

“TRUTH IS TRUTH TO THE END OF RECKONING”

Religion, Science, and Truth

A Sermon by Ronald Knapp
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A

Minot Judson Savage was a prominent Unitarian Minister in the last couple of decades of the 19th century and the first couple of decades of the twentieth century. Born in Maine in 1841, Savage began his ministerial career as a Congregationalist but after reading Darwin and Spencer he decided to become a Unitarian with a message centered on a religious interpretation of the theory of evolution. I can think of Savage being one of my spiritual ancestors in our liberal religious movement and one of his poems can introduce my sermon this morning, which deals with science and truth. “O Star of Truth Down Shining” was written in 1883.

O star of truth down shining
Through clouds of doubt and fear,
I ask beneath thy guidance
My pathway may appear:
However long the journey,
However hard it be,
Though I be lone and weary,
Lead on, I follow thee.

I know thy blessed radiance
Can never lead astray,
Though ancient creed and custom
May point another way;
Or through untrod desert,
Or over trackless seas,
Though I be lone and weary,
Lead on I follow thee.

B

I have been doing a lot of thinking, reading, and reflecting on the conflict between science and religion these past few months. This process had to do with the fact that I conducted a discussion workshop on science and religion at the Midwest Unitarian Universalist Assembly, a UU summer camp, during the first week of July. More specifically, my discussion workshop was designed to deal with how scientists see religion and was titled “Scientists and Religion”. My two sermons this summer are an outgrowth of that workshop. This Sunday I want to deal with religion, science, and Truth. Next Sunday, I want to deal with religion, science, and wonder.

One of the first things that became evident as I went through this process involved the fact that there was a great deal of both benign and overt animosity, in general, between scientists and religion. Of course there are scientists who are devout Christians and adherents of other faiths, and I came across quite a few of them in my studies, but the fact is, they represent an overwhelming minority of scientists. Believing scientists are only a fraction of scientists in general whereas believing people represent an overwhelming majority of the general population in the United States.

One of the studies I came across, and which was reported on ABC news was titled, “Most Scientists Are Non-Believers.” This study involved scientists from elite universities, from the best universities in the country. Fifty-two percent of those who responded to this survey, and most did respond, reported no current religious affiliation. 56% reported that they had not attended religious services in the previous year. 31% of these elite scientists said that they did not believe in God. Another 62% said that they did not know if there is a God and believed that there was no way to find out. Only 9% of these scientists had no doubts about God’s existence. That is almost the mirror opposite of the general population of America!

There may or may not be a fundamental conflict between science and religion, but there certainly appears to be a conflict between scientists and religion. The eminent biologist from Harvard, E. O. Wilson, who is considered the father of sociobiology, in an article titled, “Lets Accept the Fault Line between Faith and Science,” wrote:

If the perennial culture war between science and fundamentalist Christianity about evolution seems insoluble, the reason is that it is insoluble.

A trend is clear: biology is biology, conservative Christianity is conservative Christianity. The two world views – science-based explanations and faith-based religions – cannot be reconciled.

The theoretical physicist, Stephen Weinberg, also from Harvard, noted near the end of his book, The First Three Minutes:

The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems to be pointless. Anything that we scientists can do to weaken the hold of religion should be done and may in the end be our greatest contribution to civilization.

Sam Harris, a neuroscientist, who may be remembered by many as the author of Letter to a Christian Nation, wrote a piece that says in emphatic terms, “Science Must Destroy Religion.” In that essay, Sam Harris goes on to write:

Most people believe that the creator of the world wrote (or dictated) one of their books. Unfortunately, there are many books that pretend to divine authority, and each makes incompatible claims about how we must live. Despite the ecumenical efforts of many well-intentioned people, these irreconcilable commitments still inspire an appalling amount of human conflict.

In response to this situation most sensible people advocate something called “religious toleration”. While religious toleration is surely better than religious war, tolerance is not without its limitations. Our fear of provoking religious hatred has rendered us incapable of criticizing ideas that are not patently absurd and increasingly maladaptive. It has also obliged us to lie to ourselves – repeatedly and at the highest levels – about the compatibility between religious faith and scientific rationalism.

The conflict between religion and science is inherent and (very nearly) zero-sum. The success of science often comes at the expense of religious dogma; the maintenance of religious dogma always comes at the expense of science. It is time we conceded a basic fact of human discourse: either a person has good reasons for what he believes, or he does not. When a person has good reasons, his beliefs contribute to our growing understanding of the world.

Science, in the broadest sense, includes all reasonable claims to knowledge about ourselves and the world. If there were good reasons to believe that Jesus was born of a virgin, or that Mohammad flew to heaven on a winged horse, these beliefs would necessarily form part of our rational description of the universe. Faith is nothing more than the license that religious people give one another to believe such propositions when reasons fail. The difference between science and religion is the difference between a willingness to dispassionately consider new evidence and new arguments, and a passionate unwillingness to do so.

Religion is fast growing incompatible with the emergence of a global, civilized society.

The difference between science and religion is the difference between a genuine openness to fruits of human inquiry in the 21st century, and a premature closure to such inquiry as a matter of principle. I believe that the antagonism between reasons and faith will only grow more pervasive and intractable in the coming years.

In the spirit of religious tolerance, most scientists are keeping silent when they should be blasting the hideous fantasies of a prior age with all the facts at their disposal.

C

Well, perhaps that is enough to demonstrate that a conflict exists between religion and science. Perhaps that is enough to demonstrate what many scientist see as the irreconcilable conflict between science and religion, at least in its most conservative and normative form. Perhaps, at best, there is in the 21st century a radical disconnect between science and religion, which religion needs to deal with. And if that is the case, then the question arises: why is there this conflict; why is there this radical disconnect?

The most obvious battleground in the conflict between science and religion is the theory of evolution.

E. O. Wilson, whom I quoted earlier as seeing an insoluble “fault line” between science and religion, puts it this way:

The fault line, which affects conservative belief not just in Christianity but in almost all other religions around the world, can be found along the outer edges of biology. On one side is the acceptance of evolution of all life independent of God, a view held by a small minority of Americans. On the other side lies a spread of beliefs, from denial that evolution occurred to acceptance that it did but under the direction of God.

This gap, opened by Charles Darwin in his 1859 On the Origin of the Species, has not been narrowed by the endless debate that ensued. Quite the contrary, it has been steadily widened by the growth of science.

Modern biology has arrived at two major principles that are supported by so much interlocking evidence as to rank as virtual laws of nature. The first is that all biological elements and processes are ultimately obedient to the laws of physics and chemistry. The second principle is that all life has evolved by random mutations and natural selection.

Although as many as half of Americans choose not to believe it, evolution, including the origin of species, is an undeniable fact. Furthermore, the evidence supporting the principle of natural selection has improved year by year, and it is accepted with virtual unanimity by the biologists of science.

Here we are, a century and a half after Darwin’s Origin of Species, and religion still cannot deal with intellectual honesty about evolution. Religions tend to either deny it or fudge it in one way or another. Fundamentalists of all stripes tend to deny it. Mainstream Christians realize they have to accept the idea but tend to see it as the unfolding of God’s will. God works through mysterious ways, we are told, and if he so chooses, do it through the processes of evolution. Even adherents of liberal religion fudge the issues, either they do not deal with it at all, or see the whole question as a matter of choice. In the last paragraph of that quote I just read, from E. O. Wilson, is that word “choose”. Many Americans, E.O. Wilson says, “choose” not to believe in evolution. This thought reminds me of a discussion group I had here in the church some twenty-five years ago or so. We were talking about evolution. I was saying that the evidence seems to indicate that all of the life forms on this planet evolved from one common ancestor. Someone immediately responded with these words: “I choose to believe that life evolved from several ancestral sources.” Now people can, of course, choose to believe whatever they want to believe, but from the perspective of science, there is an answer to that question. We may not know the answer, but the fact is that all life evolved from either one source or from several sources. Both cannot be correct. Only one or the other is true. The ultimate answer is not a matter of choice, but of emerging knowledge.

I have often mentioned from this pulpit over the years, how important a book by Jacques Monod was to my emerging ideology. The title of that book was Chance and Necessity. Chance and Necessity contains a critique of what Monod thinks of as a modern form of “animism,” especially as it refers to the ideas of the famous priest and philosopher, Teilhard de Chardin, who sees an arrow of progress running through the evolutionary process with the human being at the top of the evolutionary heap. He sees in this the founding of a new universal theory “according to which the evolution of the biosphere culminating in man would be part of the smooth onward flow of cosmic evolution itself.” And Monod goes on to conclude, in words that have stuck with me all these years:

We would like to think of ourselves as necessary, inevitable, ordained from all eternity. All religions, nearly all philosophies, and even a part of science testify to the unwavering heroic effort of mankind desperately denying its own contingency.

There are several definitions of “contingency,” but what I presume Monod means is that we are not something special in the cosmos, unrelated to everything else. We are part and parcel of the same evolutionary process, no more and no less, than snakes, and dinosaurs, and elephants, and, for that matter, amebas. The truth of the theory of evolution has been so clearly demonstrated, and reinforced by century after century of scientific inquiry, that no understanding of the nature of the universe can hope to stand without embracing it. And religions, of all stripes, ranging from conservative to liberals have trouble embracing it. So a gulf between science and religion seems to be fixed at this time in human history.

D

There appear to be a number of reasons why this conflict continues between science and religion. Science deals with the natural, religion often deals with the supernatural. Science is characterized by skepticism and religion is often characterized by dogmatism. Science is objective and much of religion is subjective. Science finds authority in the use of reason; religion usually finds authority in sacred writings. Science is progressive, in that it grows from generation to generation, from era to era. Religion is regressive, in that it looks to past generations, and past ages. Science looks for truth in the future, religion, most often, looks for truth in the past.

There are many more contrasts that can be made between religion and science, but this will have to do for now. Beneath all of these contrasts, however, is a more fundamental difference. If “evolution” represents the most obvious example of the fault line between science and religion, to use E.O. Wilson’s words, there is, nevertheless, a more fundamental “fault line” between science and religion. That more fundamental fault line is related to the definition and meaning of the word “truth.”

It seems to me that “science,” which is derived from a Latin word meaning “knowledge,” has some sort of overarching consistency in how it approaches the search for truth, some continuing unity in how it defines and gives meaning to the word truth. The assertion in a line from

Shakespeare's Measure for Measure seems to be, to a large extent at least, characteristic of science: "Truth is truth to the end of reckoning." Truth – that is, truth now known or yet to be known – is truth – there is a progressive accumulative quality to it – "to the end of reckoning."

Religion, on the other hand, seems to lack any degree of consistency as it approaches the search for truth, any degree of unity in how it defines the meaning of the word "truth." Among fundamentalist Christians, and I suppose this is true of fundamentalism in other religions as well, there is a negative form of consistency, a unity born out of denial. They just do not want to confront modern understandings of the nature of the universe. This has long been characterized for me by my high school class in Biology when we were being tested on the theory of evolution. One of my classmates, a fundamentalist Christian, had a lot of trouble with that test. He resolved his problem by answering each question with "the teacher and the text book say (such and such) but I believe the Bible."

Most of the time, however, religion seems to want to fudge the truth; religion wants to hedge the truth and this seems evident all across the ideological spectrum. Among mainstream Christian groups, for example, there is often a tendency to accept evolution, on the one hand, and then to proceed to modify with the other. "God moves in mysterious ways," it is said, and since he is omnipotent he could perform creation by using evolutionary processes. Or, maybe a year in those biblical times could really be a hundred years, or a thousand years, or for that matter, a million years. Who knows? The problem is that such "modifications" undercut fundamentalist scientific knowledge gained in the modern world.

Among religious liberals, that funding and hedging continues. I could not count how many times I have heard, in this church, over the years the idea expressed as "your truth and my truth." As if truth were infinitely divisible! In my workshop this summer on scientists and religion, I made a statement with the expectation that someone in the group would challenge it, just as I expect that some of you will. And yet it seems to me to be beyond dispute. My statement was this:

If I make an assertion that such and such is true.

And you make the opposite assertion.

There appears to me to be only three possible responses.

I am right and you are wrong

You are right and I am wrong

Both of us are wrong.

Now there is always someone who responds: "There is a forth possibility: Both of us are right," and that always strikes me as absurd. The idea of truth then becomes so fuzzy that there is no content to it.

This idea seems to be especially prevalent in contemporary Unitarian Universalism – a movement fundamentally premised on rationalism – with the concept known as "post-modernism." I remember the first time I came across post-modernism. I had a conversation with one of my colleagues at an installation service and she said that she was "into" Post-modernism, as if it were the latest fad. I admit to not knowing a whole lot about post-modernist thought, but I do know that it is anti-scientific in the sense that it rejects any idea of objective truth. Truth

exists only in the mind as it is filtered through cultural understanding. Truth is always subjective because it is always culture bound. There is no inherent unity to truth. There are no trans-cultural, trans-historical, or universal truths. And these ideas are fairly widely held among Unitarian Universalists!

Is it any wonder that there is so much conflict between science and religion, or perhaps more accurately, between science and theology? Is it any wonder that a scientist like Carl Sagan, in The Fine Art of Baloney Detection, came to this conclusion?

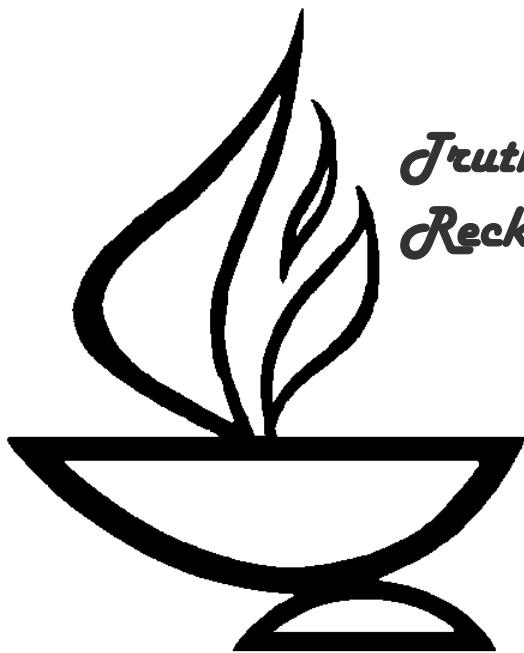
One of the saddest lessons of history is this: If we've been bamboozled long enough, we tend to reject any evidence of the bamboozle. We're no longer interested in finding out the truth. The bamboozle has captured us. It is simply too painful to acknowledge – even to ourselves – that we've been so credulous.

E

Religion, or theology, can never regain a degree of academic respectability – intellectual credibility – until it comes to terms with the nature of truth, the same truth that science tries to come to terms with. Science may deal with the “why” of the universe, and religion may deal with the meaning of the universe, but there can be no meaningful reconciliation between the two unless their varied explorations involve the same universe, the universe as we now see it unfolding.

If that reconciliation could ever be achieved then both science and religion, looking out at the same universe, we could continue that exploration with the insight gained by one of the greatest scientists of all times, Isaac Newton.

I was like a boy playing on the sea-shore, and diverting myself now and then finding a smoother pebble or prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.



Truth Is Truth to the End of Reckoning:

Dinner, Drama and Travel

a sermon

delivered by Rev. Ron Knapp

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