

Seen & Unseen

A sermon by Rev. Benjamin Broadbent
Based on Genesis 4:1-7 & Hebrews 11:1-4
Preached on January 27, 2008

I.

The last laser show I witnessed was at a Christian revival meeting, so to speak. Last June, the United Church of Christ celebrated 50 years at its biennial meeting, called the General Synod, in Hartford, Connecticut. Among other celebrations and recognitions, delegates to the General Synod welcomed Dr. Charles Townes to the podium. Assisted to the podium by his wife, this 91 year-old physicist spoke calmly and gently. For those who don't recognize the name, Dr. Townes shared the Nobel prize in physics in 1964 for his work with masers and lasers.

Dr. Townes is also a member of the First Congregational United Church of Christ of Berkeley, California. In addition to his work in physics, he has dedicated much of his career to exploring the relationship between religion and science. In his article, "The Convergence of Science and Religion," Townes argues that science and religion are not necessarily contradictory. He repeated this conviction in his speech last summer: (quote) "One seeks to understand the purpose of life, the other seeks to understand the order of life."

The relationship between religion and science is one of the great questions of our current age. The question is made urgent by extreme points of view. One such view is that science has altogether supplanted religion as the source for reliable knowledge. Another view is that that religion trumps scientific knowledge because it is of higher order. These two spheres of knowing present themselves to us as siblings rivaling over territory. As people of faith in the modern, and therefore scientific, world, we are responsible for parenting these two siblings. Shall we decide to side with one and kick the other out on the street? Shall we try to reconcile differences and suggest they learn to share? Or shall we acknowledge differences, give voice to concerns, and respect the preferences of each?

II.

The story of Cain and Abel, in Genesis 4, is paradigmatic for these kinds of conflicts. The story is not history in the sense that we understand it - Cain and Abel were not historical individuals in the way that Martin Luther King Jr. or Susan B. Anthony, or even Jesus, were. The story is mythic, primordial, and therefore deeply and timelessly true.

Cain and Abel were the sons of Adam and Eve, the first humans, the first parents. These brothers were as different as brothers can be, symbolized by their vocations. In verse 2, we learn that Abel was a shepherd and Cain was a farmer. In verse 3, the brothers each bring an offering to Yahweh. Cain brings produce from the earth. Abel brings meat from his livestock. And then, one of the more perplexing verses in scripture, verse 4: "And Yahweh had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard."

Upon reading this text, our questions abound: In what way did Yahweh express his regard for Abel's gift and his lack of regard for Cain's? Why did Yahweh regard one and not the other? These questions are the very reason our modern minds reject the validity of scripture in general. The text presents itself to us as unsatisfying, arcane, and obtuse. Our intellects have been trained to desire and expect clarity, precision, and certainty. With the advent of technology, including most recently, the internet, we expect information on demand. Texts like Genesis 4 are unforgivable because they fail to provide the critical information we desire.

Yet life is more than immediate information, and the conflict between these two brothers will not be resolved once and for all. The religious claim in this pre-historical text is that this sort of sibling rivalry is a once-and-for-all reality of human existence. It is a rivalry played out between religion and science in our own day.

III.

In the current field of public opinion, there is much division on the subject of the relationship between religion and science. Some contend there is no relationship. Science-minded positivists claim that science has replaced religion as a valid way of knowing. They point out religion's tilt toward conserving the past and science's insistence on cumulative knowledge that produces unending progress. Religious fundamentalists, using remarkably similar reasoning, claim that "true" religion is a direct and unarguable revelation from God. The clear and apparent meanings of scripture trump all contradictions. Divine revelation, they argue, is more perfect and reliable than any human knowing.

While we know better, these extremes tend to define the popular science versus religion debate. In an age of sound-bites, an age of not-enough-time, an age of oversimplification, the most interesting voices come from those who are attempting either to integrate the two ways of knowing or to define separate spheres of knowing that should be respected.

A couple of years ago, at the prompting of church member and geologist Steve Getty, I joined the Clergy Letter Project, which invites clergy to sign a letter which states:

"We the undersigned, Christian clergy from many different traditions, believe that the timeless truths of the Bible and the discoveries of modern science may comfortably coexist. We believe that the theory of evolution is a foundational scientific truth, one that has stood up to rigorous scrutiny and upon which much of human knowledge and achievement rests... We urge school board members to preserve the integrity of the science curriculum by affirming the teaching of the theory of evolution as a core component of human knowledge. We ask that science remain science and that religion remain religion, two very different, but complementary, forms of truth."

Recently, I read an interview with John Polkinghorne, who is one of the world's top quantum physicists and also an Anglican priest. He helped me imagine the relationship between these sibling rivals, religion and science, in more positive ways. To the scientific-minded among us, Polkinghorne likes to point out (quote) "that religious faith is not a question of shutting your eyes and gritting your teeth. It is search for truth in a different domain."

To help separate those different domains, Polkinghorne makes a distinction between science as a *synchronic* subject and religion as a *diachronic* subject. That is, with science (quote) "what matters is what we know at the present [because] scientific knowledge is cumulative." He continues, "I know much more about the universe than Newton did, not because I'm cleverer than he but because I live 300 years later."

Theology, the study of God, religion, and the church, is a *diachronic* subject. Theological knowledge is not cumulative, but dependent upon historical context. Theology relies upon constant dialogue with scriptural and theological texts across history.

Given this distinction, how do those of us engaged in conflict resolution between scientific discovery and theological inquiry understand the theory of evolution? From a scientific synchronic point of view, the theory of evolution is the best explanation available for how the world and its inhabitants arrived at their present form. From a theological diachronic point of view, the question is not how, but why? Why is the world as it is? What is its purpose? One answer to that question, which would require a series of sermons to unpack, is "To glorify God."

From either point of view, the theory of evolution does not explain everything. Polkinghorne, speaking scientifically, says, (quote) "Just take our ability to do science, for example... I can't believe that our ability to understand and probe and enjoy the structures of... [the] world is simply a spin-off of our ancestors' learning to dodge saber-toothed tigers. It's something more than that."

IV.

Perhaps the future of the relationship between science and religion will go beyond simply defining spheres of knowledge and telling each side to “stay on your own side of the room.” By trust and experimentation, perhaps some kind of convergence or integration is possible. Perhaps, as quantum physicists have testified, science ultimately leads to religious questions, to leaps of faith in order to enter new spheres of knowing. Perhaps theology is best understood as a science, which sphere of study is God, the church, and ethical questions of purpose.

The writer of the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews plays with the relationship between what is seen and what remains unseen. By faith, the letter says, we understand. But our understanding only goes so far. Ultimately, John Polkinghorne says, it’s good to recognize that “no one can know everything.”

John Buchanan told this story in a recent *Christian Century* article: “A Native American... was asked by a judge if he promised to tell the court ‘the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.’ His translator ‘seemed to struggle, and at length, rendered the man’s reply: “I don’t know what the whole truth is... I only know what I know.” Or, Buchanan reflects, “as Shakespeare’s Hamlet put it to his friend Horatio: ‘There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.’” Amen.