

WORKING AT THE WATER'S EDGE: TOWARD A REUNION OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION

**worship service led by Reverend Preston Moore
Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists
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CALL TO WORSHIP

The poet John Donne once said, “there is nothing that God hath established in a constant course of nature, and which therefore is done every day, but would seem a miracle, and would exercise our admiration, were it done but once.” We walk through these doors, today, Earth Day 2007, celebrating our reverence for the earth; hoping to reawaken our senses to the everyday miracles in our given world; hoping to remind ourselves of our responsibilities to the habitat that sustains us; and realizing that the real miracle is not to walk on water, but rather, to walk on the earth. Come let us worship together.

SERMON

A little over a hundred Aprils ago, a twenty-six year old clerk working in the Swiss Patent Office dashed off a whimsical, newsy letter to a friend. “Conrad!” the letter writer began, “What are you up to, you frozen whale, you smoked, dried, canned piece of soul?” After asking about the condition of Conrad’s soul, the letter writer brought his friend up to date on his somewhat eccentric hobby: theoretical science. Squeezed in alongside being a husband, a father, and a government worker, it seems he had found time to write a few science papers.

This chatty correspondence is still around for us to peruse because the writer was a guy named Albert Einstein. In one of those spare time science papers from 1905, he worked out the special theory of relativity, the foundation for work that transformed physics forever. I bring Einstein to church with me this morning because religion and science are acting like antagonists these days; and yet Einstein, who became the living symbol of science, was passionate about their interdependence.

He described the deep religious feelings of scientists this way -- “a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection. . . . It is beyond question closely akin,” he said, “to that which has possessed the religious geniuses of all ages. . . . [T]he cosmic religious experience,” he declared, “is the strongest and the noblest driving force behind scientific research.”

We have to wonder what Einstein would make of our current spate of controversies involving science and religion. Within the last couple of years, a number of Imax theaters have refused to screen a documentary called “Volcanoes Of the Sea” because its discussion of evolution offended fundamentalist religious groups. A recent survey shows that approximately one-third of our country’s science teachers feel pressured to teach Biblically based creationism.

Legislation is pending in many states that would entitle college students to sue their professors if they feel their religious views on scientific theories are not being given equal time.

In the last few weeks, a 770-page “Atlas of Creation” published in Istanbul was sent free of charge to schools and universities across Europe. It attacked evolution as false and linked it with communism, fascism, and terrorism. In Kenya an evolution/creationism controversy is raging over plans to exhibit a prehistoric human skeleton called Turkana Boy. In St. Petersburg, the Russian Orthodox Church is supporting a family suing the educational system for teaching only about evolution and excluding creationism.

Now, before we become too indignant about these assaults on science by the religious right, we should consider whether science is committing similar trespasses against religion. It is indeed, and the most extreme examples I’ve found are in the polemical books and articles now being published by scientists like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris.

In The God Delusion, Letter to a Christian Nation, and other writings, these scientists accept that science would be out of bounds to traffic in religion; but they go on to say that religion is out of bounds trafficking in religion too. They deny the validity of the religious domain altogether. The only domain worthy of human attention, they claim, is the one that can be understood using the scientific method. The validity of alternative methods is not a possibility, and thus any domain that might be understood only through such methods is not a possibility either. And anyone pursuing such alternative methods is not only foolish but also dangerous. That would seem to include you and me.

The polemic of scientists like Dawkins and Harris has all the earmarks of the very fundamentalism they condemn. First, it makes claims of exclusive, infallible truth. Individual scientists may err, but the scientific method is the way, the truth, the light. We should close our minds to all else, lest we be poisoned.

Second, it embraces tautology. The scientific method is the only lens for seeing the truth, it asserts, because religious lenses have no “real evidence” for their truth claims. But Dawkins and Harris define “real evidence” by reference to . . . the scientific method! What sort of science is it that uses the assumptions of a method of inquiry to validate that method of inquiry? At bottom, these scientists are asserting that if something is not explainable in conventional scientific terms, it does not exist; and even more importantly, that we cannot have a relationship with something that is mysterious.

Third, it attacks differing views by mischaracterizing them in monolithic terms. Repeatedly, Dawkins and Harris talk about the varieties of Christianity and even religion in its entirety as if they were like a single company run by a single board of directors. And then they treat as representative of all religions the ones that are easiest to attack – such as the ones that depend on sketchy archeology, pinning everything on the literal truth of miracles that supposedly happened long ago.

These rhetorical tactics would seem to make the scientific polemic unpersuasive, but I doubt that’s of serious concern to Dawkins and Harris. Like all fundamentalists, they aren’t

preaching to the unchurched, but rather, to the choir. Their purpose is to recruit the faithful for the crusade; and their method is not to persuade but rather to frighten, to enrage, to incite -- through demonization and personal attack. They call religion a disease, a virus, and those who believe in God delusional, mentally ill. They might as well say heretical. Religious education, says Dawkins, is child abuse and brainwashing. Actually, I might well say that about my own school experiences in chemistry and earth science classes, but I would never ask the rest of the world to adopt such a label.

In an apocalyptic confrontation of this kind, of course, any means will justify the end. So no need to worry about careful consideration of the other side's perspective. At a recent conference sponsored by the Science Network, a senior research scientist from the Space Science Institute called for the establishment of an alternative church to evangelize for science, stating "we should let the success of the religious formula guide us." Fight fire with fire; respond to fanaticism and bigotry and contempt with more of the same. And call this something no one could be against: science.

So. Religion jumped out to an early lead in this polemics derby, but science is catching up, matching its fundamentalist adversaries fanatic for fanatic. Can anyone show us the way out of this shouting match? I think Einstein can. I think what Einstein has to say about the complementarity of science and religion is every bit as brilliant as $E=MC^2$. For this wisdom to gain currency, though, it will take a revolution in thought. Here's what I believe that revolution needs to be about and why Unitarian Universalists should lead it.

Right relationship between science and religion first requires clear conceptions of each. Einstein described religion as providing us with "a sense of the ultimate and fundamental ends. . . . They come into being not through demonstration but through revelation. . . . One must not attempt to justify them," he said, "but rather to sense their nature simply and clearly." He described science simply as "the study of "how facts are related to, and conditioned by, each other." He observed that "objective knowledge provides us with powerful instruments for the achievement of certain ends, but the ultimate goal itself and the longing to reach it must come from another source. . . ." That "other source" he declared to be religion.

Einstein discerned "strong reciprocal relationships and dependencies" between religion and science. Religion needs science to teach it how to realize values and goals. Science can only flourish, however, if fueled by an "aspiration toward truth and understanding. The source of this feeling," said Einstein, "springs from the sphere of religion."

This feeling reflects an attraction to mystery. The physicist and science writer Chet Raymo describes the place where this attraction takes us in our pursuit of both science and theology. He uses the metaphor of a finite island of understanding surrounded by an infinite sea of mystery. We dredge up more solid ground at the water's edge and expand our perimeter. Occasionally the sea pushes back, washing away the results of our labors and leaving us with less understanding. And then, after the deluge, we start dredging and building again.

If the sea of mystery is infinite, then expansion of our island of understanding can never diminish the sea. It can only lengthen the shoreline along which we pursue our science and our theology -- our never-ending work of delving, dredging and filling at the water's edge.

Science and religion both utterly depend on faith. Scientists, Einstein observed, build their lives on "faith in the possibility that the regulations valid for the world of existence are rational, that is, comprehensible to reason. I cannot conceive of a genuine scientist," he declared, "without that profound faith." And faith in reason is still faith. To persevere in one's job trusting that one's pursuit of truth will reveal something valuable is to live a life of faith.

And the scientist and theologian inside all of us are both lovers, because they love truth. To love is to see the truth everywhere, to surrender to it, to be willing to be surprised by it, and to accept it just as it is. Science and religion demand this of us, even at the expense of having our precious ideas sometimes turn out to be error colliding with truth.

If we are willing to bring these attitudes to the water's edge, science and religion can enable us to make very different but complementary translations of mystery: in the case of religion, into the values and goals of a good life; in the case of science, into an understanding of the realities in which that good life must be grounded. Wholeness in human experience is impossible without harnessing these disciplines in a harmonious way. But when humility get lost in the practice of either science or religion, we lose our connection to this harmony.

When religion arrogantly pretends to be science by claiming the Bible as an authoritative scientific text, the result is bad science because it arrests human curiosity and brings no empowerment to the rational side of human living. It is also bad religion because it imprisons God within one characterization of the divine – the one found in a particular human literary rendering. When God is kept small, human spiritual experience is also kept small.

Conversely, when science arrogantly pretends to be religion, claiming the scientific method is the only way of apprehending creation, the result is bad religion because this leaves unaddressed the human longing for unity with the infinite, about which the scientific method has nothing to say. It is also bad science because it starves curiosity at its source, which is that sense of awe and reverence for inexhaustible mystery.

Einstein saw loss of humility as the root cause of strife between science and religion. "Science," he said, "can only ascertain what is, but not what should be, and outside of its domain value judgments of all kinds remain necessary. Religion, on the other hand, deals only with evaluations of human thought and action: it cannot justifiably speak of facts and relationships between facts."

Fanatics on both sides are arrogantly disregarding this basic distinction. Religious fundamentalists claim to know all they need to know by reading the Bible. They consider this text the perfect, complete, and exclusive source of divine revelation – right down to an account of the physical world. Any source that deviates from this text is heresy. The religious term for this perverse adulation is idolatry, or, more precisely, bibliolatry – the worship of a book, of one small sliver of creation – singling it out and elevating it to a holy status, blinding the idolators to

the revelation of God in all of creation – including in the soaring, brilliant discoveries of scientists.

Polemical scientists like Dawkins and Harris are also guilty of the arrogance of bibliolatry, treating the canonical works of the scientific method as a new holy scripture, to be interpreted by the high priests of physics and biology as if it were the word of God. The sensing of revelation, as Einstein so poetically termed it, is scorned by these new would-be clergy as the primitivism of the scientifically illiterate. To me, this is papal infallibility dressed up in a lab coat.

Harmony between science and religion is natural and appropriate; but our world seems to be very far from that blessed state today. What can Unitarian Universalists do?

First, we can celebrate science in our church life as a spiritual value. Our Principles and Purposes revere the free and responsible search for truth and meaning not because this is good civics but rather because it brings us closer to the divine and therefore is sacred. Let us make that sacredness manifest.

Second, we can begin to say loudly in the public square something we regularly say to each other within these walls: that the books in which revelation, discovery and understanding are inscribed are never closed. Gracie Allen said “Never put a period where God put a comma.” She was right. And we might add, never put a capital “R” on religion or a capital “S” on science.

Third, we can begin to say a gentle but firm “no” to fanatics who would make dogma of either religion OR science. Both science and religion are grounded in what our Principles and Purposes call the “direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder,” which we claim as a source of our living religious tradition. Let us celebrate that experience in all of its diverse forms.

And finally, we can be the convenors of a deeper dialogue. It can happen in church. It can happen in somebody’s back yard. Having an elderly cousin occasionally skitter across the garden in the role of a streaking comet, cane in hand, in the midst of a physicist’s explication of a solar eclipse, might give us a priceless reminder of our real callings: through the exercise of the magnificent gift of intellect, through the evocation of a spiritual life that is not limited to the material realm, scientists and theologians are doing holy work, moving humans and human understanding and experience in the direction of wholeness. If those who act as adversaries could see one another as playing the role of the sun in a drama about science, or God in a drama about religion, then maybe we could hang onto our humility. Maybe we could remain conscious of our shared mission when we feel the urge to use our professional training to wage war with each other.

We Unitarian Universalists like to say that we place our faith “in the conversation.” Real conversations about science and religion only happen when people are ready to accept that there are no final answers. We are willing to be the church of I Don’t Know For Sure, and yet to act in the world with the humility that comes from living with imperfect knowledge. The gift of our religion to the world is its insistence on working at the water’s edge, rather than remaining on the

safer, dryer ground of dogma and moral certainty. The conversation needed for the reunion of science and religion is our kind of conversation. It's time for all of us to get our feet wet.

AMEN.