessary for the enrichment of human existence, and that the development of this dimension necessitates the acceptance of (or [407] belief in) certain truths which have not been (and cannot be) scientifically demonstrated. For many astrologers, astrology is a religion rather than a science: it enriches their lives (and the lives of their clients) in the same way that other people's lives are enriched by Christianity.

This is, for me, completely acceptable, and I can admire and respect these astrologers who adhere to astrology in spite of the lack of scientific evidence. In fact, from this point of view, my own rejection of astrology begins to look like a very naïve thing, comparable to the way in which, thirty years ago, I turned away from Christianity because God had not answered my prayers and because I could not see any 'evidence' that God was good. Maybe I have turned away from astrology simply because it does not seem to be the best religion for me at the present time.

Of course, if we see astrology as a religion, we need to be on guard against astrological 'fundamentalism', in the same way as we may want to oppose Christian or Muslim* fundamentalism (for instance, the literal belief that God made the earth in seven days, or the belief that Salman Rushdie must die in accordance with God's word in the Koran). I see astrological fundamentalism in the belief held by certain astrologers that the stars govern our every action and that we are at their mercy. Such excesses must always be opposed, on ethical, not on scientific, grounds. But, if these excesses can be avoided – and in the absence of any evidence that astrology does anyone any harm – why should astrologers not be allowed to practise their religion in peace, rather than being constantly pressed to turn it into a science?

* In the original *Journal* article this is misprinted as 'Muslin'.

Postscripts

From 2000:

Even if it isn't really 'true', astrology is still a wonderful thing, a fantastically complex and beautiful construct, which draws your eyes up to the heavens and makes you aware that you are a tiny and yet still significant part of the workings of the universe. Most astrologers, I believe, are affected by this, and have a quality of beauty in themselves. The annual astrological conferences that I attended were wonderful experiences because of the quality of the energy and the sheer excitement generated by the exchange of astrological ideas.

From: Garry Phillipson, *Astrology in the Year Zero* (London: Flare, 2000) p. 122.

From 2005:

After all, what would happen to astrology if it was proved beyond doubt that there is a connection between planetary positions at a particular time and events on Earth occurring at the same time? It would be taken over, not only by science, but by politics and big business. It would become part of the "system" from which so many of us long to escape. It would do great harm, because of the way in which it would be used by unscrupulous people in search of profit and power. It would lose its magic and its capacity to inspire. How much better that it should remain one of those things (like life after death) that are never proved but remain tantalizingly possible, elusive, just out of reach, offering glimpses of a universe that lies beyond our ordinary experience.

Written by David to supplement his letter upon its publication on Rudolf Smit's website.