

Science and the Christian Religion: A Sermon in Three Acts*

To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence; their foot shall slide in due time: for the day of their calamity is at hand.

Deuteronomy 32:35

Act I

(Wearing an academic gown.)

What is the relationship between science and the Christian Religion? Are they compatible? Are they incompatible? Are they neither?

For many Christians, the relationship between science and faith is called into sharpest question by the apparent conflict between two prominent models regarding the origin of Man – the creation account we find in Genesis and evolutionary theory as first proposed by Charles Darwin. And so it is appropriate, on this 203rd anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin, that we examine the relationship between science and the Christian faith, and do so using the illustration of biological evolution.

Attend me as we read five brief statements of faith collected from UCC sources regarding science, evolution, and man's place in the world. I would ask you to think critically about each of these statements in turn, considering both whether you agree with them personally, and the extent to which each might be supported by scripture.

The first set of three statements come from "A pastoral letter On faith engaging science and technology" written in 2008 by Rev. John H. Thomas, General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ:

(1) "Through the scientific advances of our time, we are seeing nature with new eyes, and what we see fills us with wonder and praise. Stunning images of deep space are like new windows on creation. Microscopic details of living cells show us the unexpected intricacies of our biology. What we see evokes wonder and humility, and we hear within ourselves a new voice arising and singing an anthem of praise that reverberates through the whole creation." I think everybody will recognize these words as a lovely and poetic echo of Psalm 8 or Psalm 19, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth His handywork." Yes, amen to that!

(2) "When we behold the depths of space, we hear the words of Genesis and of a God who creates by speaking the universe into existence. But we are filled with new questions about a God who is still creating a universe that is still unfolding." This is an observation that the physical world changes, and that it continues to change. Amply supported by science, certainly, but the scriptural support is not immediately obvious.

(3) "Evolution helps us see our faithful God in a new way. Our creator works patiently, calling forth life through complex processes spanning billions of years and waiting for us to awaken and respond in conscious participation in God's own overarching dream for all living things. Evolution also helps us see ourselves anew, as creatures who share a common origin with other species." This is an affirmation

of biological evolution, indeed that human evolution has occurred. Again certainly supported by science, but most certainly not to be found in scripture.

The next two statements come from a UCC minister named Rev. Michael Dowd, and are taken from his 2007 book, "Thank God for Evolution."

(4) "It is essential to remember that from an evolutionary perspective, we are not separate creatures on Earth. We grew out from the Earth, like a peach grows out of a peach tree. When the bible tells of God forming Adam from the dust of the earth and breathing into him the breath of life, we can now appreciate that this is a beautiful figurative description of this process." This is an assertion that Adam did not in reality exist, that he was an allegorical character only.

(5) "The Fall and Original Sin are both trivialized when we interpret the events in the Genesis story as factual. Inclinations toward excess with regard to food, sex, and feel-good substances are deeply rooted in our reptilian brain. So are aggressive tendencies, such as might lead to thievery, fighting or even warfare. There is profound relief in knowing that the inclinations we most dislike in ourselves are heirloom instincts, not of our own doing. Once relaxed and accepting, we can begin to forgive ourselves and others for past transgressions." Was original sin not a consequence of eating from the tree whereof the Lord commanded Adam he should not eat? Is original sin simply an "heirloom" of our reptilian ancestry? Of this original sin can we forgive ourselves?

Have we, in a series of five brief passages from UCC sources, descended from a poetic restatement of Psalm 19, step by step, slip by slip, into a redefinition of original sin and a green light to forgive ourselves for it? In accepting the scientific reality of evolution, we must relegate Adam to figurative status, must we not? Then the sin of Adam must be figurative as well, yes? Then if we are not wholly and truly stained by the sin of Adam, the wretched delusion that twists us from birth into thinking that we are "as gods, knowing good from evil," why did our Christ submit to the cross? And did He die in vain?

Here we tread a slippery slope! And in Deuteronomy 32:35 we read, "Their foot shall slide in due time, for the day of their calamity is at hand!"

I now quote from a UCC source of a finer pedigree, Rev. Jonathan Edwards. Attend the words that Edwards first preached to the congregation at Enfield, Connecticut in 1741:

"Their foot shall slide in due time! In this verse is threatened the vengeance of God on the wicked unbelieving Israelites, that were God's visible people, and lived under means of grace; and that, notwithstanding all God's wonderful works that He had wrought towards that people, yet remained, as is expressed in Deuteronomy, void of counsel, having no understanding in them, who provoked our Lord to jealousy by worshipping strange gods, who sacrificed unto devils, to gods whom they knew not, to new gods that came newly up? Of the Rock that begot them they became unmindful, and forgot the God that formed them.

Their foot shall slide in due time! As he that walks in slippery places is every moment liable to fall; he cannot foresee one moment whether he shall stand or fall the next; and when he does fall, he falls at once, without warning. Which is also expressed in Psalm 73:18-19 where we read, "Surely thou didst set

them in slippery places: thou casteth them down into destruction. How are they brought into desolation as in a moment!"

And are we not wicked, as wicked as the Israelites who provoked our Lord to jealousy by worshipping new gods that come newly up? Then our feet too will slide in due time, and we too are under a sentence of condemnation to hell. The sentence of the law of God, that eternal and immutable rule of righteousness that God has fixed between Him and mankind, is gone out against us, and stands against us; so that we are bound over already to hell.

The wrath of God burns against us, the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is now hot, ready to receive us, the flames do now rage and glow. The glittering sword is whet, and held over us, and the pit hath opened her mouth under us, and The devil stands ready to fall upon us and seize us as his own."

Act II

(Wearing a lab coat.)

Science is the construction of testable models about the natural world. This is Chapter 1 in the textbook from which we teach Freshman Biology at the College of Charleston, and indeed the substance of the first lecture in my Biology 111 class every fall. Typically we move on to explore at great depth the verb-half of our definition. We focus on the scientific method. How do we construct testable models of the natural world? We begin with an hypothesis – an idea to be tested. We conduct experiments. We gather data systematically. We publish our results together with our methods so that our models can be independently tested by other researchers.

Typically I do not spend much time on the second half of the definition of the word, science – the half specifying that science deals only with the natural world. I think this may be a mistake on my part, and I think it is a common mistake among my colleagues in other science departments as well. Science is strictly an operation of this world. Its language is entirely of the natural world, its culture is entirely of the natural world, and all its assumptions are of the natural world. Science has no relationship to the spiritual world, by its very definition.

Take any simple statement of the Christian faith. For example, on the third day He rose again from the dead. This is clearly not a testable hypothesis about the natural world. In fact, this fundamental assertion cannot even be expressed in the language of science, because if an organism is subsequently demonstrated to be alive, it cannot have been dead, by definition. The most triumphant confession of the Christian faith – He is risen – cannot even be expressed in the language of science, much less tested.

Science and faith are not compatible in any sense. Neither are they incompatible in any sense. They are quite simply, and quite profoundly, different. They have different languages, different cultures, and different assumptions about the different worlds in which they operate. Neither is better or worse, neither is more correct or more true. Science and the Christian Religion are as playing baseball, and playing the banjo. They are not incompatible, in the sense that my father was both a baseball player and a banjo picker. But they are not compatible either. For science is of this world. And our Christ's kingdom is not.

I have 39 colleagues in the Biology Department at the College of Charleston, 38 colleagues in Chemistry, 23 colleagues in Physics and 19 colleagues in Geology. Not one of the entire 119 of us, ever, in his entire professional career, has tried to make his science compatible with religious faith. Shall we here in the pews of the mainline denominations on Sunday morning try to bend our Christian faith into compatibility with science?

Act III

(Wearing a suit coat.)

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world." This was His response to Pilate, who asked where His armies might be to rescue him. But we read in John 18:36 that He replied to the challenge of Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world."

The kingdom of our Christ is a spiritual kingdom. Today, I fear that many Christians, especially those of us in the mainline protestant denominations, may have lost the ability to distinguish the spiritual from the worldly, to distinguish the holy from the unholy, to distinguish the sacred from the profane. But the distinction between the worldly and the spiritual runs like a bulwark through the entirety of our religious tradition, Old Testament and New.

The word "holy" occurs 1,480 times in the New International Version of the Bible, and the word "sacred" occurs 286 times. These two words are used interchangeably in scripture to designate some special person, place, thing, or time set aside for a higher use, typically as fit for God, or as worthy of an offering to God. This is to contrast to times and places and things that are profane, or common, or worldly, which are beneath God, and not to be offered to Him.

So for example, in Exodus the Lord told the People of Israel that they were to be his holy people, and enjoined them to remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy. We read in the books of Kings that the priests donned their sacred garments to carry their sacred offerings into the Temple. On at least two occasions in the Epistles, Paul referred to "holy scriptures," which would ultimately include the letters to Timothy and the Romans that he himself was writing at that very moment.

Of course, our Lord retains sovereignty over the whole of His creation, the profane no less than the sacred. The assertion of Jesus Christ that His kingdom is not of this world was meant to declare that His authority does not issue from worldly princes or their armies, but rather from His Holy Father. The power of God does not proceed from civil government, and He is not subject to civil courts or laws, and His holiness shall not be profaned by admixture with the secular state. The power of God does not proceed from business or commerce, He is not subject to the marketplace, and His holiness shall not be profaned by taint of lucre. The power of God does not proceed from the physical universe, and He is not subject to natural laws, and His holiness shall not be profaned by science.

Our Christ's kingdom is a spiritual kingdom, his bride the Church is sacred, and her scriptures are holy, and we sully the Christian religion when we combine, compare, mix or adulterate our faith with profane, worldly things, such as business, government, or science.

Paul instructed us, in Romans 12:2, “Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is the good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” Shall we then withdraw from this world? Should I resign my nine-to-five job as a scientist at the local college, move to a beautifully landscaped estate in the countryside, pray seven times a day and raise chickens? Does the Apostle Paul call us to monkery?

No. For although Jesus was not of this world, He was very much in it. The Word was made flesh and dwelled among us. He walked the dusty roads of first century Palestine, feeding the poor and healing the sick. He taught by the Sea of Galilee, he cleansed the temple of the moneychangers. He was in the world, but not of the world.

And following in the footsteps of our Christ, we too are enjoined to be in the world, but not of the world. We too are called to feed the poor and heal the sick. We too are called to go into the world and make disciples of all nations. We too are called to plant churches in Haiti. Have we answered that call? Or have we written a check for \$2,500 and washed our hands of it?

In summary, this morning I have made three points:

First, science and the Christian faith are not compatible, nor are they incompatible. They are very simply, and very profoundly, different. They have different languages, cultures, and assumptions about the different worlds in which they operate. They cannot be combined.

Second, we should not try to combine them. Science is of this world, and the kingdom of our Christ is not of this world. The entire weight of scripture, Old Testament and New, enjoins us to keep the things that are God’s holy, sacred, and set apart from the things of this world, which are profane, and not worthy of an offering to God, such as science.

And third, we are not called to monkery. For although Jesus was not of this world, nevertheless He was in the world, feeding the hungry and healing the sick. So too should we follow our Christ, striving to be in the world, as businessmen, lawyers, dishwashers or even scientists, but not of it.

In conclusion, my entire message this morning is summarized by a single verse of scripture, James 1:27. There we read, “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.”

Prayer:

Just a closer walk with thee,
Precious Jesus, hear our plea,
We’ll be satisfied if we
Could walk, just a closer walk,
With thee. Amen.

*Preached at Circular Congregational Church, Charleston, South Carolina.
February 12, 2012.