

Religion & Science

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Given at the UU Fellowship of Pottstown December 9, 2007

There is a major difference between science and religion. Science is about facts, and "truths based on facts." Religion is about meaning and truth based on meaning. Religion is much more subjective, more personal. It is, for a many UU's about living with in the bounds of scientific theories.

I used Ken Wilber's book, the *Marriage of Sense and Soul*. this book as a source for thinking about how these two seemingly opposite ways of thinking can be blended and combined.

Wilber begins his book by framing post modernism and pre-modernity. Most of the history of civilization is based on an understand of the world that is quite different than our modern view. Wilber points out that for most of the worlds history, and this includes almost all cultures, there was a basic understand of the world that included more than jus the material world. This view held there was a great Nest of Being. (imagine concentric circles) In the center of that nest is matter, outside of that and including that is mind/thought/soul then, outside of that is spirit.

"...the basic point has remained, [in the worlds religions,] essentially identical: Reality is a series of nests within nests within nests, reaching from matter to mind to Spirit, with the result that all beings and all levels were ultimately enfolded in the all-pervasive and loving embrace of an ever-present Spirit.

Each senior level in the Great Nest, although it includes its juniors, nonetheless possesses emergent qualities not found on the junior level. Thus, the vital animal body *includes* matter in its makeup, but it also *adds* sensations, feelings, and emotions, which are not found in rocks. While the human mind *includes* bodily emotions in its makeup, it also *adds* higher cognitive faculties, such as reason and logic, which are not found in plants or other animals. And while the soul *includes* the mind in its makeup, it also *adds* even higher cognitions and affects, such as archetypal illumination and vision, not found in the rational mind. And so on.

In short, each higher level possesses the essential features of its lower level(s), but then adds elements not found on those levels. Each higher level, that is, *transcends* but *includes* its juniors. And this means that each level of reality has a different architecture, so to speak." (MR&S p.9)

There is a corresponding and specific branch of knowledge that goes with each- physics, biology, psychology, theology, and mysticism. (Wilber argues that the nest is collapsed completely in western thought.) I would argue that these branches of knowledge have ranking in a hierarchy in western thought that reverses their order. And in reversing their order, one completely changes the concept of the nest of being.

There is a sense in western society that anything outside of the material world is suspect because it cannot be scientifically proven or tested. Anything having to do with mystical experience or theological understanding is invalid because it falls outside of what we can truly "know." Our thinking and knowing the world has been reduced to what Wilber calls monological. What we can know through observation, and testing. There is no need to communicate with the subject, that is unimportant. Anecdotal evidence, collected though casual conversation or lived experience is not just irrelevant, it is dangerous. This can be seen in the resistance of modern medicine to the use of meditative techniques, acupuncture, and other holistic forms of medicine in the healing process.

Ten years ago or more, Dr. Herbert Benson of the Harvard Medical School put his career on the line to prove, using empirical evidence, monological techniques, that relaxation techniques can benefit patients. Science refused to accept or believe that such techniques could be useful because there was no western scientific evidence, no proof. (Several thousand years of successful use by eastern peoples was not enough proof. This has also been true of the shamanic traditions.)

Seeing things with the Eye of the flesh as Wilber puts it, has reduced our ability to understand the world. We see only what can be seen, only what is matter oriented. Our relationship with the world using this eye of the flesh or monological way of thinking is one that is essentially I-it. There is, in Wilber's understanding an eye of the mind that allows us to see the world in a dialogical relationship- one that attempts to see relationships as I-thou. One that seeks interaction and dialogue in order to discover truths. This involves interpretation, symbolic meaning, and mutual understanding. But our cultural emphasis is on the monological rather than the dialogical.

The eye of contemplation- or the translogical as Wilber calls it, is completely disregarded and dismissed as unnecessary, foolish, and or superstitious. This way of thinking transcends the logical, and rational, it stands open to something greater- to the radiant Divine.

How did we get here? How did our culture get to a place where we value the I-it relationship more than the I-thou or the concept of oneness?

This has to do with Art, Morality and Science and their corresponding articles (I, We, and It) being split into separate spheres of knowledge. Art or the Beautiful is the first sphere and that is in the eye of the beholder- it is totally subjective and individualistic we use the language of *I* to describe it. Morality is about cultural standards about what is Good. It has to do more with groups- so the language of *we* is used. Science is about object information, about what is true. There is no subject, no need for discussion. It is about facts. The language of *It* is used.

There is a part of us, as human beings that wants to know things. We want to know how we came to be here. What our purpose is. Where we are headed. These are questions of meaning. Questions that help us navigate the world and live in right relationship with others. They are the questions that religion has tried to answer.

We are all interested in these answers to one degree or another. Wilber points out that science has been so successful in providing answers, that our culture has allowed it to become the powerful force that it has. It is not the fault of the scientists, or the researchers. It is because we want concrete answers to difficult questions. The rise of religious right shows us there is no shortage of people who want the answers handed to them. But, before we take the high moral ground, many of us are looking for easy answers too. The difference is that many of us are looking to science to provide them, not religion.

We have used science to help us better understand our bodies as well as our world. We have relied on science to help us when we are feeling ill or out of sorts. For example, science, with its understand of neurons and brain chemicals has provided us with amazing medications that help to balance the levels of serotonin in the brain. But we have not yet discovered what causes depression. We can to fix the levels of serotonin with medication, but we don't how to fix to depression. Which is, in my opinion, more than just the chemical levels in the brain. It has to do with a Soul perspective. One that includes the body and mind, but also transcends it and is greater than just the material sensory world.

But science has answered so many questions so well, we have put all our eggs into its basket and asked it to solve all of our problems and answer all of our questions. Even questions it cannot possibly answer. The question: What are we made of? Can be and has been answered by science. Science has most recently answered the question, How are we put together? Still looking at the world with a monological perspective- IT- But science cannot answer the question that comes next- Who chooses how we are put together?

Because our culture has placed its entire faith in the basket with science, we are at a loss about how to answer that next question. This question asks us to respond with the language of We, not of It.

Oppenheimer, who managed the development of the Atomic bomb in the US, had some serious moral concerns about how their research would be used. It is my understanding that later in his life he regretted his involvement in the Manhattan Project because of how the technology was used.

When scientist begin to study they perceive the world as objective. The larger moral implications are not considered, because the spheres of the good, the true and the beautiful have been disassociated from one another. And the sphere of the true has been elevated above the other two. They no longer work as checks and balances to each other. Is it important/helpful to know the map of the human genome?- Through the eyes of science, the true - yes. Through the eyes of the moral, the good, maybe. Through the eyes of the beautiful, art- not particularly.

It is true that having information about the genome is essential in helping to cure or even prevent certain illnesses. But is this Good? For those who see only the material world and reject the great nest of being, than yes. It is indeed good- it is better than good, it is great. But those who see the world from a different perspective it is not at always useful or good, it is at worst interference.

From the perspective of a Christian Scientist, medicine is an interference. It denies and rejects God's will. Hindu's believe that we suffer as a result of karmic debit and no one can interfere with that process, the suffering is there to teach us a lesson about living, about others, about God- it has a purpose!

This perspective takes a very different view of the world than the Western scientific perspective, one that keeps the great nest of being in tact. A perspective that seeks objective truth above all else seems to be short sighted. The long term effects and consequences of the true are not considered because only the objective, the monological, is important. So what about the consequences? What about the culture in which the information is discovered? What about the non-objective repercussions of science?

We live in a society and increasingly a world that is driven by market forces and monetary gain. Any scientific discovery of the true will be impacted by that environment. Science is not done in a vacuum. It is conducted in a culture, in a society. I have heard some say that if one scientist doesn't discover such-and-such a thing, someone else will. No doubt this is true. But Oppenheimer will always be associated with the atomic bomb- What a way to go down in history.

Our education system has gone to great lengths to uphold the western view of science as the only true right view. Our schools increased emphasis on science and math with younger and younger students scares me. What of classic literature, art, and music, not to mention philosophy, history and theology? Liberal education is about creating a whole person- one who can think and act with compassion; a person who can reason and at the same time reflect on feelings and experience. Our schools have accepted the fall of the great nest of being and with it, they have rejected any worth in knowledge that is outside of the material world.

The UU church in Davis CA has worked meditation into their Religious education program. The children there have learned to sit in silence- contemplative silence for 30 minutes. It has taken about 4 months to get there. The teachers have explained the importance of silence and listening to ones inner voice. The children go outside and sit in wooded grove for 30 minutes each week. They are connecting not to the material world, but to the world of soul and spirit.

I want to be clear here- I don't dislike or distrust science. I just wonder if we aren't too caught up in trying to have science answer the difficult questions. Is the only answer to illness medication? Or are there alternatives that are just as valid? Is the notion of the big bang and an expanding universe useful beyond just the impierical? Does alternative thinking like mysticism and contemplation have something valid to offer us in understanding our world? Is it possible to put ethical and moral thinking into the scientific process to address issues of misuse, control and access?

What I would like to see is not a halt to scientific exploration, but a look at the ethical and moral questions that scientific discoveries will force us to address. That science itself cannot possibly answer. Who will decide what we do with the genome map? The companies that own the patent on the genome (as if it can be patented in the first place). The question of cloning, sex selection with fertility drugs, and other important decisions cannot be left up to the corporations that pay for the research. Nor should they be left to those who pay the right price for it. Nor should it be left to government officials who are in the back pockets of the corporations.

I would like to see science return to a right sized portion of how we see the world. One view of several- Not the only real one. I would like to see our culture consider the role of science in a larger context. Science can tell us a great deal about brain chemistry, but what of depression, addiction, alienation, violence, purpose, and right living. Science is a tool to help us gain better understanding, but it is not the only tool. Mystical experience, dreams, meditation and contemplation have just as much to offer as science. They are tools that are just as important for understanding the world we live in and who we are as science.

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