

Religion and Science: Can We Talk?

From the series: Can I Honestly Believe?

Text: Genesis 1:1; Psalm 19:1, 7; John 1:1

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Spring Lake, Michigan
August 9, 1998

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Shortly after I set my summer sermon series late this spring, *The New York Times*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and *Newsweek* all called to see what was hot, and they all selected this particular sermon as the subject on which they'd do a feature article. *U.S. News* and *Newsweek* on July 20, 1998, had articles: *Newsweek*, "Science Finds God," *U.S. News*, "Are We the Only Universe There Is?", and July 12, *The New York Times* featured an article on science and religion, "Cross Over the Line Drawn in the Sand," a major feature article. Well, I'm always glad to help them out. As a matter of fact, of course, I am kidding, but it is interesting that, having set the series and set for this week the question of the possibility of conversation between religion and science, there should have appeared within the last month those major features in the news media. It does indicate, I suppose, that the subject about which we are speaking is a subject of more than passing significance, and so I think that it is good that we within the religious community think from our perspective about the relationship between science and religion, because of the unfortunate history that we have had in the last couple of hundred years of the conflict between science and religion.

The subject this morning follows in the series, "Can I Honestly Believe?" There is an inner logic to the series, I would hope, and I would hope that it is somewhat apparent. We began with the question, "Do We Need Religion?", to which we said, no, not if religion is a means by which we, somehow or other, stave off the wrath of an angry God. We're all right. God loves us. We don't need religion for that purpose. But I made the point that religion, all of the human religions, are really creative, imaginative constructs by which we respond to that experience of God. Religions don't fall out of heaven, but human beings are encountered by that ultimate Mystery, and the whole human family has been aware of some presence, some greater reality that embraces us and from time to time seems to break through to our experience. The religions are the way in which human beings respond and give expression to that experience that has taken hold of them, and there are at least three dimensions to religion. There is the teaching, the doctrine, what we believe in light of the encounter. There is the ritual, the

mode of worship, that by which we devote ourselves. And then there is ethics or a way of life. How, then, shall we live in light of this experience of God?

So, religions are not necessary, but I think the human being is diminished and human community is diminished without the cultivation of religious devotion and the illumination of religious faith.

If religions are human creations, then we can tamper with them without worrying about disrupting God or coming into some kind of lightening bolt. If religions are our human response to the experience of God, then they aren't sacred; they can be improved upon; they can develop; they can change in the light of new insight. And perhaps the greatest challenge in light of the world in which we live and the information we have about the human situation and the cosmic reality, perhaps the greatest challenge to the religious community is the conception of God that we have. In Judaism and Christianity and Islam, the conception of God has been labeled Theism from the Greek word *theos*, and so, a theistic conception of God has been considered almost synonymous with belief in God. If one is not a theist, one is an atheist. But, I tried to point out that that is not really true, because the theistic conception of God which is in our scriptures, in our liturgy, in our hymns, that is a human conception concocted, constructed out of the response to the experience of God, and if our knowledge of reality develops, changes, as obviously it does, then it is possible, at least for some whose knowledge of the world collides with that conception of God, to seek to re-imagine God, to try to bring God to expression in a way that is more consistent with our experience of reality in our day. But, if we do that, then one might say, "How can I pray?" or "How do I pray?", because the heart of religion is the experience of communion with God, communication with that Ultimate Mystery that we can never reign in, never fully comprehend, but which breaks through to us and which we would respond to and with whom or with what or whatever we would be in communion with.

How then do we pray? If our knowledge of the world has given us some dissonance with our old conception, our old image of God, then probably the problem's in this book, because this book is the record, a faithful record of the authentic encounters of God with humankind. This book is the testimony of a people who were encountered by that Mystery, who believed heart, mind and soul, in that God, and who reflected that experience here. But how could they reflect it? Well, they could only reflect it in terms of their understanding of the world. And so, if this old book is the reflection of religious experiences that are two to three thousand years old, then the conception of the world that is the framework by which they brought to expression their experience of God is also two to three thousand years old, and so, what we had to say is, "How does the Bible function?, How ought the Bible to function? Does the Bible tell me so, as it says it in the Bible? Is it so?" We say, "No, it's not necessarily so," because what the Bible is about is the expression of the reality of the experience of God, but it's dressed in garments that come out of an ancient time and therefore, if the Bible talks about the physical world, it's going to talk about the physical world as it was

understood two thousand years ago. And, if our conception of the physical world has dramatically changed, then what we're going to have to say is, "I can't take the conception of the world from the Bible anymore. I have another conception of the world. But what the Bible is talking about, the experience of God in the world - that's what I have to listen to." And that's the same experience I'm seeking, so I have to learn how to use this Bible in a way differently than traditionally has been the case.

But, I'm a praying man. I'm a believing human being. I crave the experience of God, and I can find that experience witnessed to in these pages. But being a human being, I am material, concrete, a creature out of the dust, as the Genesis account says. We call the first man Adam, but it wasn't Adam, it was *A-dam* in Hebrew, which is dust, dirt, mud. The man, the human being is out of the dust, out of the earth, and that man out of the earth called *A-dam* because the earth in Hebrew is *Adama*. So, we have A-dam from *Adama*. In the Hebrew understanding of things, there is a consistency between the molecules and the amoebas and the dust of the earth and the human creature who becomes conscious of himself and of another, aware, able to transcend himself, jump out of his skin and observe it all as from the outside.

Now, if I as a praying man am also part and parcel of the cosmic reality, how am I going to find my place in the cosmic reality? I can live in the mystical experience of God, but I also dig in a garden, observe the stars, and have to deal with the health or unhealth of my body. So, there's got to be another way to uncover the cosmic reality of which I am a part and, of course, that is the way of the natural sciences.

I have now a dual way of knowing. I have the religious experience and, if I want to nurture that religious experience, I go to this ancient text that tells me of others before me who had the experience of God, the experience of the Holy, who were invaded by the Divine Reality, and I find that this becomes a helpful pointer, also a conditioner that opens my life to that same encounter. But, when I want to know about the world of which I am a part, I can go to the sciences, whose empirical method of observation and experimentation will tell me about the concrete universe into which my life is laced.

So, can there be conversation between science and religion? Of course, there can. Of course there can, because religion is asking the question, Why? Most profoundly, why is there something rather than nothing? Why are we here? What is the meaning of it all, and to what end? Those are religious questions.

Science takes apart the "something." It describes what is there. It is a limited discipline. It has no business talking about the Why, or the Wherefore, or the meaning in the meantime. If science remains a science and religion remains religion, there are legitimate arenas in which they can operate and the conversation between them is absolutely essential. Unfortunately, there's been a great conflict between science and religion and there's enough blame on both

sides. There have been scientists who have thought that empirical data gave them the right to say that there's no Creator and there's no purpose to it all, and there have been religious people who have mistakenly taken this book and have gotten data out of this book about a construct of the world and they have said to the empirical observations of the scientist, "That can't be, because the Bible says," which is really dumb.

So, there's blame on both sides. But, I don't need to police the science corps. I need us, as religious people, from our point of view as a religious community, - it is so critically important for the church no longer to live in that sense of conflict and hostility, but rather to foster the conversation, because it knows that it deals in questions of the source of all being and the resting place of all being and, in the meantime, has no other basis than the scientific, empirical method to understand the being of which it is a part.

Alfred Lord Whitehead, one of the premier minds of the century, has made a wonderful statement and in the first service I read it and I realized that it's one thing to read it and marvel at it, and it's another thing for you to try to hear it and understand it, and that didn't seem to be possible. His point is this, that religions will not again regain their old power until they learn to change as science changes. By that he means, in the scientific method there's always the questioning of every conclusion and, when a conclusion is dislodged by further data, science doesn't experience a defeat, but it experiences a triumph.

On the other hand, religion has set its conclusions in concrete and that mystical experience that it has with God which it communicates in the garments of this world, when those garments of this world, of the time in which the experience happened, are absolutized, and the religious truth of it all is identified with the way in which it is communicated, well then, when reality continues to unfold and when science is to explain more and more the mysteries of the universe and the whole religious experience is locked into a conception of things 2000 years old, according to Alfred Lord Whitehead, religion loses its credibility.

Whitehead, a mathematician, a philosopher, is not being antireligious here; he's concerned about religion. He says what has happened is that religion has lost its credibility because, every time there has been advance in knowledge and new understanding, a new breakthrough about the universe, about the cosmos, the church has said, "No, no, no, no, it can't be, can't be! The Bible says! The Bible says!" and then pretty soon it becomes so obvious that everybody knows it and then the church says, "Oh, yeah, it's true."

And so, 400 years after Galileo, the Pope apologizes. "Sorry, old boy, we put you on house arrest. You were right. We were wrong because we were reading the Bible for scientific, cosmological information which it doesn't give." And that whole controversy, that whole adversarial climate has been detrimental to the whole religious enterprise, and it's not over, folks. There is a fundamentalist mentality that is trying to establish the most impossible conception of creation

that one has ever heard. The old Creationism - Evolutionary debate still rages in the public school, for goodness sakes! And, as Whitehead points out, this doesn't hurt science. This hurts religion, because we come off as blind obscurantists who block knowledge and refuse to accept what is empirically verifiable through the scientific method, and what we have to do is dissociate the religious experience, the mystical experience of God for which the heart longs, of which Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and David and Jeremiah and Isaiah and Paul and Peter spoke. The experience of God: we have to dissociate that, dislodge that from the framework, the garment in which it was communicated, and then (here's the trick) - how can we who have experienced the living God bear witness to it in light of the marvelous, cosmic reality that is unfolding before us?

I facetiously mentioned the articles in the news magazines, but there were a couple of good paragraphs, and at the conclusion of the *U.S. News & World Report* article there was the suggestion that maybe with the cosmology that we have now available to us, we may be learning that the cosmos is not running down waiting to, as a cinder, fly apart or collapse upon itself, but maybe, just maybe after 12 or 15 billion years, with the very recent arrival of the human creature who brings consciousness, awareness and voice to the cosmos, maybe, maybe we're just at the beginning of exciting new breakthroughs, the future dimensions of which, who can dream? *Homo sapiens* may represent a youth movement, arriving at a time when almost everything is still to come. Dreary subjections about ultimate faiths may be supplanted by the belief that, like the cosmos itself, the human prospect is, as the physicist Freeman Dyson once wrote, infinite in all direction.

In the first service was our resident cosmologist, Howard VanTil, who gave me a couple of pieces soon to be published in which he argues about the fully gifted creation. Now, Jacques Monod, a Nobel-winning biologist, has written a book, *Chance and Necessity* and, after his biological observations based on empirical information, Monod goes on to be a religionist, a philosopher who concludes that we have to accept the fact that we are alone in the universe that is deaf to our music and as indifferent to our hope as to our crimes and our sufferings. Monod is a first-rate scientist, but when he becomes a religionist, he says, "No purpose, not going anywhere, no meaning." He has leaped out of the limits of his own discipline, and that's his faith conclusion. But, Howard VanTil suggests, grounded in his belief in a source of all being, that the "Let there be" of the first word was a creative word that endowed whatever was brought into being with the full capacity to develop into all the multiplicity of this marvelous universe of ours, the end of which, who can say? And I say to Howard VanTil, "You have just leaped out of the limits of your discipline, you're now a person of faith," and he would say, "Yes, I am." And then I have to choose myself between a Jacques Monod who does his research and then as a person of faith says no meaning, no purpose, or Howard VanTil, who does his research and then says, "A source endowing the stuff of creation with the potential for this marvelous flowering and blossoming." So, you see, the conversation between religion and science can be

fruitful and exciting. But we need to remember the limits of science and then give them free hand and let them go and let every new surprise be a new cause for praise to the Creator. And we need, at the same time, while that whole development is there for our enjoyment and our investiture, to cultivate that relationship with God that comes only through prayer and meditation and openness to the spirit that is beyond empirical verification.

The Psalmist picked up the theme of creation from Genesis and in Psalm 19, the first six verses, sang the glory of Creation that without words or speech sings the praise of God. But, the Psalmist knew more than the wonders of creation that pointed him to a Creator. This same Creator, he says, is Yahweh, the God of the Covenant, whose Torah, the way of life, comes to give me instruction and illuminates my way. And with humility and authenticity, that sense of that Ultimate Mystery Who has addressed him causes him to say in a moment of self-awareness, "Test me. Know my words, the meditations of my heart. See if there be any wicked way in me. Lead me in the way eternal, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer." And you and I can go even a step further and say that in the beginning when God said, "Let there be," there was a word that was the creative force that brought all things into being and, in the fullness of time, that word became flesh and there was a face, and in that face we said, "My God! What grace and glory." Not only in that face, but I see it in your face and in face-to-face community, strangely enough, there's the presence of that One Who in faith we say, said, "Let there be," and in trust we claim will in the end make all things well.

Well, it's really quite simple and quite wonderful, if you get it.