



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “For the Love of Science & Religion”

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### Centering Thoughts:

*Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear.* Thomas Jefferson

*Science investigates; religion interprets...Science deals mainly with facts; religion deals mainly with values. The two are not rivals. They are complementary.* Martin Luther King, Jr.

*We have experiences that go beyond what we can explain.* Karen Armstrong

### Reflection:

In a fifteen minute sermon or reflection, I can hardly say what I'd like on any topic, much less address the longstanding debate about whether science and religion can be reasonable friends, harmoniously married, or forever in divorce court. Inadequate as my effort may be, I speak to this relationship because it has relevance to our lives.

Take climate change. Some devout souls claim it is scientific mumbo jumbo, not based in reality. And, even if human action contributes to unprecedented climate change, some argue God will solve our problems. So relax. Be happy. Burn fossil fuels with abandon.

Another controversy exists in schools—should evolution or creationism be taught? Charles Darwin helped prove creationism wrong long ago, but some still profess its truth. Reproductive-rights and same-sex marriage also find themselves embroiled in religious and scientific controversy. It may surprise some of you, but even within the UU fold, the issue is not settled. A UU once asked me if anyone who believes in God is delusional. I think you can guess what they think about most religions.

There aren't many things I can claim all Unitarian Universalists believe, but I think it's safe to say we accept the findings of science, even if today's scientific truth turns out to be in error tomorrow. We accept that the earth isn't flat, that dinosaurs didn't co-exist with humans, and that earthquakes aren't a sign of a god's anger. Right?

Our common acceptance of science appears in one of Unitarian Universalism's named sources. We draw from six broadly defined sources for wisdom and inspiration. Turn to the back of your order of service and count down to the fifth bullet. It reads: "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."

Many of us draw from this source, as well as others, even when they appear in tension or seem to contradict each other. A humanist may not be comfortable with the God language of our fourth source, though they recognize that loving our neighbors as ourselves is a worthy teaching. A mystic may not be comfortable with limiting the world to the rational or empirical world, though they recognize navigating the world requires science as well as the technological fruits of science. We are free to draw from any and all of these sources because we believe wisdom and inspiration for our living, a.k.a. truth, can be found in many places.

That alone may make our tradition unique, but I think the fifth source 'drops the mic'. Other traditions may accept science, but they don't make it so explicit. The Nicene Creed doesn't say, "I believe in the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and Scientists." And Christians generally ask you to take on faith, without question, Jesus' unique divinity or that his death somehow paid for our sinful nature. These doctrines are not ones UUs typically believe, in no small part because of our rational, scientific stance. Jefferson claimed irrational religious dogma was a tyranny over the mind of man which he vowed to fight. That tyranny is the idolatry of mind and spirit found in the fifth source.

Jefferson and other Enlightenment thinkers like Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Joseph Priestley (the minister-scientist who discovered oxygen's properties), along with later 20<sup>th</sup> century humanists, contributed to changing Unitarian and Universalism into the more rational, naturalist religion we experience today.

Though Jefferson was a deist who believed in a Creator God who then departed from the Creation, Jefferson valued reason over biblical revelation. Believing that Christians had distorted Jesus' teachings, Jefferson affirmed in his book, *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth*, that Jesus was not divine, though his ethical teachings should be followed. Jefferson was so convinced of Christianity's errors that he took scissors to the Bible, cutting out all the miracles and references to a divine Jesus. I imagine some of you might want to do the same. I think it explains why many avoid using even the word religion to describe Unitarian Universalism.

Our acceptance of science may appear to settle the case, but we do not all reject religious or spiritual ideas. Science is all about curiosity and questions that seek answers to life's mysteries, like how did the universe begin and what happens when I die. Religions ask similar questions. Most religions provide an answer. Ours encourages you to find your own answers, answers that may not be true for someone else. And this is where we leave room for people to believe differently about the religion vs. science controversy.

Yesterday I helped facilitate a 'New to UUFA' orientation. People shared their spiritual journeys and several mentioned a disconnect between the teachings of the Christian church and the world

described by science and reason. When I asked participants to stand along an imaginary continuum line to indicate whether they felt close to or far from some concept of God or the divine, most found themselves leaning toward the line's far side. The few at the close side described God or the divine in non-theistic, non-supernatural terms. The most common description was an intangible connection, perhaps some force or energy that ties us to all existence. No one described an all-knowing, all-seeing divine person. Previous newcomers have shared similar ideas.

We may tip the scale towards scientific empiricism, but we are more than that. We include mystics and theists. We have many who embrace the (capital M) Mystery, who feel something more than what can be described by science exists. Is it possible to accept both science and something beyond science? I believe so.

British philosopher and logician, Bertrand Russell, believed (quote), "Religion is something left over from the infancy of our intelligence, it will fade away as we adopt reason and science as our guideline." I think he, and others who believe there is no relationship between science and religion, assume religion only means dogmatic belief in things that contradict science. Miracles, as Jefferson knew, are not possible in the reality described by current science.

But I think Russell, the late Christopher Hitchens, and others of similar opinion, draw religion too narrowly. Behavioral scientist Frans de Waal says, "The enemy of science is not religion. Religion comes in endless shapes and forms... The true enemy is the substitution of thought, reflection, and curiosity with dogma." That's not Unitarian Universalism. We reflect, we think, we're curious, and yes, some of us find answers that may be beyond science's ability to know, but resonate with our experience.

I don't know how my experience of awe and wonder is explained by science. I don't know how my feeling of connection to nature is explained by science. I don't know why I'm drawn to and admire beautiful sunsets. I don't know why the concept of spirituality makes sense to me. Maybe science will one day explain these things, but it's a mystery now. Many questions remain to be answered, including what existed before the Big Bang or why it occurred. These are religious searches as much as they are scientific.

I think we need all our sources. And we need to be reminded that human experience includes more than a rational understanding of the world. Science alone is inadequate. I agree with Carl Sagan who wrote:

Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of spirituality. When we recognize our place in an immensity of light-years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty, and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual...The notion that science and spirituality are somehow mutually exclusive does a disservice to both.

Spirituality refers to those personal experiences which religion tries to explain or give meaning to. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks adds, "Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what the mean."

Let's not paint all religion as irrational or dogmatic. Science and religion can be reasonable friends and harmoniously married. They just need to appear in divorce court when unthinking dogmatism defies accepted science. We need doctors to accept evolution so they'll understand how bacteria become resistant to medicine. We need politicians to accept climate science so that we can prevent disastrous consequences to earth's habitable land. Accepting the results of science matters, even as we seek to explain the seemingly unknowable, the Mystery, in religious language.

May we Unitarian Universalists continue to seek answers to life's big questions, and may we accept the compatibility of science with our dogma-free religion.

**Questions for Reflection or Discussion:**

1. Have you had an experience where rational or scientific explanation seems insufficient? Does the use of spiritual language or concepts describe or explain them more fully? Share.
2. Do you believe religion is the enemy of science? Do they complement our current scientific understanding of reality or are they in opposition of each other? Explain.
3. Can science become as dogmatic or absolutist as religion or spirituality? How might science and reason become an idol of the mind or spirit?

