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April 4, 2009: The Two Cultures, 2009

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Title: The Two Cultures, 2009

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4/4/2009--It was 50 years ago that C.P. Snow delivered a famous lecture at Cambridge entitled, "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution", which he later turned into a book. The two cultures he had in mind were science and literature. Literary scholars knew nothing of science. The complaint was not about two cultures, really, but was, as Peter Dizikes wrote in the New York Times Book Review on March 22, that science was not being received. We can think of two cultures today as well. Since the influence of all the arts has declined since 1959, the two cultures today are science and religion. I don't know many scientists, so I am not sure whether scientists as a group are cut off from religion and religious thinking. I do know that students of religion are not cut off from science. At least since Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit Priest and paleontologist, theologians have known that coming to terms with science is a key theological project of the modern age. Where we see the two cultures cut off from one another is among those who do not know the best thinking of either one. Average religious people do not know science and some seem prepared and proud to reject it. Average secular people who are often admirers of science but know little about it, can be hostile toward all things religious. These two sides are visible in the culture wars, especially the fight over teaching evolution. The divide between science and religion does a great deal of harm to both sides. When religion contradicts the sense in a culture of what is possible, it opens itself to irrelevance. This may be part of what is happening today in America among the young. While it is true that religion at its best always contradicts common sense—Jesus did not "look out for number one"—it cannot contradict the plausible worldview of a society. If the Gospel stands or falls on whether the eye could have evolved naturally through evolution, the Gospel is doomed. The harm to secularism is even more pronounced. The search for scientific truth may be a beautiful way of life, but it is not one that most people are currently pursuing. If non-scientists reject religion in the name of science, they just end up with flat materialism and unrealistic humanism. For most of us nonscientists, it is religion rather than science that helps orient us in the universe and ask the big questions—who am I, why am I here and how am I to live? Even if science has a great deal to contribute to the answers to these questions, it is not well suited to leading us to ask them.