

Evolving Religion

This morning we take up the topic of religion and science, at the suggestion of Eric Aldrich. In our conversations about this, Eric said he was looking for some reflections on the apparent usurpation of science by partisan political forces -- as in efforts to put concepts like Intelligent Design into science curriculum. In the same week Eric and I were having these conversations, I attended two conferences. The first was the three-day Johns Hopkins Institute for Spirituality and Medicine, the theme of which this year was "What Does it Mean to Be Human – a Public Discourse on Genetics, Ethics, and Spirituality." Then on Friday of the same week I attended one day of the Spiritual Activism Conference of the Network of Spiritual Progressives held in the District. One element of the Spiritual Covenant with America that they are advocating is the following:

We [spiritual progressives] will seek the separation of Church, State and Science. We will protect our society from fundamentalist attempts to impose a particular religion on everyone, but will not fall into a first amendment fundamentalism that attempts to keep all spiritual values out of the public sphere.

Well, needless to say, by the end of that week, I was totally conferenced-out, feeling completely overwhelmed although completely energized by all that I had been hearing. There was enough material there for many years worth of sermons, so the thought of narrowing it down to just one was daunting. I wanted to go on retreat for about six months just to absorb some of it. But I was also in the midst of planning out all of next church-year's themes and had already decided on "values, virtues, and Unitarian Universalist identity." So what this did was give me an additional framework based on what is going on in our culture right now for exploring those ideas next church-year: church, state, science, values, virtues, and Unitarian Universalist identity. There should be enough there for plenty of sermons, adult religious education programs, covenant circles, Chat-Munch-and-Chomp conversations . . . it should keep us pretty busy next year!

But of course that didn't solve my problem of what to talk about *this* morning. So what I thought I'd do today is reflect a little about how *I* go about thinking about all of this. As a Unitarian Universalist minister, I live my whole life exactly at the intersection of science and religion, which is where pastoring happens – engaging with you the congregation, as a whole and as individuals, about how to live . . . how to make real, actual life choices that are ethically and morally sound.

What we are ultimately talking about in this religion and science conversation are completely different fields of knowledge . . . actually bigger categories than "fields." Stephen Jay Gould calls them different "magisteria" – different realms of knowing. A wide net or domain "where one form of teaching holds the appropriate tools for meaningful discourse and resolution."^[1] Tools, of course, being methods, means, common vocabulary.

Religion and science are completely different magisteria, different realms. Gould defines them this way: “Science covers the empirical realm: what is the universe made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). . . Religion [is a different realm. It] extends over questions of ultimate meaning and moral value.”^[2] Gould, a scientist, is interested in both, but keeps them separate.

Richard Dawkins, my favorite atheistic scientist, says something similar, except he isn't interested in ethics. He remains solidly within the realm of science. In my sermon a few weeks ago on agnosticism, I quoted him: “Science has no methods for deciding what is ethical. That is a matter for individuals and for society.” For religion, I would say. And the realm of religion will evolve over time just as science evolves over time as more and more sophisticated methods are developed for understanding the empirical realm.

Both realms, though, are seeking. Seeking understanding. Seeking wisdom.

One of the first presenters at the Johns Hopkins Institute was Francis Collins, who is the Director of the National Human Genome Research Institute, and refers to himself as a “scientist and believer.” The way he reconciles the two is simple: [I think I got this pretty close to correct in my notes]: “God is not limited in space and time; He created the universe and natural law, and chose to use the elegant mechanism of evolution to create life.”

That is a wonderfully elegant way of putting it, for someone who is that kind of a believer -- and he then proceeded to play the guitar and lead us -- an audience that included people of many different faiths and no faith at all -- in the version of the hymn Praise the Source of Faith and Learning that is in our Unitarian Universalist hymnal. So I certainly felt right at home.

But Unitarian Universalism doesn't lend itself to neat and elegant statements. We tend to be paragraph people; essay people; lengthy discourse people. Keep-the-conversation-going-people. For me, Collins' statement leans just a bit too heavily in the direction of “Intelligent Design” . . . it defines God just a bit too closely to a “being,” which doesn't work for me. I'll come back to that.

Let's go back for a moment to Gould . . . he used a word that is misunderstood all the time in the public discourse. He used it correctly, but it often is not. [Anyone pick up on it?] The word is “theory.” We hear that word all the time in the heat of the so-called “Intelligent Design” debates. The proponents of intelligent design use the word “theory” for their idea that because the world is so complicated it could not possibly have come to be by chance -- it *had* to have been designed by a master, intelligent being of some kind. And then they use the phrase “just a theory” about evolution -- saying that it is “just a theory.” Notice they always use the diminutive words “just a” in front of “theory” when they apply it to evolution?

Well, that's not fair, because "theory" has a particular meaning in the realm of science. A theory isn't an idea, or a thought, or a hunch or a guess. It is a *tool* for meaningful discourse in the realm of science. Theories are based on facts and observations; they are logical and testable; the tests can be repeated; the tests can be replicated by *different* scientists, and they are predictive. And sometimes they turn out not to hold up – but the *method*, the testing itself is what is important. This week's example was soy – last year soy was the latest snake oil that cures whatever ails ya. This week, results of many more scientific tests say, "oops, never mind. We were wrong." Well, more and more logical, testable evidence is piling up for evolution – working with various life forms, scientists can predict what a change in environment might mean. How do you test for a designer? So it will be important to reserve the word theory as a tool in the scientific realm.

What does the realm of religion have that is roughly equivalent to, or that operates as a tool in the way that theory operates as a tool in science? I would suggest that the tool is story. Religion uses stories to open up the imagination in the way that science uses theory to open up the intellect. And this has always been true. People or animals or imaginative beings in stories grapple with situations – the same kinds of situations that humans grapple with. Stories provide a basis for the role of true religion – as Gould says, "a ground for moral contemplation rather than a set of dogmas accepted without questioning."^[3] Stories that do this well last for generation after generation.

So we've got these two separate realms – science and religion. One is attempting to describe the physical world. The other is attempting to find ultimate meaning and moral value.

Enter the church and the state. Whereas science and religion are differing realms of knowing, the church and the state are each forms of government . . . systems of authority over some group of people. To the extent that you choose what country or nation you live in, you choose to be part of that system of authority. You might be born into it, but once you are of age, not choosing to leave is a choice to stay. To the extent you choose what religious community you belong to, you choose to be part of that system of authority. You might be born into it, but once you are of age, not choosing to leave is a choice to stay. But both are systems which attempt to regulate and control behavior.

Religious communities and nation/states have overlapping functions – to establish ethical, moral, and behavioral systems that create a climate for humanity to live well with one another. In our particular country, which is the only one I know well, a choice got made at the beginning by the people who set it up, to draw authority from the people and to keep at bay church or other religious systems that draw their authority from anyplace other than the people . . . the governed.

The problem is, they deal with many of the same things. Like, a prohibition against killing. Most religions have such prohibitions. Our country – actually each individual state – has such prohibitions. And in all cases – religious and secular -- they are pretty nuanced: There is first, second and third degree murder; first, second and third

degree manslaughter; self-defense; accidental versus purposeful, and so on and on. So . . . is such a prohibition religious or secular? And . . . here comes science again . . . how can you tell if the person is really alive or dead? What is life? What is death? How are the different realms of knowing to be incorporated into how we, the people, govern ourselves.

So we've got a bubble for the realm of science. A bubble for the realm of religion. A bubble for the authority of secular government or state. Bubbles for the authority of various religious communities. And all of these bubbles have to be in conversation with one another, through . . . people. Abstractions cannot be in conversation with each other . . . only people can.

And *I want* . . . those people to bring their values into the public sphere and public discourse. Openly and honestly. Even their religious values that I may not agree with. Because I want to bring my religious values into the conversation even if others don't agree with them. What helps me understand this is the following example. Suppose, one of our children, in this church grows up and runs for public office. We teach here, as one of our core principles, affirmation for the inherent worth and dignity of every person. That is a *religious value*. I would be appalled, positively appalled, if that new public servant, raised in this church said, "Oh, I will not bring that value into my public position. It is religious, and I leave my religious values at the door. I will not, in my public life, affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person."

See why this is so hard? And won't be solved easily by either the religious right or the religious left, or a conservatives or liberals . . . I don't think any of the labels and categories are helpful. Actual people have to come together to study and contemplate scientific theories and stories both old and new in order to figure out how to be most human . . . and how to live among one another.

I want to close this morning with a few more words about religion because we are, after all, a religion. There is a context that religion does its work in. We don't really live our lives in "fields of knowledge," in "magisteria." We live our lives in our bodies and in our families, and in our communities.

Religion when done well, doesn't only enjoin us in conversation about questions of ultimate meaning and moral value. That can be done in many settings. Religion, when done well, enjoins us in those conversations throughout all aspects of our life – cradle to grave, in particular congregations. It provides us companionship . . . companion . . . "with bread" . . . breaking bread together. What is the bread? All the "stuff" of which life is made. Birth, death, illness, growing up, becoming married or partnered, suffering, caring, courage, limitation, resignation, regeneration, disappointment, grief and mourning, despair, compassion, joy and gratitude and hope, and love.

On the surface, science and religion ask similar questions. Indeed, sometimes the questions sound *exactly* the same. An anguished mother asks: "Why did my child die?" Science answers: because she had leukemia, which damages the human body in such and

such a way, and the body cannot survive. But that is not what the grieving mother is asking. Why did my child die? Why did *my* child die? Why did my *child* die? Why did my child *die*? Repeating the scientific answer doesn't help. Religion, when it works well, does not answer the question. It simply shares the bread . . . companions one through the pain. And when life brings joy . . . it companions us through those times as well.

Throughout next year . . . we will juxtapose science and story – some ancient, some current -- in order that we can engage in moral contemplation together. Bring our own lives into the conversation, together. Explore, together, what the fruits of this study and contemplation might offer the larger community and world. This is, I believe, how we discover the movement of God among us.

May it be so.

^[1] Gould, Stephen Jay. *Rocks of Ages* [New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1999], p. 5.

^[2] *Ibid.* p. 6.

^[3] Gould, p. 42