

# Science and Religion

## A Unitarian Universalist Perspective

*Helen Lutton Cohen*

Stem cell research, reproductive technology, cloning, death with dignity, ever faster and more complex means of communication—the successes of science help us to understand ourselves and our world and make many new things possible, but they also challenge our sense of what it is to be human beings, our ethical understanding, and our priorities.

Though the popular media often presents these questions as science vs. religion, Unitarian Universalists have historically viewed science and religion as compatible. Growing up in the First Unitarian Congregational Church of Cincinnati, Ohio, I was proud that members of my religious faith embraced knowledge of all kinds, were ready to learn and change, and wanted to hold an understanding of the nature of the universe (their theology, I would call it) in harmony with the latest scientific understandings.

One of my favorite Sunday School curricula was Sophia Lyons Fahs' *How Miracles Abound*, which explored everything from leaves to the solar system and celebrated our world and our ability to learn about it. My first truly spiritual experience, I think, was looking at the solar system that my Sunday School teacher had drawn on the blackboard and feeling both overwhelmed and lifted up; I was beginning to grasp the immensity of things, my own smallness, and a sense that I was “held” by the immensity.

### Embracing Science

In order to understand ourselves as a religious movement, to know our roots, we need to understand how vital to its formation this openness to science and all new knowledge was. Both Unitarianism and Universalism emerged out of Calvinist Protestantism at the end of the eighteenth century, embracing the sense of human possibility, progress, and reason that had developed during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Our movement was founded in the context of a growing curiosity and optimism about the world. We believed with Unitarian minister Samuel Longfellow that “revelation is not sealed.”

Scientist and theologian Joseph Priestley, one of the British founders of Unitarianism, said,

Let us examine every thing with the greatest freedom, without any regard to consequences, which, though we cannot distinctly see, we may assure ourselves will be such as we shall have abundant cause to rejoice in. . . . We scruple not to plant trees for the benefit of posterity. Let us likewise sow the seeds of truth for them. . . . Distrust all those who require you to abandon [reason], wherever religion is concerned.

Unitarians and Universalists alike worked to adapt their religious understanding to the growing, sometimes astounding discoveries of astronomy, geology, and biology.

But even for nineteenth-century Unitarians and Universalists, there were questions about the proper use of science: Would it destroy religious faith? Does it neglect or dismiss the spirit? Can its discoveries undermine as well as support human morality? The first great Unitarian preacher, William Ellery Channing, passionate advocate for reason and education that he was, wrote,

In truth, nothing is more characteristic of our age than the vast range of inquiry which is opening more and more to the multitude of men. Thought frees the old bounds to which men used to confine themselves. It holds nothing too sacred for investigation. . . . Undoubtedly this is a perilous tendency. Men forget the limits of their powers. They question the infinite, the unsearchable, with an audacious self-reliance. They shock pious and revering minds, and rush into an extravagance of doubt more unphilosophical and foolish than the weakest credulity.

In addition, over these two centuries, groups have risen up within our movement that have found science inadequate and sometimes arrogant in its limited picture of what is true. Transcendentalists, Unitarian Universalist Christians, feminists, and recent advocates of spirituality have argued that science ignores the immeasurable truths of the spirit. A divide has arisen in Unitarian Universalism between deductive and intuitive approaches to truth, leading many to question whether science and religion are always compatible.

### **The Challenge of the Twentieth Century**

A general acceptance of science, and of the technology it makes possible, continued to grow among us, however, well into the twentieth century, along with a belief in the goodness of human nature and its continuing improvement through education. These beliefs led to the bold Unitarian affirmation of progress onward and upward forever. In the mid-twentieth century, the theologian Henry Nelson Wieman argued in *The Source of Human Good* that science and technology will eventually solve the major problems facing humankind.

But at that same moment, human beings were facing the horrors of twentieth-century technology made possible by science. The great Universalist minister Clarence Skinner wrote in 1947,

We have seen in Europe how education can be prostituted and made to serve the ends of destruction. . . . Our culture has trusted too much in facts. It has let science go where it will, serving heathen gods. But we are suffering for our sins. We are enslaved in an age of enlightenment because our enlightenment is not total. We are one-eyed philosophers and have lost the ability to see more than one thing at a time.

At the end of his essay, Skinner concluded, “Righteousness must be founded on truth. It must square with reality. It must harmonize with what we know of the universe. But truth must be righteous. It must serve the good and not the evil. It must seek the Kingdom of Ends. It must serve the moral law.” He was clear, as Channing was, that the scientific search for provable facts and their applications should be guided by our ethical understanding.

Human nature has not changed significantly, and it can still turn any tool or cause to evil. Science cannot be our religion. We need all our ways of knowing—love, reason, experiment, history, psychology, ethical understandings developed through human history—to figure out how to live our lives. We need them all to decide if something is good or bad, whether it is done in the name of science, religion, patriotism, or any other worthy but limited allegiance.

### **Learning and Wonder**

I continue to believe passionately that science and religion are compatible. Individually we may be more comfortable with one approach or another, but we can still recognize that any one approach is limited and needs others. We can rejoice in what they accomplish together.

One meaning of unitarianism is the belief that all that exists is ultimately one, whatever form it takes: matter and energy, body and soul, mind and heart, all living and non-living things, deduction and intuition, emotion and intellect, love and reason, science and religion. We may prioritize our loyalties by the things we feel closest to, but then we use our reason to remember that we are all one. The Big Bang, while we cannot claim it as proven scientific fact, is a metaphor that harmonizes with a belief in unity.

Universalism entails a belief that everything belongs. Science has uncovered enough about genetics to show us that we belong together within the human family, among primates, among all living things, among the stars. We are at once so small and so securely held by and connected with a vastness beyond our comprehension. I felt as a child, and I feel now, the attachment between me and each thing I encounter. In some sense, I love the whole world. God is in the details. When we live in the world with this understanding, there are few simple answers and fewer absolutes. We must be ready to open our minds and hearts to change, however convinced we are. We must also be ready to act, according to our best understandings and with humility.

Science and religion together reveal to us a world of wonder. They make us grateful to be part of it, even in the face of the fear, pain, loss, and evil that are also part of it. So it is that the Unitarian poet minister Robert Terry Weston wrote, at the end of his poem on the evolution of the universe,

This is the wonder of time; this is the marvel of space; out of the stars swung the earth;  
life upon earth rose to love. This is the marvel of life, rising to see and to know; Out of  
your heart, cry wonder: sing that we live.

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