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First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
East Hartford, Connecticut

September 25, 2011

Religion and Science

(Second in series, Contemporary Issues in religion and Morality)

John 16:12-15; Job 42:1-6 NRSV

It may seem remarkable that a sermon about the relationship between religion and science might still need to be preached in the 21st century. After all, the scientific perspective and method of discernment has dominated western culture for over a hundred years. And at the least, most of us easily accept the methods of science when they lead to space flight and such things as polio vaccines and modern conveniences. Even the most strident critics of the Big Bang Theory, biological evolution, or carbon fourteen dating, might often consider their dissent in the comfort of temperature controlled offices thanks to advances in science and technology. Nevertheless, many people still deny on the basis of religious belief some of the things that science teaches. There can be little doubt about this when the front running presidential candidate of a major political party believes that the biblical story of creation should be taught in science class in the public schools.

The proposition here this morning is that science is never a threat to religion and religion is never a threat to science because religion and science know different things. The subject of religion is spirituality. It addresses questions about God, morality, the meaning and purpose of human life on earth, and the survival of consciousness in an afterlife. Science can not answer such questions. They are beyond its purview. The subject of science is physicality. It addresses questions about matter and energy and the laws that govern them, how the material universe developed and continues to develop and, yes, how and when it began. How and when are scientific questions, who and why are religious questions. Neither discipline has the tools to answer the questions of the other. The methods of science can not be used effectively to ascertain the truth about God and morality and the meaning of life, although some may try. Would anyone say that since we now understand the universe to have been created by the Big Bang as an inevitable result of gravitational forces, therefore God was not behind it? Oh? Science proves that, how? On the other hand, some religious people claim that human beings are not the result of evolutionary mutations that started with the earliest life forms on earth approximately 400 million years ago because the Bible teaches that all creation took place in only seven literal days and human beings were created directly from the dust of the earth by the hands of God. Oh? And does the Bible also teach us that we all have about three billion base pairs of DNA, one from our mother and one from our father and that we all have roughly sixty new mutations that were not present in either of our

parents? Albert Einstein had it about right. "Science," he wrote, "without religion is lame, religion without science is blind." (Collins)

In general, there seem to be two possible objections to certain points of science that some religious people have. One is that some things that science claims are simply not true and contradict the biblical message. The second is that emphasizing science and living with all the modern conveniences and medical palliatives that science brings, can turn our attention away from God or even cause us to think that God is no longer necessary.

An example of those who may not doubt the truth of science, but are rather concerned that the lifestyle changes it brings are inconsistent with faith-filled living, might be the Old Order Amish. For the Old Order Amish and those who think like them, modern conveniences are not to be avoided because the science behind them is mistaken, but rather because they might jeopardize our sense of dependence upon God and even our physical well-being. I disagree with the extent to which the Old Order Amish take that concern, but I do have a certain respect for the Amish. Being born and raised in Pennsylvania and having furthered my education in Lancaster County in which the Pennsylvania Amish reside, from what contact I have had with them and from what I have read about them, I believe that they are a most genuine people. They live, it seems to me, a lifestyle more authentic to their concerns than those who utilize all the benefits of scientific advances but then reject the scientific method when its discoveries refute creation happening in seven literal days or the earth being only ten thousand years old. The trouble with science for the Amish is its presumed utility, not its factuality. They believe that living a simple lifestyle, without modern conveniences, is consistent with the intent of God for our lives and best suited to both our spiritual and physical needs. For example, the Old Order Amish do not use electric light bulbs in their homes because they believe it is healthier and happier to be aware of light as a gift from God each day, and to be awake and work when the sun is up and sleep when the sun is down rather than to stay awake by electric light at night and sleep after the sun comes up in the morning. But they do not question that what science teaches about electricity is true.

Even while disagreeing with the extent of their discomfiture with modern conveniences, we might appreciate the Amish concern that the application of scientific discoveries is not necessarily good for people, or the planet, or both. This is why we have an Environmental Protection Department, and a Health Department, and a Food and Drug Administration. Think what we may about big government, and how regulations may sometimes go too far, would we really want to live without them at all. The Amish have no concern about asbestosis, or carbon monoxide poisoning in their basements from their oil burners, or harmful chemicals on or in their food. The basic idea we might share with them is that just because science can do something does not mean that it should be done. Applied science must be good for people. The earth needs to be able to endure it. Moral values need to be considered in relation to it and for people of faith morality is grounded in religion. Science needs religion in order to be helpful.

Of course, the tension between science and religion is not new, another reason to think that by now accommodation between the two would have been made in the minds of just about everyone. Francis Collins, in his book, *The Language of God*, a book which if you are intrigued by this subject I highly recommend, briefly traces the history of the controversy surrounding Galileo. Collins is a genetic scientist and a Christian who was a leader in the now successful effort to map the human genome. Collins writes that someone with

a sense of history might ask, “Haven’t we been to this movie before?” Conflicts between interpretation of scripture and scientific observations are not exactly new. In particular, the conflicts that arose in the seventeenth century between the Christian church and the science of astronomy provide some instructive context for the evolutionary debates of today. Galileo, with his self constructed telescope, observed four moons revolving around the planet Jupiter. That simple observation, which we take for granted, presented significant problems for the traditional Ptolemaic system, where all heavenly bodies were supposed to revolve around the earth. Galileo also observed sunspots, which represented a possible affront to the idea that all heavenly bodies were created perfect.

Galileo ultimately came to the conclusion that his observations could make sense only if the earth revolved around the sun. That placed him in direct conflict with the Catholic church.

While much of the traditional lore of Galileo’s persecution by the church is overblown, there is no question that his conclusions were received with alarm in many theological quarters... After much back and forth between Galileo and the church, he was ultimately... tried before the Roman inquisition in 1633 and forced to “abjure, curse, and detest” his own work. He remained under house arrest for the remainder of his life, and his publications were banned. Only in 1992—359 years after the trial—was an apology issued by Pope John Paul II... The Pope said... Galileo sensed in his scientific research the presence of the Creator who, stirring in the depths of his spirit, stimulated him, anticipating and assisting his intuitions. (Collins, 153-56)

One more quote, this one from a well known church father in the fourth century whom we know as St. Augustine. Reflecting on some of the anti-intellectual controversy circulating during his time he wrote,

The shame is not so much that an ignorant individual is derided, but the people outside the household of faith think our sacred writers held such opinions, and, to the great loss of those for whose salvation we toil, the writers of our scripture are criticized and rejected as unlearned men. If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well, and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they going to believe those books in matters about the resurrection of the

dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven, when they think their pages are full of falsehoods on facts which they themselves have learned from experience in the light of reason? (Collins, 157)

Galileo was a scientist and a believer. We can all be. “I do not feel obliged, he said, to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forego their use.” (Collins, 158) Yes, exactly.

Toward the end of his earthly days, our Lord had gathered the disciples together and said to them, *I still have many things to say to you, but you can not bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.* Note the phrase, ***all the truth***. It may well be argued that Jesus did not have scientific truth in mind when he said that, but still, ***all the truth***. Truth is truth, from whatever source it comes, and the One who said he **is** the truth said that the truth will set us free. So we need never be afraid of the truth. If it is true, it is God’s truth and we can welcome it and be thankful for it. We can let science be science, and God be God.

Collins, Francis S. “The Language of God”. New York: Free Press, 2006.