**A REFLECTION ON RELIGION AND SCIENCE**
**UU MEETING HOUSE - CHATHAM, MASS. – AUG. 26, 2007**
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Some five years ago this past May, near the end of my tenure as interim minister at the First Parish in Bridgewater, I attended a special program at Bridgewater State College. It was called "The Last Lecture" and one of the featured presenters was the organist of the First Parish UU Church in Bridgewater, Professor Vahe Marganian, who was giving his last lecture as a professor in chemistry at the college. The purpose of "The Last Lecture" was to give retiring teachers and professors an opportunity to give their swan song to the college community, to say what they would like to say if they could put the essence of their knowledge and wisdom about their particular discipline in a last lecture.

Incidentally, I was a Chemical Engineer major at UMass. in Amherst my first two years in college, before switching to Sociology in preparation for going to seminary. I really loved chemistry so there's a bit of the scientist in me as well as the metaphysician and theologian. So, I looked forward to hearing my fellow church employee talk about his work as a chemistry teacher and his thoughts about science and chemistry in everyday life—so much so that I was moved to respond in similar fashion about the practice of religion in everyday life and the relationship between science and religion and their special areas of concern. Thus, I put my thoughts in a Last Sermon to my congregation in Bridgewater and thought they might be worth sharing with you, my congregation for a day here in Chatham. God willing this will not be my last sermon to my fellow congregants here at the UUMH.
One of the things noted by Vahe in his Last Lecture is that there is a kind of hierarchy of the sciences moving upwards from the least exact sciences towards the more exact or hard sciences. Thus you have biology talking up to chemistry, chemistry talking up to physics, physics talking up to mathematics, and finally mathematics talking up to God. That got a big chuckle from the audience. By the way I took my share of integral and differential calculus while in college, but I never thought that what I was doing was in any way talking up to God, though I sometimes wondered if even God could figure out what these equations were all about.

I am reminded of that old political saw about the hierarchy of privilege in the wealthy families of Boston. The saw concludes by saying that "in the home of the bean and the cod,…the Lowells talk only to the Cabots, and the Cabots talk only to God." Well, you know, it used to be the case, back in the Middle Ages, that theology was considered to be the Queen of the Sciences because it dealt with the biggest Numero Uno of them all, the ultimate Source and Being of all existence. Back then it was the theologians who talked up to God, not the mathematicians.

But God, it turned out, was the least exact subject of all to study, much too complicated and vague, pure spirit, no hard physical data, there being no proof of God's being and existence that could pass muster in modern philosophy. So in our time the language of mathematics becomes the language of divinity. We think God's thoughts after Him or Her, as it were, as we figure out the calculus of the creation.

I think it was Stephen Hawking in one of his books who said that if we can ever solve the math for the Grand Unification Theory that unites the forces of gravity, electro magnetism and the weak and strong forces of the atom—something Einstein was never able to do in his lifetime—then we will at last come to know the mind of God. Then we can wear the equation on our tee shirts. And won't we be grand!

There is still something to be said for honoring religion in the sense of its derivative meaning, *re-ligio*, to bind together again, to reunite that which has been divided and separated, to reconnect or be linked

with a larger source of meaning and existence. Or as Tillich once said, religion has to do with ultimate concerns, it asks the big questions—where do we come from, what are we, where are we going? Why is there something and not nothing? If science is primarily interested in the matter of things, how all things hang together materially speaking, then it could be said that religion at its best is interested in things that matter, how all things hang together spiritually and morally speaking.

Religion by its very nature is value laden—it cares about life and existence, is concerned about death and dying and what happens to us before and after, wants to do what is right and best for all persons, to see justice done and to live in harmony with all of God's creation. The philosopher Immanuel Kant tied science and religion together when he said: "Two things fill the mind with ever increasing awe and wonder—the starry heavens above, the moral law within." Einstein did as much when he declared that the sense of wonder and awe is at the heart of all true science and art, and we would add, religion as well.

Years ago I read a book by the astronomer, Robert Jastrow, called GOD AND THE ASTRONOMERS. Jastrow, sums up the situation of science and religion regarding the creation of the universe in the following words:
A sound explanation may exist for the explosive birth of our Universe; but if it does, science cannot find out what the explanation is. The scientist's pursuit of the past ends in the moment of creation" (the Big Bang). "This is an exceedingly strange development," noted Jastrow, "unexpected by all but the theologians.... At this moment it seems as though science will never be able to raise the curtain on the mystery of creation. For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries.

Yes, but what have they been doing? Some of them, unfortunately, refused to look through Galileo's telescope for fear of dislocating the earth from the center of the solar system. Then they imprisoned and tortured him and made him recant what he knew to be true. But that's an old story and the previous Pope, John Paul, II, finally got around to apologizing for the way his predecessors treated Galileo. John Paul even admitted that the story of evolution as set forth by science was probably true as far as it goes; it was just not the whole story.

So, in a manner of speaking, science and religion are finally on the same page as far as the creation of life on earth is concerned, although there are still some reactionary religionists who resist the obvious truth of an evolving universe. What is important is that both science and religion begin with a sense of wonder at the mystery of creation. Any religion worth its salt asks, what is your frame of reference morally and spiritually speaking? Do you have a code of ethics that guides your thought and behavior? Do you have a metaphysics that accounts for the meaning of your existence? Do you ask the big questions and are you searching for a larger truth to live by? If not, then you need to get with the program because seeking to fulfill a spiritual hunger is part of what it means to be human.

Your religion is the way you make connections with people and events, and the larger universe. *Religio*—be reunited, be reconciled, be connected to those from whom you are estranged. Will the circle of love and justice, health and healing and wholeness be unbroken? Yes, if you would have it be so, or at least you can make an attempt to find a new spiritual center, re-establish a link with that larger circle of Being whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.

I am intrigued by the information contained in a hologram, a three dimensional photographic image. You've seen them on the cover of National Geographic and even on your credit cards. What is interesting about a holographic photographic plate is that the smallest piece contains the whole image. In other words, the whole (the totality of being) is inherent in the smallest unit. That is in fact the case when it comes to understanding what happens with biological cloning, which we've been hearing about so much these days. A single cell of any living being can be implanted in the hollowed center of a female egg and replanted in the womb. It has the potential to reproduce a biological copy of the donor.

All of you is contained in the tiniest part of you. What if the whole universe is based on such a premise? As the Dali Lama, in the title of one of his latest books puts it, "The Universe In A Single Atom." That means we are all connected to one another and to the entire web of creation of which we are a part. Science proves it, or nearly so.
What kind of an ethic derives from such an insight? What we do to nature we ultimately do to ourselves. What we do to others we also do to ourselves. The stranger, the enemy, the friend and the lover are all rooted and grounded and connected to the center of all being that is God/Goddess, the Source of Life, Being and the Universe. We are part of one another even when we are apart from one another. Love your neighbor as yourself because your neighbor is your extended self. As the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hahn puts it: we inter-being are. To know that we are connected to all that is, that the laws of nature and the laws of love and justice are in our own mind and conscience, is to know the basis of all religion and morality, and our relation to the ultimate source of existence.
This reminds me of a little joke about a minister and a scientist who met in an airport bar waiting for a delayed flight – they discussed their life work - the scientist said to the minister, "Ah, religion – I always thought it could be summed up by the Golden Rule—do as you would be done by." - The minister said to the scientist, "What branch of science are you in?" The answer: "Astronomy" - "Oh," said the minister, "I always thought that could be summed up by Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star, how I wonder what you are."

Well, you know, they may not be too far off the mark when you stop to think about it. Yes, indeed, it's all so simple, if only it wasn't so hard to figure out. The renowned scientist, Karl Popper, once defined science as organized skepticism. Like Socrates of old scientists keep asking question after question, seeking clearer and more satisfying answers to the mystery of creation. The history of science is in part a history of inadequate or failed theories that are eventually replaced by more encompassing and better theories.

Well, if science is organized skepticism about material matters, then I would have to argue that the Unitarian Universalist church today is organized skepticism about spiritual matters. Methodists sometime refer to four sources of religious authority: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience. In most mainline churches Scripture and Tradition have a clear priority over Reason and Experience. If your religious experience, however reasonable it may be to you, is out of line with traditional church doctrine and Biblical witness, then it is incumbent upon you to re-examine your thinking and experience and to amend the heretical tendencies of your thought.

In Unitarian Universalism we find a reversal of the order of priority of the sources of religious authority. Reason reflecting on Experience is the center of religious authority for us. If Scripture and Tradition contradict clear evidence of Reason and Experience then conscience impels us to trust our own experience. Moreover, Scripture and Tradition are no longer confined solely to Judeo-Christian sources. With Channing we welcome new truth as an angel from heaven, be that angel Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Secular or Pagan, ancient or modern.

If the Uncertainty Principle and probability theory are now part of the everyday thinking of science, they are equally so a part of a modern liberal religion like Unitarian Universalism. Paul Tillich called it learning to live with ambiguity. Doubt and uncertainty are part of what it means to have a faith that seeks understanding and truth. Some years ago Bronowski suggested that religions should take a page from the lessons of science and learn to be tolerant of each other—since no religion has all the answers.

Well, years before Bronowski lived and taught, Unitarian church historian, Earl Morse Wilbur said that the distinguishing marks of a liberal religious faith are Freedom, Reason and Tolerance. However, he was quick to point out that by themselves they are not enough to constitute a viable religion and faith. Freedom, Reason and Tolerance are necessary principles for the pursuit of truth and understanding about things both material and spiritual. But, they are not the same as truth itself, nor can they fulfill the need for love and compassion, and the desire to celebrate the gift of life in rites and ceremonies, anthems and songs.

We are Unitarians because we believe the source of being and existence is One, though called by many names. We are Universalists because we believe that salvation and the journey to wholeness is ever available to all. And we are Unitarian Universalists because we believe that reason and love in action and practice are the best means for discovering what it means to be human and illuminating the mystery of the divine.

One of the sources of “the living tradition we share” in our UU Principles and Purposes refers to “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.” Both science, and the liberal religion we profess, honors the quest for truth in the material and spiritual realms of our lives. In the final analysis, as the Vedanta tradition in Hinduism teaches, “Truth is One. We call it by many names.”