

## “Science and Religion: A Match Made in Heaven”

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In the year 1925, America was a different place. It was only five years previous that women had won the right to vote for the president of the United States. Louis Armstrong was playing jazz in Chicago. Virginia Woolf had just published *Mrs. Dalloway*. The world’s first-ever motel opened in Monterey, California.<sup>1</sup> And in April 1925, a young teacher named John Scopes discussed the theory of evolution with his high-school biology students in Tennessee.

As a high-school student myself sixty-some years later, in Minnesota, I studied the famous “Scopes Monkey Trial” that ensued. I learned about the great Clarence Darrow, the liberal defense lawyer—who, by the way, regularly attended a Unitarian church in Chicago<sup>2</sup>—and I learned about William Jennings Bryan, the conservative Christian who prosecuted John Scopes for undermining the teachings of the Bible. My high-school class watched the movie version of *Inherit the Wind*, the play based on the trial. It renames the lawyers as “Brady” and “Drummond,” but they’re clearly meant to represent Bryan and Darrow.

And, watching the movie, I cringed when Drummond asked Brady to speculate on the geological age of a rock, and Brady replied he is more interested in the Rock of Ages than the Age of Rocks.<sup>3</sup> I thrilled to Drummond’s passionate speech in praise of the power and freedom of the human mind. “In a child’s power to master the multiplication tables,” he cried, “there is more sanctity than in all your shouted ‘Amens!’, ‘Holy, Holies!’, and ‘Hosannahs!’”<sup>4</sup> And in my heart *I* shouted

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://din-timelines.com/1925\\_timeline.shtml](http://din-timelines.com/1925_timeline.shtml).

<sup>2</sup> See [http://www.famousu.us.com/bios/clarence\\_darrow.htm](http://www.famousu.us.com/bios/clarence_darrow.htm) (accessed on April 6, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, *Inherit the Wind* (New York: Bantam, 1975), p. 84.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence and Lee, p. 83.

“Amen!” to Drummond’s humanism because it mirrored what I believed. I was convinced that religion wasn’t good for much except standing in the way of freedom of thought and scientific progress.

Flash forward to today, and we’re *still* arguing about how to teach natural history. I know better now that lots of religious people do accept the theory of evolution very comfortably. But some don’t, and some of *those* people are in our government. Every reputable scientist alive today agrees that the Grand Canyon is millions of years old. But if you go there and ask a park ranger how old the canyon is, you won’t get a straight answer. The Bush administration has forbidden park rangers at the Grand Canyon to give an official estimate when people ask them how old the canyon is. Meanwhile, one book for sale at the Grand Canyon actually claims the canyon was formed by the great flood in the time of Noah.<sup>5</sup>

This calls for a response. So, this month, we are joining over 500 congregations around the country, of many different denominations, who are declaring in their worship and their educational programs that science and religion are not enemies.

You’d think that by now we wouldn’t have to defend the revolutionary idea of evolution. But for a lot of Americans, science and religion are still enemies. Many people are trying to defend one or the other, taking sides and arguing which one should dominate. But where has all that arguing gotten us? Nowhere very helpful. It’s familiar territory to me, though. My dad is a psychoanalyst, and so of course *I* learned early on that Freud thought religion was a nice little neurotic delusion for folks who were too weak to get along without it. And since Freud was practically God for the psychoanalytic folks, I figured, well, he must be right!

Then I got to high school and started studying chemistry and physics, and that put another nail into my coffin of skepticism about religion.

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<sup>5</sup> “Quack Science,” *Christian Century* January 23, 2007, p. 7.

Here was this world of science that opened up for me, with the little models of atoms and molecules and interlocking electrons, and the cute little two-letter codes for the elements, and the laws about how gravity worked, and the Doppler effect, and why levers made it easier to lift things. I loved this world. It made sense.

And the way we learned it in high school, those little atoms explained everything about everything, really. We went back to the Big Bang and learned about how everything that exists came from that tremendous explosion, and how science is advancing so that we know more and more about how we got from there to here. In that world of ever-progressing knowledge, who needed some old guy named God to explain anything? Maybe I wondered now and then about what happened *before* the Big Bang, and how all that matter got there in the first place. But we never talked about it in class, and I didn't really have anyplace to take those wonderings.

Meanwhile, what I thought of as that "old guy named God" entered my life in a roundabout way when a wave of conversions to born-again Christianity hit my high school in 10th grade. One after another, a bunch of kids at my school became born-again Christians. One of them, a sweet, gentle girl, didn't hesitate to tell the rest of us, when we asked, that she was truly sorry but she was afraid she did believe we were all going to hell if we didn't convert. She was really nice about it, but still I found it disturbing!

As for the rest of them, it's true that they seemed happier, really at peace and smiling a lot. But it seemed so weird that they actually believed that I was going to hell. I remember feeling kind of jealous of their peace of mind and that inner glow they seemed to have, but also convinced that what was doing it for them was not going to do it for me. Since I had never gone to church, I figured this was what *all* religion was. And I said, no thanks. For me, science and religion had nothing in common.

Well, things have changed in my world, and maybe in yours too. I will always be grateful to have found Unitarian Universalism, not least because it shows us how to honor both religion and science. In our statement of Principles and Purposes, we tell the world that, among other religious traditions, we honor “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.”

As a religious movement we’ve always been guided by reason in thinking about the big questions like, “Who or what is God? Is there a God? Is the Bible true? And how do I know what to believe?” We have always said flat out that the Bible is a human book, written by human beings, and we need to use our reason to interpret it just as we would with any other book. We aren’t afraid to use our brains and follow our thoughts wherever they lead us.

We’ve welcomed scientific knowledge too. The theory of evolution really doesn’t pose a problem for us. Guided by science, we can read the book of Genesis and say, when God creates the light, that is a lovely symbolic way of talking about the sun and the stars and how much we need light to live. When God creates the waters, and then the dry land, that reminds us of how life began in the sea, “Life from the sea, warmed by sun, washed by rain,” in the words of the reading we shared, and then how life crept little by little onto the land. And when God creates the sea creatures and the birds and the insects and the reptiles and the mammals and finally the people, we say, how amazing that the theory of evolution says, yes, the fish came first, and then the birds, and then the mammals, and we only came to exist very late in the story! Isn’t it amazing that Genesis and Darwin are telling just the same story, only in a different language!

For us, science and religion are dear friends. Most of the time it’s easy to embrace that “Principles and Purposes” statement that we “heed the guidance of reason and the results of science.”

How about that next piece, though? What about those “idolatries of the mind and spirit” that we’re warned against? When the “Principles and Purposes” statement was written back in 1985, I imagine that most people were thinking of traditional religious doctrines that felt too narrow to us, like my high-school notion that God was an old guy, or the idea that if you don’t accept Jesus as your personal savior, you’re going to hell. In my view, those *are* idolatries. On the other hand, we have to be careful not to let science itself become a form of idolatry for us. When I got turned off by my buddies’ born-again religion, I assumed that’s all religion was, and I decided to be one of those tough and rugged folks Freud talked about who didn’t need the so-called illusion of religion to make it through life.

The thing is, though, I did need it! As soon as I encountered Unitarian Universalism and got exposed to a different kind of religion, one that told me I didn’t have to leave behind what I already believed, I drank it up, in huge big gulps, just like a fish that hadn’t even known I was out of water.

In retrospect, I understand why I was so thirsty for something more than *just* science. The thing about science is that it can only understand what it can empirically observe and measure. In fact, from a scientific perspective, if you can’t physically, materially observe something, for all practical purposes it’s simply not there. If our entire worldview is shaped only by science, then we are living in a material world of time and space, and that’s it. When our time on earth is done, then we’re done too, as far as we know. That may be true. We don’t know for sure.

But religions throughout human history, in every age and every culture, have always told us that there’s more to life than just what we can see and hear and touch. Every religion has told us, in a million ways that differ from place to place, that we *are* bodies, but we’re more than *just* bodies. We’re consciousness, we are spirit, we are life energy, we are divine, we are *something more* than what science tells us we are.

Today, many people in our culture are trying to live without this sense of “something more,” and finding it rough going. What are we supposed to do with our dearest and deepest hopes? For the first time in human history, some of us in this culture don’t *dare* to harbor the hope of life after death.<sup>6</sup> Some of us don’t dare to name our experiences of grace and mystery and awe, even to ourselves. Some of us don’t even dare to *hope* that we are loved by the power that gave us life.

In this kind of culture, we in this religious community have such a mission to fulfill. We may never embrace the kind of faith that captured the hearts of my high-school classmates. But we can proclaim a religion that says, we believe in science, and we believe in more than that too. We’re proud to claim that great liberal lawyer Clarence Darrow, defender of evolution and freedom of thought, as a member of our religious tradition. We’re proud to read Genesis and claim it as sacred myth. We see the chain of evolution that started with a tiny cell and produced *us*, and we say, “Cry wonder that we live!”

And yet...and yet...I wonder if we can also find some compassion for poor William Jennings Bryan, the man who railed and thundered against Darwin’s theory of evolution. Would it surprise you if I told you that Bryan was also a great populist? All his life he stood up for causes that we would be proud to be associated with today. He fought for women’s suffrage and for a progressive income tax. He lobbied for a federal program to insure bank deposits, to protect ordinary people. He preached consistently against American imperialism.<sup>7</sup> He was certainly not perfect; he had a permanent blind spot where race was concerned and never saw African-Americans as equals. But he was in many ways a good man, a thoughtful and compassionate and, yes, *liberal* man.

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<sup>6</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “In the Beginning of Creation Was Consciousness,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* Fall/Winter 2003, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, “William Jennings Bryan’s Last Campaign,” *Bully for Brontosaurus* (New York: Norton, 1991), p. 417.

So what happened? What was so wrong about evolution for this progressive politician?

What if I told you that the textbook John Scopes used in that biology class wasn't Darwin's own *Origin of Species*, but rather a textbook called *A Civic Biology*, which presented the theory of evolution and used it to endorse the eugenic idea that epileptics and mentally retarded people should be sterilized?<sup>8</sup> At that time, the theory of evolution was being misused to argue that rich people were simply the "fittest," poor people were proven "unfit" exactly by virtue of their poverty, and anyone who was labeled weak or deviant might not even deserve to live. One line from Scopes's textbook actually reads as follows: "Hundreds of families...exist today, spreading disease, immorality and crime....Just as certain animals or plants become parasitic on other plants or animals, these families have become parasitic on society....If such people were lower animals, we would probably kill them off to prevent them from spreading."<sup>9</sup>

Well! Given that context, is it really so surprising that William Jennings Bryan, the champion of the common person, thought that the teaching of evolution was sinister? Bryan really had a point. Yes, he took the Bible more literally than any of us would today. But he also shared *our* passion for justice and equity for *all* people, not just the strong and the wealthy. He didn't want to trade his faith in the God of justice and compassion for what he saw in evolution—a fatalistic acceptance of "might makes right."<sup>10</sup>

Bryan didn't have it all figured out—he couldn't understand that Darwin's theory of evolution was separate from and better than the way it was being applied. But Clarence Darrow didn't have it all figured out either. In his zeal to defend scientific freedom, he didn't see what Bryan

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<sup>8</sup> "The Evolution-Creationism Controversy: A Chronology," at <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/scopes/scopeschrono.html> (accessed on April 6, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> George William Hunter, *Civic Biology* (1914), quoted in Gould, p. 429.

<sup>10</sup> See Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (New York: Knopf, 2006), pp. 294–95.

was afraid of losing—compassion for the weak, gratitude toward the forces of life, and an awareness of mystery in the world.

Eighty years later we've come to know a little better on both sides. Now I like to imagine those two great men shaking hands and saying to one another, "Yes, I see what you mean. I see what you mean." Science and religion, embracing, at peace. May it be so in our lives and in the life of our nation.

Amen and blessed be.