

Science, Religion, and Unitarian Universalist History

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Reading from “Science and Religion: A Unitarian Universalist Perspective”
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Stem cell research, reproductive technology, cloning, death with dignity, every 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 present 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. . .

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.”. . .

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. . .

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. .

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.

Sermon

Each year I try to have one or more ongoing, over-arching themes that run through a number of services over a period of time. One of those themes this year is Unitarian Universalist history, which I selected, in part, to go along with the year’s theme in our children’s Religious Education program, which is Unitarian Universalist identity.

Later in the winter, and into next spring, I’ll be focusing on some important individual

names in our history. For instance, on Mother's Day I'll be talking about Unitarian Julia Ward Howe, who has a special relationship with that holiday. And then on May 23, we'll celebrate the 200th birthday of prominent Unitarian and Transcendentalist Margaret Fuller. And we don't want to neglect the Universalist side of our heritage, and so we'll devote one service to the Rev. Kenneth Patton. His may be an unfamiliar name, but you're likely to recognize some of his words and hymns.

Today, I will not be focusing on one individual, but rather on a larger, more general aspect of our history. Namely, its relationship with the world of science. I will be talking about a number of Unitarians and Universalists who have had a prominent place in the scientific world. But I'll also talk more generally about how science came to be an important part of our religious identity.

I already mentioned in our reading this morning the important role, throughout the history of our faith, of curiosity, the sense of human possibility, and reason – basic Enlightenment values. We need look no further than our current Principles and Sources to see that those values are still fundamental to our identity.

One of the stated sources of our Living Tradition is: "Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science." "Science" is written right into who we are and where we come from. And our fourth principle calls on us to affirm and promote "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning." There are many ways of seeking truth and meaning, but certainly some of the primary tools in our quest for truth are scientific observation, experiment, and reason.

We'll see, when I talk about Joseph Priestley in few minutes, that the link between Unitarianism and science was already well-established even before the turn of the nineteenth century over two hundred years ago. But, as influential as Priestley was, that link did not reach its full potential until the second half of the nineteenth century. And even then, those who were the staunchest advocates for science were among the radical wing of Unitarianism, known as the Free Religious Association.

Actually, that radical wing included two important schools of thought. There was the "intuition school," which carried on the Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker, and Margaret Fuller. At its core was the conviction that the soul's access to the Divine, through intuition, was direct and unmediated. The "Scientific School," on the other hand, according to its most ardent spokesman, Francis Ellington Abbot, believed that "Science is . . . destined to be the world's true Messiah." According to historian David Robinson, Abbott and others believed that "Religion, because of its concern with human spiritual destiny, asked the right questions. But science, because it was 'neither more nor less than *human knowledge*, in all its various branches and departments,' was the only force ultimately capable of providing answers."

And here's a bit of foreshadowing of what I'll have to say a little later about our contemporary, Connie Barlow. Abbott believed that divinity revealed itself in the workings of the evolutionary process. And so he set out to "accommodate religion to science by seizing on the scientific discovery of evolution as an essentially religious perspective."

So, let's take a look at some individual Unitarian and Unitarian Universalists who have devoted part or all of their lives to the world of science. First, no talk on science and UU history would be complete without mention of Joseph Priestley. For Priestley holds an important place in the history of both science and Unitarianism. Priestley is, in fact, most famous for his scientific accomplishments. He is credited with the discovery of oxygen. More accurately, he

recognized and isolated oxygen as a separate and distinct gas, which he called dephlogisticated air.

Priestley also worked with carbon dioxide, which he called fixed air. His first scientific publication described his method of impregnating water with fixed air, producing carbonated water, and giving him some claim to the title “father of soda pop.” Priestley is also sometimes credited with discovering that India gum could be used to rub out lead pencil marks, thus inventing the eraser and giving the material its more common name: rubber.

Priestley’s interest in science, and particularly electricity, was aroused by his encounters with his lifelong friend Benjamin Franklin, while Priestley still lived in England. This led to his discovery that graphite can conduct electricity, and to his publishing a comprehensive *History of Electricity* in 1767. Priestley’s wide-ranging work in scientific areas and his notable accomplishments are more remarkable considering that he never took a single formal science course throughout his entire lifetime. In fact, science was never his primary interest in life. He was a prolific writer on a wide range of intellectual pursuits, making important contributions in the fields of education, moral philosophy, theology, metaphysics, political economy, and history, as well as in physical science.

The other part of Priestley’s life of particular interest to us this morning is the religious. Priestley went to Daventry Academy at the age of nineteen to study for the ministry, which he considered his primary vocation throughout his life. He was already questioning some of the orthodox tenets of his Calvinist faith. And as his ministry progressed, so did his dissenting Unitarian tendencies. His attacks on the central tenets of orthodoxy, particularly the doctrine of the Trinity, were controversial and generated numerous verbal attacks on him in pamphlets, from other pulpits, and even in the House of Commons.

On Bastille Day, July 14, 1791, an unruly mob, unhappy with Priestley’s religious views as well as his political support for the French Revolution, burnt the meetinghouse where he preached, as well as his home and laboratory. Priestley fled with his family to London, and after three difficult years there, sailed off to America, hoping for a fresh start.

Arriving in Philadelphia, Joseph was offered a chair in Chemistry at the University of Pennsylvania. But he turned it down and moved on to Northumberland, where he helped establish a colony for English Dissenters, and established a Unitarian congregation that still exists today, counting as one of its current members a former President of this congregation, Sara Kelley.

One final point I want to make about Joseph Priestley is that for him, science and religion were not two separate, compartmentalized aspects of life. He approached both with a basic attitude of openness and curiosity. In his words:

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. . .

The next Unitarian scientist I’d like to mention is Maria Mitchell, the first American woman astronomer, first professor of Astronomy at Vassar College, and first director of Vassar’s observatory. Maria was born in 1818, the third of ten children born to a Quaker family on

Nantucket Island, Massachusetts. Her father, an amateur astronomer himself, was her primary teacher in her younger years, sharing with her what he considered to be the evidence of God in the natural world.

In her mid-twenties, Mitchell began to question the teachings of her puritanical Quaker meeting, and was disowned from membership. She began attending the local Unitarian Church, and did so for the two decades that she remained on Nantucket.

While she was at Vassar, Mitchell was pressured to attend the college chapel, which was served by preachers of various denominations. She wasn't always happy there. Once, when the service interfered with her observation of Saturn, she asked the President to shorten his prayer. Some of the more devout members of the college trustees tried to have her dismissed, but to no avail.

After hearing one minister, a Universalist, preach on the dangers of science, she wrote, "Scientific investigations, pushed on and on, will reveal new ways in which God works, and bring us deeper revelations of the wholly unknown." She believed that the revelations of the Bible and understandings of nature through science were not in conflict. "If they seem to be," she said, "it is because you do not understand one or the other." As has been the case with many, Maria Mitchell became a Unitarian, at least in part, because there she could practice her science and her religion with no sense of conflict between the two.

Another, more recent scientist who shared that characteristic was Linus Pauling. Like Joseph Priestley before him, Linus Pauling was most famous as a chemist, but was also notable in a number of other areas. For instance, Pauling was awarded not one, but two Nobel Prizes. The first was in 1954 for his work on the chemical bond and the structure of molecules. The second was the Nobel Peace Prize, awarded in 1962 for his work against war and advocating for nuclear test bans.

After receiving so much acclaim, Pauling felt a responsibility to use his fame as a springboard for speaking out on important issues, such as segregation and the Vietnam war. Some felt that he took that responsibility a bit too far, that his strong convictions sometimes led to self-righteousness. That when convinced that he was correct, he made his points more aggressively than necessary. For instance, his conviction about the importance of vitamin C as a cure for the common cold and a preventative for certain cancers. In this instance, the confidence, energy, and persistence that had made him a valuable peace advocate worked against him and dimmed his reputation.

And what about his religion? Pauling found a supportive environment for his antiwar work at the Unitarian Church of Los Angeles. He spoke there and at other area Unitarian churches, addressing crowds of up to a thousand listeners. He developed close relationships with several Unitarian peace activists including the Los Angeles minister, Stephen Fritchman. "My wife and I joined the Los Angeles Unitarian Church," Pauling later wrote, "because it accepts as members people who believe in trying to make the world a better place."

Pauling had been an atheist since childhood. But he wasn't militant about it, and got along well in the humanist environment of Unitarianism. He found the concept of God problematic, and saw no advantage in believing. He dealt with the world as he perceived it. In a 1974 interview he summed up his beliefs, saying "my basic philosophy is oriented to the diminution of suffering in the world . . . a basic ethical principle with me (is) that decisions be made that will increase happiness."

The last two people I want to mention are still among the living. First is Tim Berners-Lee. Al Gore may not have invented the Internet, but Tim Berners-Lee *did* invent the World

Wide Web. In 1989, he proposed a global hypertext project, based on some software engineering work he had done nearly ten years earlier. He went on to write the first World Wide Web server in 1990, and it was made available to the Internet in 1991.

Berners-Lee has spent most of his life and his career in England, but did spend some time in Boston, during which he and his family joined a Unitarian Universalist congregation. He had been brought up in the Church of England, but left the church as a teenager, just after being confirmed and “told how essential it was to believe in all kinds of unbelievable things.”

You may already be asking yourself about a possible connection between the World Wide Web and the “interdependent web of all existence” found in our principles. In a 1998 article, Berners-Lee wrote:

People have often asked me whether the Web design was influenced by Unitarian Universalist philosophy. I have to say that it wasn't explicitly, as I developed the Web well before I came across Unitarian Universalism at all. But looking back on it, I suppose that there are some parallels between the philosophies. . .

The Web and the UU concept of faith are similar in that both serve as a place for thought, and the importance of the quest for truth, but without labeling any one true solution. The quest for truth is always accompanied by skepticism of anyone claiming to have found it. . .

There is one other thing that comes to mind as common between the Internet folks and the UUs. The whole spread of the Web happened not because of a decision made from any authority, but because a whole bunch of people . . . picked it up and . . . it actually happened.

Tim Berners-Lee sums up his new religious home like this: “Unitarian Universalists are people who are concerned about all the things which your favorite religion is concerned about, but allow or even require their belief to be compatible with reason.”

The final person I want to talk about this morning is not actually a scientist. But Connie Barlow is an acclaimed author of popular science books and articles. Her book, *The Ghosts of Evolution* was Amazon.com's top-recommended book for several months in 2001. Most of her writing explores the nexus of science, spirit, and meaning. As a dedicated Unitarian Universalist, Connie has also developed several curricula for children's religious education.

Since 2002, Connie Barlow and her husband Michael Dowd have lived entirely on the road as “America's evolutionary evangelists.” While Connie is a UU, Michael is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ. But they have both dedicated their recent lives to spreading the good news of evolution as the basis for a new, healthier approach to religion. If you remember anything about the series I did last spring on the “four faiths,” Connie Barlow falls squarely in the domain of religious naturalism, in the mold of people like Ursula Goodenough and Loren Eiseley. What I'm struck by in reading Connie's words is the obvious respect for scientific truth wedded to the “transcending mystery and wonder” that are also recognized in our UU sources. Let's let Connie Barlow speak for herself:

The more we learn about Earth and life processes, the more we are in awe and the deeper the urge to revere the evolutionary forces that give time a direction and the ecological forces that sustain our planetary home. . .

Tell me a creation story more wondrous than that of a living cell forged from the residue of exploding stars. Tell me a story of transformation more magical than that of a fish hauling out onto land and becoming amphibian, or a reptile taking to the air and becoming bird, or a mammal slipping back into the sea and becoming whale. Surely this science-based culture of all cultures can find meaning and cause for celebration in its very own cosmic creation story.

And so, in the vision of people like Connie Barlow, we see the conflicts and contradictions between religion and science falling away, so that the two can come together in wondrous celebration of the truth as determined by science and reason, and the meaning and values that we bring from the very best parts of our human selves.

So may it be.