

## **READING: Do Science & Religion Need Marriage Counseling? By Chris Buice**

Science and religion: Can this marriage be saved? I sometimes wonder what advice I would give to science and religion if they came to my church office in search of couple's counseling. After all, they were such a happy couple until the Middle Ages. Many early scientists were leaders in the church. But during the Renaissance they began to squabble with each other. Arguments became very heated during the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution. Now they live in different houses and sleep in separate bedrooms. One occupies the laboratory; the other inhabits churches, temples, and other religious institutions.

Some may say it was a hopeless marriage from the start. They are simply too dissimilar. They should divorce because of their irreconcilable differences. Of course, most happy couples have at least a few irreconcilable differences. I once knew a couple who had been married for over forty years. One was a Democrat and the other was a Republican. Every election day they marched off to cancel each other's vote. You might think that it would be hard for them to live together. And yet it was a very successful marriage. Nevertheless, if you went to their house for dinner, you might hear their continuing argument over whether or not Herbert Hoover was solely responsible for causing the Great Depression.

So, irreconcilable differences do not have to lead to a divorce. If I were the designated couple's counselor for science and religion, I think I would advise them to keep talking to each other despite their separate and distinct ways of looking at the world. I think each has something to learn from the other. Science is the great discoverer of new truths and technologies. Religion gives us values and ethics so that we can use scientific discoveries for the good of all. Religion helps us to answer questions like "Who am I?" "What is my purpose in life?" Albert Einstein once observed, "Science without religion is lame. Religion without science is blind." The two could form a wonderful partnership. I would counsel science and religion to continue a dialogue with each other. Fortunately differences of opinion do not have to spell the end of a meaningful relationship.

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### **Science and Spirit By Rev. Don Southworth November 11, 2006**

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This morning we continue our ongoing series on the sources that feed and nurture Unitarian Universalism. We began by talking about how words and deeds of prophetic men and women challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil, then we spoke about our transcendent experiences of mystery and wonder, we reflected on how Jewish and Christian teachings call us to love our neighbors as ourselves and two weeks ago we reflected on how wisdom from the world's religions guide us in our ethical and spiritual lives. As I have mentioned every week, the sources are the rivers, or tributaries if you will, that feed the ocean that is Unitarian Universalism. As we have gone through this series many of you have confessed to me that you did not pay much attention to the sources and did not really know how important they were to creating the mosaic that is our faith.

And none of our sources, perhaps, has a bigger impact on how Unitarian Universalism has evolved in the last century than the source we are discussing today. "Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of mind and spirit", the source we are exploring today, may be the most unique of all our six sources.

Many people, especially those from religious traditions where a belief in God is central to their message, may look at this source and question how we can use any teaching but God's, and especially

humanist teachings, to counsel us towards anything. Humanism is one of the most misunderstood words in the religious landscape. To some religious people it suggests heathens, godliness, sacrilege and immorality. But the Humanist Manifesto – a document written and signed primarily by Unitarian ministers in 1933 – is one of the most spiritual and most enlightened teachings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Humanist Manifesto provided a hopeful and almost idealistic look at the future of religion and humankind. It proclaimed “Today our larger understanding of the universe, our scientific achievements, and our deeper appreciation of the kinship of all people, have created a situation which requires a new statement of the means and purposes of religion. The goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good.”

The American Humanist Association which was formed eight years after the signing of the Humanist Manifesto, and which many Unitarian Universalists are members of, suggests that “Humanism is a progressive life stance, free of supernaturalism, that affirms our ability and responsibility to lead meaningful, ethical lives that add to the greater good of humanity.”

John Dietrich, the minister of the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis first coined the word humanism in his 1919 book, *The Religion of Experience*, to describe the new religion he was articulating – a religion without the need of for a supernatural God and a religion focused entirely on the goodness and potential of human beings. In the 1940’s and 50’s humanism – both religious and secular – fueled the fellowship movement in Unitarianism which brought hundreds of new congregations into our movement.

As is true of almost all of the sources, this source is broken into two parts. The first part tells us that humanist teachings counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science. This source reminds us of our commitment to check our facts, so to speak, whenever we study scripture, whenever we search for answers to the big questions of life, whenever we look for meaning and inspiration. Humanism grew out of the Unitarian religious tradition in part because reason and science have always been part of what made us who we are.

Micheal Servetus ,who wrote the book “On the Errors of the Trinity” in the 16<sup>th</sup> century which reasoned that there was no basis for a Trinitarian God in the Bible, and was burned at the stake for his perspective, was a doctor who helped discover how blood moved through the body.

Joseph Priestly whose home in England was torched by people outraged at the Unitarian message he was preaching, and who fled to America bringing Unitarianism with him, was the scientist who discovered oxygen. And the minister, William Ellery Channing, the father of American Unitarianism, was speaking about the Bible but was really referring to all religion when he said, “we feel it our bounden duty to exercise our reason upon it perpetually”.

Science and reason were important to our ancestors and they are important to us today. But I have a confession. Unlike many Unitarian Universalists, many of the people in this congregation in fact, science was never my favorite subject in school. I was generally a straight A student but science was always one of my weaker subjects. I took science from Mr. Fish in junior high for two years and other than memorizing the periodical table, my fondest memory of science class are the short skirts that Patricia Lee wore almost every day. High school biology is a blur except for cutting up a frog and being rejected by Maureen Reicke no matter how hard I tried to convince her to go out with me. And the worst grade, and biggest headache, I received in my first two years of college was in Physics. As hard as I worked, and I must have worked hard because I cannot remember any girls from the class, I just never really got it.

I make this confession to you today so that you know that my approach to life, and to religion, has never been very scientific. I have always believed that religion and faith had to be grounded in our experiences and must make some rational sense, but when I first heard that humanism was in large part born out of the scientific culture and revolution of the early 20th century I was a bit skeptical. I came into Unitarian Universalism as someone who had a strong belief in a God of my own understanding and when I learned that I was in a theological minority and that Humanism was the theological choice for 46% of us, I wondered how I would fit in.

Such was my state of mind before I went to seminary and before I started studying our sources and the wisdom and inspiration they contain. When I read Mason Old’s book, *American Religious Humanism*, and learned about the history and teachings of humanism I discovered that I too was a religious humanist.

The tenets and principles of humanism were far more than formulas and theories created by scientific-minded ministers and philosophers; they were guidelines for living a good life.

For many people, however, reason and the results of science do not fit into a religious or spiritual life. Some religious people claim that if we are always looking for proof we will never find faith. Some say that science and religion are two different domains that cannot, as our reading suggests this morning, live together, and need a divorce. Ironically people on both sides of the science and spiritual debate say this. The fundamentalist on one side tells us that the existence of God or any supernatural force must be accepted sight unseen, while the fundamentalist on the other side tells us that if something cannot be proven it cannot exist.

I like to think that the truth is actually somewhere in between. Many scientists seem to make the best theologians. The physicist Alan Lightman writes, "Of all the people today, I think scientists have the deepest faith in the unseen world. The greater the scientist the deeper his or her faith." Einstein wrote that, "cosmic religious feeling is the strongest and noblest motive for scientific research...it is the most important function of art and science to awaken this feeling and keep it alive in those who are receptive to it." Einstein also said that what he was trying to do in his scientific work was to understand how "the Old One" thinks.

And Gordon Atkinson, the author of the book and website [RealLivePreacher.Com](http://RealLivePreacher.Com) – says it perhaps the best for me, "I learned that it doesn't matter in the least that I be convinced of God's existence. Whether or not God exists is none of my business, really. What do I know of existence? I don't even know how the VCR works."

The first half of this source reminds us that we must use reason and appreciate science in any religious or spiritual seeking we do. One of the reasons that we believe so deeply that the path to religious and spiritual wisdom is unique for every person and cannot be covered by one overarching statement, creed or belief is that every person's theology or life story, and the meanings we forge for our lives, are crafted from our own individual life experiences. That which we turn to for solace and strength, for renewal and reflection, for inspiration and love – must make sense to us. But the second half of this source is what I find most interesting and maybe most challenging. Our religious heritage and our shared experiences make it obvious that humanist teachings are part of the ground we walk as religious people. We believe in life and that the power to craft lives of meaning and purpose, service and love must be found in this world and not another that we cannot be certain of.

While we may believe in, or give our lives over to that which we cannot easily see – prayer, meditation, the interdependent web of life, that which some call God – we do so because our experiences, and sometimes even scientific studies, have shown us that connecting with our deepest selves and/or that which is outside of us works. Spiritual practice has been proven to be effective and so we strive to learn how to incorporate it into our lives.

But what does it mean to have the lessons of reason and science warn us against the idolatries of mind and spirit?

The book of Exodus declares that, "'Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.'

Now I suspect that most of us do not read Exodus very often or worry too much about having other gods before the god that we read about in the Hebrew Scriptures. And to be honest when most people think of idols these days – including me – it is the American Idols that people listen to and vote for on television. So this idolatry stuff does not come naturally to us. One encyclopedia says this about idolatry: "**Idolatry** is a term used by many [religions](#) to describe the [worship](#) of a false [deity](#), which is an affront to their understanding of divinity. Many religions consider the beliefs or practices of other religions to be idolatrous." By that definition some might say that our inclusion of humanism as one of our sources might be idolatrous. But in truth humanism is one of our paths to understanding divinity.

When I think of idols I think of those things, those objects, those beliefs, those people in our lives that become bigger than they should be. Bigger than God? For some. Bigger than our best selves, than love, than that which gives us wholeness and health? For everyone. Sometimes our idols are obsessions or addictions, sometimes our idols are beliefs that we cling to so tightly our mind becomes closed like a trap

door, sometimes our idols are those things which society promises will make our life complete – the new car or television, the new the new house or the new relationship.

Forest Church writes in A Chosen Faith, the best book on our sources, “The inclusion of a warning against idolatries of the mind and spirit is not an afterthought, it is absolutely critical to the identity of our faith, protecting even science and rationalism from becoming idols. Science and technology without awe and humility about how they are used too easily become threats to both nature and humanity. Mere freedom from traditional theistic belief does not guarantee just or social behavior. Idolizing such freedom can lead to either self-absorption and “possessive individualism” or to the many idolatries promoted by consumerism and by manipulative would-be messiahs.”

Church goes on to outline some of the idolatries that Unitarian Universalists take for granted such as the freedom of the individual, reason, and tolerance – which as with everything can be wonderful in moderation and dangerous and unhealthy in the extreme.

Avoiding idolatries of the mind and spirit is difficult work. For some idolatry of the mind is the most seductive. Another book to read, another degree to earn, another blog to write, another political or philosophical treatise to study. The pursuit of knowledge becomes not one of many roads to wisdom, it becomes the only road. If we just learn and understand enough, life will make more sense and perhaps be complete. But idolizing the mind and reason over all else leaves us only half-full.

As does idolizing the spirit. Spending our time searching for the mystical and the magical can become a full time job. Some move from religion to religion, from minister to minister, from spiritual practice to spiritual practice hoping to find that right mix of the metaphysical and sometimes the supernatural to make sense of life. The pursuit of the spirit becomes so intense – and often so individualized – that the support and the lessons of being in community and serving in community are neglected.

Our fifth source reminds us that science and spirit are not an either/or proposition when crafting lives of meaning, purpose and goodness. I can be, as I am, a humanist who is also a mystic. Someone who finds value and hope in the scientific, rational world of humanism where religion must make sense and my respect and appreciation for life and the human endeavor is supreme. And at the same time I can fall to my knees in prayer and in gratitude for the wonder and mystery of life that I cannot explain but can only enjoy, for the pain and suffering that I cannot escape but can share with that which is larger than my mind and my understanding – whether that be human or divine.

When I think of science and spirit I think of two stories that I leave you with this morning. The first is the story of Galileo. I graduated from Galileo High School in San Francisco. For most of my life I took pride in that - not because of Galileo - but because Joe DiMaggio and OJ Simpson went to Galileo as well. Today I honor Galileo the man more than my sports idols.

Galileo at the age of 70 was forced to recant his scientific findings, on his knees, to the Catholic Church by saying “having before my eyes the Holy Gospel, which I touch with my hands, abjure, curse, and detest the error and the heresy of the movement of the Earth.” Galileo, for who scientific investigation was an act of religious faith, is rumored to have said under his breath, “the earth still moves”. He was sentenced to life imprisonment for making the universe a bigger idol than Catholic teaching.

And the second story is a story about science and spirit. Many years ago Kathleen and I home schooled our two boys for one year. We were part of a wonderful home schooling group in Berkeley, California which coordinated all kinds of field trips that I was usually too busy to join. One Saturday night, we went to the Lawrence Hall of Science at UC Berkeley to look at the stars. One woman who had brought a powerful telescope, looked as if she was keeping a big secret as she invited the kids and the adults to look through the telescope to the heavens above. One by one, people both young and old alike, would turn from that telescope with their mouths wide open and a sense of awe written across their faces. I had to see what was so magical in that telescope lens.

I squinted in the eye piece and my eyes could not believe what they saw. Saturn, clearer and more colorful, than any picture I had ever seen. I could count each ring and felt like I could reach out and touch every one. It was one of the most inspirational, moving and spiritual moments of my life. It was the closest I may have ever been to looking into the face of divinity. And it was all based on science, science that Galileo helped to create and paid for with his freedom.

Einstein said, "Science without religion is lame. Religion without science is blind." Thanks to our fifth source we get to see and experience all the beauty, wonder and glory of life, learning from both science and spirit, never having to chose between being blind or lame.

May it be so. Amen.