

Science, Technology, and Religion VII

Science and the Search for Meaning

Peter Morales

We affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” This simple proposition, which could serve as the motto of any scientific society, secular organization, or humanist group, is in fact one of the seven principles that guide the Unitarian Universalist religion.

Unitarian Universalism was formed in 1961 through the merger of two different religions, Unitarianism and Universalism—the first a Christian heresy, the second at least unorthodox, if not also heretical. Unitarianism rejects Trinitarian theology, and Universalism asserts the salvation of all. Historically, Unitarians and Universalists stood up for what they believed, even at the expense of their personal safety. Likewise, Unitarian Universalists are committed to truth and meaning to this day.

It is perhaps surprising that a religious organization would hold as one of its deepest convictions the “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” After all, for many religions, truth, or at least what is true about the most important matters, is given by a set of sacred texts or traditions that members accept as a matter of faith. At least in this somewhat stereotypical view of religious thought, the truth about the highest or most important things cannot be sought—it is only given by authority. Scientific truth, on the other hand, is constantly changing. That is to say, what people know to be true changes as new information comes to light and ideas are challenged by new findings.

It is understandable, then, that religion and science have had a conflict or two over the years. Many religious traditions have taught us that we human beings are God’s most glorious creation in the physical universe and that Earth is therefore properly at its center. Science suggests instead that we are the accidental outcome of a process of evolution that had neither us nor anything else in mind and that our geocentric perspective is an illusion. We have here two radically different conceptions of the human condition and of humanity’s place in the cosmos. And therefore it should come as no surprise that many people believe they have to make a choice between a religious and a scientific worldview.

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What to make of science is a fundamental issue facing religious traditions in our time. Science has become an overwhelming challenge to traditional ways of viewing the world and our place in it. But for faith to be whole, for it to encompass the whole of our lived experience with the world, we must come to terms with science and what science teaches us.

As Unitarian Universalists, we recognize that science and religion share a common wellspring. They both arise from the human need to cope with life, to make life comprehensible, controllable, and meaningful. Indeed, we are all scientists. We all search for knowledge about the world, a way to make sense of our experiences and to give our lives meaning. Sometimes we get it right, sometimes we learn that we were wrong. But our knowledge is never disinterested, as it always grows from our personal urge to make meaning of experience. We are scientists because we search for truth about our world.

Science is the discipline that can give us answers to the search for facts about the world around us. These questions can run the gamut of the myriad everyday questions that are relatively easy to answer—How much does this rock weigh? What kinds of things will a magnet pick up? But it also includes questions that are enormously complex and difficult—How old is the universe? How did human beings get here? What is the mass of the Higgs Boson? But all of these questions have something in common: we can answer them. We can gather evidence, study it, compare answers, and choose the answer that best fits our experience.

Science is based on a radically democratic way of knowing, in the sense that scientific truth is comprised of the things we can all experience—not on private experiences, accessible only to putatively gifted individuals. Another way of saying the same thing is that, at least in principle, science does not ask us to take its conclusions on faith or on authority. Science is about what is objective and repeatable; scientific truth needs to be equally true for everyone everywhere. A pound is a pound the world around. The charge of an electron and the mass of the top quark are the same everywhere. When we look through a backyard telescope, Jupiter has four visible moons when you look at it and when I look at it, just as it did when Galileo looked at it through his primitive telescope. The latest data suggest that the universe is 13.82 billion years old. This is the case whether we like it or not. The speed of light appears to be the universal speed limit even for those who would like to zip along at warp nine. The mass of the top quark according to the most recent measurements is 173.09 billion electron volts whether your theory predicted it or not. We are the products of the same biological evolution that produced monkeys,

manatees, and mangoes. That's just the way it is, and ultimately, science is an attempt to understand those parts of human experience that are unarguably true for all of us.

Meaning Beyond Science

But Unitarian Universalists affirm the search for both truth *and* meaning. If we are scientists in search of truth, we are also theologians in search of meaning. While science and religion both arise from our need to cope with experience, science and religion are responses to fundamentally different questions. Science can help us discover the truth about our world, but religion can help us give that truth meaning.

Even as science continues to teach us more and more about what is, to penetrate many of the fundamental questions about the universe, people are still searching for a way to apply those truths to their lives in a way that is emotionally or spiritually fulfilling. Part of the reason for the gap between scientific knowledge and meaningful experience of it is that the passion and wonder and awe that science ought to inspire is too often suppressed or ignored in the way we teach and talk about science. But the problem goes beyond that. There is a human hunger for meaning that science does not address. After we know all there is to know about the world, we still must answer the question: "so what?"

Questions about meaning are not scientific questions. The issue of what will make your life or mine meaningful is not a question that lends itself to controlled measurement. In this case, there are no correct and incorrect answers, no objective propositional statements.

Indeed, the answer we seek is not "out there," but rather in our hearts and in our families and in our communities. Meaning in life does not exist unless we create it; it is our individual and collective response to what we have learned about the world. We develop rituals and religions, form families and communities, join together and drift apart in order to find purpose and meaning for our lives.

I believe that hunger for meaning is the source for the renewed interest we have witnessed in recent decades in ritual, in spiritual practices such as meditation, and in traditional religious imagery. This coincides with recent findings that the number of people in the United States who consider themselves religiously unaffiliated is growing, while a majority of them still "describe themselves either as a religious person (18 percent) or as spiritual but not religious (37 percent)." People are seeking something that science does not give them. This is not a criticism of science.

To criticize science for not satisfying our emotional and spiritual need for meaning is like criticizing a circle for not having corners.

Religion, at its best and most profound and most enduring, has been humanity's way of collecting and transmitting wisdom about the meaning of life from one generation to the next. Religious rituals, rites of passage, moral teachings, images, and stories—especially stories—are ways of creating meaning together and sharing it. Religion can teach us about the kinds of things worth committing ourselves to: community, family, compassion, justice, the natural world, beauty.

Before science, religion filled the vacuum created by ignorance and created stories to explain the truth about the world—myths about creation and humanity's origin. But over the long march of the history of science, humanity has sought to fill that vacuum, to learn more about the world and to discover how it works. Science is indeed a spectacular achievement. The scientific truths of life are amazing, beautiful, and awesome. But only we can decide how to react to them, how to apply those wondrous insights to our own lives.

We are all intensely aware of the potential for conflict between science and religion. But that potential conflict does not define us or our journeys. We can know and face the truth—what scientific endeavors try to prove—and then move on to define our own meaning. We have choices to make. We still have to fashion lives that can channel our passion and our compassion. That is our religious task—individually and communally to create lives filled with meaning and lives consistent with what we love most deeply.

Search Together

Finally, I want to draw attention to one more aspect of that deceptively simple principle: “we affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” As Unitarian Universalists, we do not merely accept truth and provide the space for people to create meaning. We actively *search* for truth and meaning, holding to a principle demanding action and not simply providing a concept available for passive assent. Our view of truth may change, the meaning of our lives may be different, but as long as we are actively, responsibly seeking both truth and meaning—and allowing others to freely do so as well—we are living into our best selves. We are all scientists. We are all theologians. We are all in this together.

What is the meaning of your life? Our religious traditions suggest some answers. We will all answer differently based on our differing

experiences, but we can all agree on some common themes. Our collective wisdom proposes that a meaningful life is a committed life—committed to mutual compassion and respect, openness, humility, and stewardship. This is what it is to live religiously. This is why we covenant together to be a religious community. We are here to help each other live with purpose. We learn, accept, and marvel at the wonders science has opened for us, and then create our lives by giving that knowledge meaning.