

Sermon on Science and Faith, given by Ken Rockwell, May 15, 2022

Scripture: Genesis 1:1 – 5, (12 – 13?) (25) 1:31; I Kings 19:4 – 12

[Before I begin, a note about the scriptures selected. It's not easy to find passages touching on the relationship of religion and science. I wrote most of this sermon over two years ago—pre-COVID. But just recently, I came across a sermon from April of 1984 by Rev. Peter Brenner, pastor of this church, on how the modern scientific understanding of creation is compatible with the Bible. He used a passage from Genesis for a scripture reading, so I followed suit. As for the other selection... well, you'll see! Now: where was I before I was so rudely interrupted by the pandemic? Oh, yes...]

In previous sermons, I have spoken of my past wrestling with doubt in matters of faith. But in all of those years of struggle, I haven't experienced something that is a very common root to people's religious doubts, namely, the idea that religion and science are bound to be in conflict. Faith and reason are incompatible, they say.

Why is this such a common belief? Perhaps because the strongest supporters of one side or the other make a lot of noise about it.

We've all heard quotes from militant atheists, who seem to have an active crusade going to demonize religion as the source of all of humanity's problems. Witness the title of Christopher Hitchens's book: God is not great—how religion poisons everything. Hitchens, Sam Harris, and other spokesmen of this view are often trained scientists, and think it their professional duty to make war on religion for its unscientific ideas.

Still, there are other scientists who don't go to this extreme. Some of them may even be affiliated with some religious tradition. And others recognize the atheists' efforts to be not really in keeping with science, either. My brother is one such scientist, a geologist who is sure that all phenomena can be explained scientifically. But he calls himself an agnostic and refuses the label of "atheist" because, he says, Atheism is also a religion, and its exponents are as guilty of promoting discord as the militant religionists.

On the religious side, we see most of the anti-science coming from those who take certain lines of their scripture in a literal manner. “The Bible says this; science says something different; I believe the Bible, therefore I reject what science says.” The conflict goes away if one isn’t tied to a literal interpretation of the verses that supposedly conflict. If the two creation stories in Genesis—which, by the way, conflict with each other in a literal reading of them—are seen as metaphors (or to use New Testament language, as parables), meant to teach us lessons, there isn’t a need to deny scientific findings.

Some examples of positive religious responses to science:

My other brother is a Baha’i. The Baha’i Faith is a new religion (born in the 19th century) that has always asserted that science and religion are in harmony. As one of its leading exponents, Abdul-Baha, put it succinctly:

“There is no contradiction between true religion and science. When a religion is opposed to science it becomes mere superstition. ... Religion and science are the two wings upon which man’s intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone!” I like that metaphor.

The early centuries of Islam saw the development of a science-friendly civilization. Muslims, along with Jews and Christians among them, kept alive the knowledge of Greek civilization, later transmitting them back to Europe in Renaissance times. Historically, Islam didn’t have a bias against modern science as its fundamentalists today do. One Muslim thinker put it this way: God could have created the world in any manner He chose. It’s the job of the scientist to find out how God actually chose to do it.

Christian thinkers have expressed similar views. One of the first responses by a Christian minister to Darwin’s theory of evolution said in effect: “At last! A creation story worthy of our Creator!”

Recently I was walking through the Salt Lake City cemetery, and came across a large grave monument with the following quote by the one buried there:

“Within the Gospel of Jesus Christ there is room and place for every truth thus far learned by man or yet to be made known.” The speaker was James E. Talmage, a chemist and science teacher who became President of the University of Utah. He was also a faithful Latter-day Saint who rose to become an Apostle of his church.

One can find many other examples where faith and reason, religion and science, are able to dwell within the same heart.

Still, some are uncomfortable with the apparent randomness that scientists find in nature. They would rather think that God is in direct, active control of everything, as some Biblical stories suggest. Why would God relinquish control of nature? Well, why not? We have long been accustomed to believing we have freedom of will and are responsible for our own actions. Apparently, God saw fit to relinquish control of us for the greater good of human freedom. Maybe there are good reasons for nature to run its course according to natural laws—basic principles that God set up, but that have wide latitude to develop in different ways, such as evolving the wonderful diversity of life on Earth. While some Biblical passages suggest God’s direct control of nature, today’s second reading suggests otherwise: Earthquake, windstorm, fire—God was not in these, but in the voice of the Spirit.

Today, valuing the findings of science is becoming increasingly important among religious communities that are concerned with the environmental health of the planet. Science is telling us we’re in trouble, and Christians are reaffirming the statement in Genesis that God gave man stewardship of the earth. We must be wise stewards of the resources we’ve been given, using what we need but maintaining a balance so that we don’t exhaust basic resources and make the Earth unlivable.

Many of us love the beauty of nature, especially the mountains that provide a lovely backdrop to our city. This place would be unlivable without the water supply provided by these mountains. So we give thanks to God for them. But in the long term, these mountains and other features of the earth’s surface got to be as they are through geologic forces. That includes earthquakes, as well as sea level change, glaciation, volcanoes—things that we don’t care to experience personally!

Yet we are their beneficiaries in the present, and we can still thank God for setting it all in motion.

I will close with the words of Dr. Alfred Painter, a Methodist minister who clearly didn't have a problem with evolution. Reflecting on his life at the age of 82, he wrote: "Life is an endless adventure moved along by many forces that are beyond our control, but one which we can give ourselves over to in trust and confidence. There is always more going on than we are equipped to perceive through our limited senses and with our limited experience. This 'more,' I believe is the root of religious or spiritual life. Change is at the bottom of it, and the more we are a part of it—the more we rely and trust in it—the more likely are we to uncover the pleasures and mysteries of living. ... So I face each day with a deep sense of awe, content to let be what will be: the universe is ever unfolding before my eyes, and I see that it is good."

Amen.