

# “The Marriage of Religion and Science”

Rev. Greg Ward

Unitarian Universalist Metro Atlanta North

October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2004

## **Meditation** (Chris Buice)

“Is that it?” This was my brother Bill’s response upon seeing me for the first time as a newborn baby fresh from the hospital. Apparently Mom and Dad had given me quite a buildup. “Won’t it be nice to have a little brother to play with?” Bill took one look at the blob in the blanket and decided he was unimpressed.

From day one I was a disappointment to my brother. It’s hardly surprising. It’s not easy becoming the big brother. One minute you are the star of the show, the center of attention. Then the baby arrives and demands room in the spotlight. Suddenly you are displaced. Your parents have to divide their attention between you and the newcomer to the house. It is easy to begin to resent the new baby. I had dislodged my brother from his familiar place in the larger scheme of things.

No one likes to discover that he or she is not the center of the universe. No one likes to be displaced. Just think about what happened to Copernicus. In 1543 Copernicus began to argue that the earth was not the center of the solar system. Based on astronomical observations and mathematical theory, he developed the idea that it was the earth that revolved around the sun, not the sun that revolved around the earth. No one appreciated him very much for his efforts. Nor did Galileo win many fans when he tried to spread these ideas. Galileo was tried for his heresy and forced to recant. It was not until 1992 that the Catholic Church admitted it had made a mistake by condemning him. Talk about your slow progress!!

Sooner or later each one of us is forced to acknowledge that we are not the center of the cosmos. We inhabit a world with other people, plants and animals. We dwell in a universe with other stars, planets, and galaxies. At some point we are challenged to grow beyond our self centeredness. This process is sometimes painful. Whoever helps us to learn this lesson usually doesn’t win any popularity contests. The day I was born I became the bearer of unwelcome news to my brother. I, on the other hand, did not have a younger sibling to teach me this truth. Suffice it to say that with four elder siblings, there were plenty of opportunities to learn humility.

## **Sermon:**

Differing opinions. Disagreements. Bickering. Misunderstandings. Hurt feelings. Frustrations. The digging in of heels. Drawing of lines in the sand. The setting up of antagonists and protagonists. Good and evil. This is the story of most battles. Left unresolved it is the story of how battles escalate into wars.

And we’ve all seen these wars being waged. Most of us have probably been in a few of them. But much more often, what seems true is that we often find ourselves watching from the sidelines when battles break out. We watch with raised eyebrows when the first grenade is tossed. Then each side lobbies for support and pretty soon it is a skirmish between groups. Left untended, hostilities can spread to national concerns. We shake our heads, often thinking to ourselves that it’s all so unnecessary. That it is all avoidable. The differences are not irreconcilable.

“Things would be different if I was in charge,” I’ve often thought. I’d make sure there was fairness. Objectivity. A rational exchange of perspectives and feelings. And listening. And when necessary, I’d be honest and courageous and tell it like it is. “You want to know what your problem is?” I’d ask them.

And they'd say, 'please tell us, Greg, we'd really like to know what our problems are. Could you please list them for us. Start with our individual problems first. And don't leave any out.'" And they would really mean it.

As long as we're talking about fantasies, let me extend this improbability a little bit further. Imagine, for a moment, that an alternate world existed. A world which we had all the same people and all the same problems. But a world in which a different paradigm was in operation. A paradigm which put us, and our ideas, at the top of the mountain of respect and influence. A world so different that before George Bush made a decision in Iraq, before Ashcroft made a decision about restricting our freedoms, before Pat Robertson addressed the 700 club, before Bill Gates addressed stockholders, or MIT allocated it's budget – they all stopped. Before deciding anything, they'd scratched their heads and say aloud, 'I wonder what the Unitarians would think about this?'

We're talking twilight zone here, but stay with me. So respected and revered would be the Unitarian reputation for wisdom and counsel that lines would appear to hear our thoughts. And to increase efficiency, the problems of the world would be distributed evenly among our 1100 congregations.

Chief on the docket of UUMAN would be marriage counseling. And, in particular, we would have one prominent case to deal with. A nasty, contentious couple known for arguments of immense proportion. In the marriage of religion and science, she had a reputation of being bossy, righteous and mouthy. He was known to be unfeeling, patronizing and critical. There were moments of civility, but their blowups were so horrific that many of their friends preferred to see them individually rather than together, as a couple. Their marriage was on the rocks. And UUMAN was called in to cut through the conflict.

So, what do you do?

Even though we might think we had a good sense of the conflict, and who was at fault, we would use the skills that gave us our good reputation and start by gathering as much information as we could before calling them into the office. We might begin looking into their history and get to know their individual stories as well as the prominent conflicts they've experienced.

The first thing we notice, when looking at their file, is their Meyer's Briggs type. No shocker – they are on opposite ends of the spectrum on almost every category. Where religion has a tendency to be extroverted and relational, Science is often introverted and impersonal. Where Science is sensory – always looking for objective physical evidence, Religion is intuitive and subjective. Where Religion is feeling, Science is thinking. And whereas both can be quite opinionated and stubborn, Science leans toward sticking to the plan and conclusive deductions, and religion seems prone to differences in perspective, interpretation and direction. We stop to realize that, despite our own tendencies and leanings, neither of the approaches is the correct approach. And neither is incorrect. Just very different methods of gathering information and making conclusions.

The file leads us to believe that there is really nothing inherently flawed in either. Both of them operate from noble ideals. A desire to make sense of things. But, clearly, with all the fighting, something is amiss. Somewhere, one is behaving quite below where they are capable.

So we look into their history of conflict and see if we can identify the problems and flaws. We don't have to look too hard. Two major fights show up where the police had to be called. There are several clippings from the paper describing the incidents.

The first was an incident involving a man named Galileo. The second with a man named Scopes. They

were both cases where one side got a little high minded and started to harass the other just because their authority was challenged. In the case of Galileo – back in 1642 - even when one side seemed so clearly pig headed and stubborn, it wasn't until 1992 that any apology emerged – about 350 years after the event.

We seem to remember this case. Didn't we learn in elementary school that Galileo tried to tell the church that it was the sun – not the earth – that was the center of the cosmos. That the official church didn't like this – considered it blasphemous, and persecuted Galileo, threw him in the dungeon until he died – end of story. Just about everyone has heard the story. So, even though it may seem perfunctory, we Unitarian Universalists were put in charge because we are both thorough and open minded, so we read on. And we learn a few things.

In the case of Galileo, we find out he was an astronomer who lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. At that time, the prevailing theory of the cosmos came from Aristotle – that all the heavens orbited the earth – the true center of the universe. Galileo did believe differently. But his ideas were not particularly original. He was building on the ideas made known by Copernicus (who actually took *his* idea from Pythagoras) that advocated for a heliocentric model – the belief that the sun, not the earth, was the center of the universe.

We read more and discover that Galileo was the prototypical renaissance man – a brilliant scientist, mathematician and musician. But while he was intelligent, charming and witty, he was also argumentative, mocking and vain. He was, as we would say, complex. His great Achilles heel was that he would not allow himself to be upstaged by men who weren't as smart as he was. And, for Galileo, that included just about everybody.

When he observed discrepancies in Aristotle's theories he was not shy about pointing out the errors. His own ideas did not have enough evidence to be proven, but instead of collecting data to support his theories, he used what information he had to try to ridicule the Aristotelian model.

Although this meant challenging the accepted views of the church, the church took it rather well, saying they would continue to be interested in his new theories as new evidence came in. Where Galileo's claims didn't go over so well was with the society of academics – his fellow scientists. Here, it is important to remember that most institutions of learning, at that time, were associated – at least paid for and housed – by religious institutions. It was the scientists that took umbrage to Galileo's arrogance. And they were quick to disprove Galileo's ideas whenever possible - including his assertion that the planets rotate the sun in perfect circles.

Where Galileo got into real trouble was in taking his fight out of the realm of science and into theology. He began to use many of his cosmological theories to reinterpret and re-write scripture. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, people who caused a fuss for either the church or the emperor were often called before the inquisition, which Galileo eventually was. He wasn't thrown into prison. Rather, he was treated politely like the dignitary and man of influence he was. He was, however, told in short: put up or shut up. Either show proof of his theories or stop re-interpreting theology.

Galileo responded by trying to point to the ocean's tides as proof of the earth's motion around the sun. The idea was not only scientifically inaccurate, but so silly that even his supporters mocked him. This did not sit well for Galileo's pride.

His next tact was to gain an audience with the Pope who ruled to dismiss all his theories because they were theologically inconsistent with scripture. Although this verdict was quickly overruled by the Cardinals of the church, it only exacerbated Galileo's determination.

But a new Pope came to power – a former friend of Galileo’s and someone who was quite knowledgeable in math and science. Another attempt was made to sway authority to his view. But Pope Urban VIII was also unconvinced and even offered a rebuttal (though not a very sound one) to Galileo’s theories

Undeterred, Galileo wrote a response called, “*A Dialogue About the Two Chief World Systems*” in which he would present three characters – one explaining the heliocentric model named Salviati, one presenting the earth-centered model named Simplicio, and one who character who was undecided. Here Galileo made his biggest blunder: he took the words that Pope Urban had used to refute his theory of the tides and put them in the mouths of Simplicio. The name Simplicio translates as “Simpleton.”

The Pope was not amused.

We watch with raised eyebrows when the first grenade is tossed. A skirmish becomes a battle. A battle becomes a war. We shake our heads. It’s all so unnecessary, we think. So avoidable.

Galileo, was, by this time, old and sick. He was for the second time called before the Inquisition. Unlike most suspected heretics, though, he was treated surprisingly well. While waiting for his trial, Galileo was housed in a luxurious apartment overlooking the Vatican gardens and provided with a personal valet.

The inquisition condemned Galileo as being ‘vehemently suspected of heresy.’ Not exactly fair since the heliocentric theory had never been declared as heretical. His sentence was to renounce his theory and live out the rest of his days in a pleasant country house near Florence. Obviously the exile did him good because it was there, under the care of his daughter, that he continued his experiments and published his most influential work, “Discourses on Two New Sciences.” He died quietly in 1642 at the ripe old age of 77.

Years later, Alfred North Whitehead wrote of the account saying, “In a generation which saw the Thirty Years’ War and [saw the mass killing] by Alva in the Netherlands, the worst that happened to men of science was that Galileo suffered an honorable detention and a mild reproof, before dying peacefully in his bed.”

Not exactly the account we remember hearing. So, with an open mind we turn our attention to the Scopes case. Otherwise known as the Scopes Monkey Trial. The famous courtroom decision regarding John Scopes, the substitute teacher who was accused and tried of teaching evolution in the public schools, a practice still illegal in 1925 Tennessee schools. The story we are often familiar with is that of William Jennings Bryan as being a fundamentalist zealot trying to banish the theories of Darwin because they were a threat to the dominant and prevailing Christian doctrine.

While this may be partly true – and it may also be true that Bryan – who held aspirations toward the US presidency under the democratic ticket – was simply prosecuting the Scopes case to keep his name in the public spotlight. Yet it is also true that his arguments were not without merit. He argued, “what kind of society can we expect to become if we accept as our story, ‘the survival of the fittest?’ If that is who we are, then who cares for the poor? Who cares for the weak, the disabled, the needy, the disenfranchised? Is it our choice that we ‘evolve’ into a society where these obligations to care for the less fortunate are dismissed and forgotten? Do we want to become a society where no one listens when people cry to be heard?”

People are crying to be heard. Even fighting to be heard. Differing opinions. Disagreements. Misunderstandings. Hurt feelings. The digging in of heels. Drawing of lines in the sand. The setting up of sides. This is the story of most battles. Left unresolved it is the story of how battles escalate into wars.

It can happen between friends. Even groups. Or countries. And it can happen in ideologies – like science and religion. We shake our heads, often thinking to ourselves how unnecessary it all is. That the battles are all avoidable. That the differences are not irreconcilable. But there they are.

If science and religion were to come in for marriage counseling what would we say? I know I present it as a far fetched fantasy. That people would actually come to the Unitarians to decide this. But, really, when it comes right down to it, who better to reconcile these two schools of thought but a group of people who are dedicated to being both rational and religious? Who are seekers of truth both within our internal heart and mind and our external reality? Who are both relational and empirical? Who can speak the language of both? If science and religion are in search of a place to come together, I can't think of any better group of people to help them do so.

We might be the only ones who could recognize that science is really much more than 'survival of the fittest'. And that religion is much more than those seeking to be the chosen people of the one true God. And we might also be able to recognize that, even the best of us don't always live up to our ideals.

I have been a religious professional for 10 years now. But before that I was a scientist. My undergraduate work is in biochemistry and physics. I worked as a pharmaceutical engineer for 7 years.

I know how religion – at its ideal – is the pursuit of truth by pursuing love. But I also know how bossy and self-righteous people of religion are capable of being. When I took a public stand and respectfully argued at the Cobb County School board against creationism being taught as science in the public schools, a woman told me as I was leaving that never, before me, had she met a follower of Satan. This woman, I'm sure, would have considered herself a religious person. But what she did could, in no way, be construed as a pursuit of love.

I know science – at its ideal – is the pursuit of truth by pursuing knowledge. But, as a pharmaceutical scientist, it was impossible not to notice how blatantly many companies tried to pad or skew results in order to steer toward grant money or to get products out on the market – without regard for proper methodology, or obtaining all possible information of efficacy or safety. Although I was a scientist, I would not always describe my previous career as an impartial pursuit of knowledge.

The story of Galileo, the story of the Scopes trial – indeed, the story of science and religion throughout history – is a story of two bodies with lofty ideals who all too often fall short of living up to them. What gets in the way is a struggle for power. A struggle to be heard. A struggle to keep from being knocked off the pedestal of importance – reverence, respect and validation. Everyone needs some time where they are the center of the universe. But the truth is, that whenever we come close enough to the truth that we actually begin to think we are the center – that we actually become so full of ourselves that we begin to say things like, 'would you like to know what your problem is?' then we are suddenly as far away from the actual center as we ever get. Because the real truth – whether it involves love or knowledge - is without ego. And whether we are in science or religion, ego is a hard thing to avoid.

Science and religion come into our office after a big fight. What do we do? As with any relationship that has struggled, we first acknowledge the gifts they each have as well as the hurt that has occurred. We resist the urge to tell them 'we know what their problem is' while assuring them they are more than what they have been. And we thank our lucky stars that they are still together, toughing it out.

Because in this world where truth is never allowed to represent itself, but is only ushered forward by imperfect ambassadors, we depend upon both sides showing up. We need both love and knowledge to

play a part. As Albert Einstein once said “Science without religion is reckless. Religion without science is blind.”

If religion and science ever came here looking for help, what would we say? How about, ‘welcome.’ How about letting them know that here, in this church, each of them will be heard. Each will have a place. Each of them is important if the whole truth is ever to come out.

To the Glory of Life.