

Requiring Religion: Be What Knows

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University of South Carolina Religion and Science Faculty Discussion Group

4 April 2008

I have never been one for writing letters to the editor. In fact I have done so only twice in my life. Both times were within the last two years, both were to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, both were concerned with the relationship (broadly speaking) between religion and science, and both—surprisingly enough—were published!

The first was my response to an article entitled “On the Front Lines in the War over Evolution” (10 March 2006). Ten thousand U.S. clergy, it seems, had recently signed a joint statement, the gravamen of which was to insist that religion and evolutionary science are perfectly compatible. The author of the article was clearly, and rather smugly, delighted at this news, for it served to confirm the notion, widespread in academia, that it is only a few creationist cranks who think that the dominant scientism of our time poses any threat to faith. I wrote to ask whether any of these rather sanguine signatories had ever heard of Richard Dawkins or Daniel Dennett,¹ to explain to *The Chronicle’s* readership that this clerical consensus could easily be explained by the fact that serious attention to metaphysics gave way long ago to social ethics in the curricula of the mainline seminaries, and to propose a mandatory course for all high school students, not in creation science, but in the philosophy of science. Here is how I ended that letter:

No doubt the reigning evolutionary paradigm affords a way of envisioning our terrestrial environment, but to suppose it the only way, uniquely qualified to give genuine insight into the Way Things Really Are, is merely to prove that one has never given two seconds thought to the question of what constitutes a fact—never realized that what we take to be an empirical given is always the result of many prior selections and interpretations, now embedded in the fossil record of an unexamined worldview.

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

My second letter was prompted by a piece in *The Chronicle Review*, “The Place of Personal Faith in the Classroom” (25 January 2008), written by one John D. Barbour, a religion professor at Saint Olaf College. Barbour has been teaching for nearly three decades, but only in recent years, he confessed, has he begun speaking about his own religious convictions in the classroom, and even now with considerable hesitation. Why the long delay, and why the diffidence? His unsurprising answer was to say that “in public and private institutions alike practitioners of religious studies have been anxious to prove that they can be as tough-minded and academically rigorous as their colleagues in other disciplines”. The problem, as I pointed out in response, is that few scholars, whether religionists or otherwise, seem to have given serious thought to the question of what exactly tough-mindedness and rigor consist in. I ended by asking:

Might these admirable qualities not include pointing out that no one has ever, or could ever, come to know by means of the senses that all knowledge is based on the senses? Why assume that professorial contributions to the discussion of religion, when not of a strictly empirical or exegetical order, can be no more than a subjective sharing of values or opinions? Why act as if the positivists won the argument just because so many of them have gone on talking?²

I mention these articles and my responses in order to launch a discussion concerning what I believe to be the leading obstacle to any serious dialogue between religion and science. What I have in mind—as I have already hinted—is the widespread assumption, shared by academics on both sides of the conversation, that human knowledge is limited to the empirical order and that spiritual realities, even supposing they exist, are therefore off limits to a genuinely rational inquiry. It is because of this assumption that the vast majority of university professors of religion have felt obliged, like Barbour, to limit their scholarly writing and classroom teaching to talk about God, or to talk about those who historically have talked about God, or to talk about the geographical places and political circumstances in which talk, or talk about talk, about God has occurred. Even theologians and philosophers of religion, who one might have hoped would know better, seem to be running scared of the *Zeitgeist*, and rather

² Both of my letters, “Evolution and the Facts” and “Professing Knowledge”, appear in their entirety on my weblog: <http://www.cutsinger.net/wordpress2/?p=14>; <http://www.cutsinger.net/wordpress2/?p=104>.

than challenging its hegemony most have settled for thinking that only historians, social scientists, and critical readers of texts have a place in academia. Wherever one looks, whether in religious studies or philosophy, one sees the same lemming-like flight from the embarrassment of supra-sensory claims.

Meanwhile most scientists, whether natural or social, are understandably content with this consensus, and who can blame them? Contemporary university culture has been shaped with their interests, methods, needs, and expectations at the forefront. Wherever one looks, from the study of paleontology to the study of Plato, everyone is being asked to subscribe to the notion that knowledge is a matter of production and acquisition. Knowledge, or at least the knowledge that *counts*—and yes, I am deliberately punning when I use that word!—is something up ahead and out there, attained incrementally one fact at a time, and in order to reach it we must all be moving forward, innovating, getting the grants and generating fresh data. As for scientists who still believe in God, most have worked out the same compromise as their colleagues in the religion department and have consigned knowledge and faith to two more or less separate compartments of their lives, one public and the other private. The result, of course, is that the media appearances and best-selling book contracts usually go to those scientists, and popularizers of science, who *don't* believe, or rather who believe that all belief is irrational, and whose marketing plan depends on baiting their public with the proclamation that religion is bunk.

Anyone interested in furthering a dialogue between religion and science cannot but deplore, as I do, the situation I have briefly sketched—one in which people are afraid, or at least reluctant, to raise fundamental questions, and where those on the religious side are expected not to speak in their professional voice until they have first accepted the methodological premises of their interlocutors. I am not sure I would have used quite the same approach and dramatic techniques as Ben Stein did in his recently released film “Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed”,³ but as far as calling the bluff on the supposed open-mindedness of the professoriate it is precisely on target. The academy, which in its ancient Athenian version was intended to serve as a refuge from the unexamined life, has in many ways become instead a breeding-ground for consensus, complacency, and status quo. It is politically fashionable these days for admissions offices and faculty search

³ Premise Media Corporation, 2008.

committees to stress the pedagogical and other benefits of “diversity”. But when it comes to what constitutes the university’s very reason for being, the pursuit of knowledge, standardization is almost always preferred to genuine difference—the company man to the epistemological radical.

Who is this epistemological radical, and what sort of mischief might he perpetrate if allowed to run free on our campuses? I am not going to reveal all my thoughts on this subject. After all, even we tenured full professors are well advised to take things one cautious step at a time, and I would prefer not to compromise the anonymity of my moles in the sciences! I think you can deduce from what I have said thus far, however, what the first of these steps ought to be. One should begin, like Socrates, by going to the allegedly wise and asking them what precisely their wisdom consists in. Let us go to our universities’ presidents, provosts, deans, directors of development, grants officers, and fellow faculty and ask them to explain (if they can) exactly why they have chosen to assume that human knowledge is limited to the empirical order.

As my letters to *The Chronicle* suggest, there are at least two sides to this question, or two ways of raising it. One form of the question is this: Has anyone ever, or could anyone ever, come to know by means of the senses that all possible knowledge is based on the senses? You already know the answer, for no thinking person can miss it: No sensory experience has ever proved, or ever could prove, that only sensory experience provides valid proof. Empiricism, whether understood as a full-blown philosophical position or as a methodological principle, cannot be empirically justified. And of course it follows that there may well be another way, or other ways, of knowing, and hence another object, or other objects, of knowledge. But there is also a second form of the question, which cuts a bit deeper and which could be expressed as follows: Is there really such a thing as an empirical given—a pure datum, offered up naked and raw to the appropriate sense organ? Here again the answer should be obvious, though it may take the unpracticed a little longer to grasp it: Empirical objects, including our sense organs and the bodies that apparently house them, are in fact the result of many prior selections and interpretations, some of them conscious but most of them not. Long story short: The sensor is as much in the sensing as is the sensed.

Now none of this is really any news, of course, and you may be forgiven for wondering why I regard raising such elementary questions as so seditious an act. No doubt there are otherwise intelligent scientists—though none in this room, I trust!—who are oblivious to these epistemological insights and who continue to subscribe to the crudest forms of positivism. But clearly no philosopher, and no philosophically educated person, will be surprised by my claim that knowing is a constructive or creative process. The epistemological radical, however, is the person who persistently takes this claim further. He is the gadfly who insists on reminding his colleagues of this cognitive constructivity or creativity at what often prove for them awkward moments. It is all well and good to philosophize in a book or at the front of the appropriate classroom. But when you are looking through a microscope or are about to dissect a piece of tissue or are translating some ancient manuscript or are in the midst of propounding a complicated theory, based on your painstakingly extensive research, as to which demographic group is most likely to exhibit behavior A in situation B, you do not want some know-it-all breathing over your shoulder, whispering, “Yes, but are there really any data *there*?”

And yet, unless I am quite mistaken, every serious scholar needs to hear this discomfiting question, even as the Roman general, returning from his battlefield victories, needed to hear the admonition of the slave in his chariot, *Memento mori*. Why? Because it is extremely difficult for all of us, no matter how fully or how often we may accede in theory to constructivist principles, to keep them firmly—and operatively—at the center of our continued attention as we go about our daily lives. There lingers in virtually all our minds what the philosopher Owen Barfield called a “residue of unresolved positivism”, an undercurrent of cognitive forgetfulness, fueled by the commonsensical picture we have been taught to paint of ourselves, not as outside or above, but as within, and pressed as it were beneath the weight of, a world of objects—a physical one among the physically many, all caught in the flow of time.⁴ Please understand: It is not only scientists with

⁴ Barfield spoke of this “residue” in a number of conversations with me, as he did in an interview with Shirley Sugarman, published in her edited volume *The Evolution of Consciousness* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1976). Elsewhere he wrote: “I can philosophize myself free from philosophical materialism quite easily; and so, I dare say, can you.... But after we have done the philosophizing and gone back to ordinary life, the materialism is still there in our very instruments of thought, and indeed of perception.... It is not merely a habit but an ingrained habit. It is even what we call ‘common sense’” (Owen Barfield, *History, Guilt, and Habit* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961], 73).

whom I am charging this crime. Theologians and philosophers whose conception of the spiritual world is defined solely in relation to some material opposite, which this world is held to be “other” or “higher” than, are no less guilty of R.U.P. (Barfield’s acronym for the disease in question) than the veriest empiricist. The “solid” world of the seemingly given has retained, even for them, a final jurisdiction. It is still a comfortable home to return to when speculative flights are ended.

The recommendation, propounded in the first of my letters to *The Chronicle*, that a course in the philosophy of science should be mandatory for all high school students, is thus only the beginning of a solution. If there is to be a fruitful dialogue between religion and science, the unexamined assumption that human knowledge is limited to the empirical order and that spiritual realities are therefore off limits to rational inquiry must be continually, and radically, called into question—as a precondition in fact to our being truly rational inquirers. But something more is needed as well, and for this reason I am recommending herewith a second course, this time at the college level, not in philosophy but in religion. Needless to say, what I have in mind is not just any course. As I have lamented already, most religious studies professors capitulated some time ago to the scientific pressures of contemporary academic life, and most of their courses have therefore devolved into surveys about who believed what, when, where, how often, and with which social or psychological effects. This clearly does little more than perpetuate our somnambulistic contentment with intellectual business as usual.

So no, what I am thinking of here is something quite different, something that would help to open the door for students from across the disciplines to a complete reappraisal of what constitutes knowledge. The key to this reappraisal is an axiom—anticipated by my subtitle—that might be expressed as follows: *To know what is, one must be what knows*. I have put this in what is perhaps a more cryptic and sibylline form than is strictly necessary, but the essential point is in fact a fairly straightforward one, immense though I believe its implications to be. Having learned in high school, in their study of the philosophy of science, that the seeming facts of the empirical world are the product of many prior selections and interpretations, it is essential that our students now be given in college the opportunity to begin asking themselves the question, Who or what is selecting? Who or what is interpreting? If they have studied some Latin—*mirabile*

dictu, mirabilis visu!—and are aware that a “fact” is a deed that’s been done and that “data” are things that are given, they might also be prompted to ask, Done by whom or by what? Given to whom or to what? There are doubtless many variations on this query of queries. The form in which the question is posed, however, is considerably less important than the intellectual act of posing and wrestling with it. Or perhaps I should say: The question is less important than the questioner’s self-identification *with* and self-recognition *in* the act. Precisely who or what is it that is doing the knowing when *I* know, or for that matter doing the doubting when I *don’t*?⁵

I realize this last phrase might lead some of you to think that a passing acquaintance with the Cartesian method would be perfectly sufficient for my purposes. Could students not be introduced to this line of inquiry in my already mandated high school philosophy course? Descartes famously saw that though he might doubt all the disclosures of his senses, and indeed the very existence of a world corresponding to those disclosures, he could not simultaneously doubt the existence of himself as the doubter. Even confused, mistaken, or inconclusive thinking entails a thinker: hence *cogito ergo sum*. What I have in mind now, however, is something different and considerably more demanding. I am not talking about the deductive conclusion *that* there must be some *res cogitans* or knowing I. I am talking about provoking our students—and ourselves!—to begin at least glimpsing *what* this knowing I *is*. The question is not whether one must postulate a transcendental ego as the necessary presupposition of perceptual unity. The question is whether one might contrive to look *along* this ego so as to *see oneself being what knows*. And here precisely is where a religion course, and only a religion course, can fill the bill.

To get at the essential, though, we shall need to help our young charges cut through a tangled and sometimes disheartening underbrush of distracting accidents. They will need to be taught at the outset that religions are much more than collections of texts and commentaries, more than weird episodes in the lives of persons and peoples, more than institutional excuses for violence and political intrigue, more than ideological

⁵ Each of these is a variation on the question “What is the Self?”, which the Indian advaitic sage Sri Ramana Maharshi was famous for turning back upon his inquirers.

assertions to be accepted blindly and thus in a manner that dishonors the mind.⁶ On the contrary, they must be brought into contact with teachings, and teachers, that can help them understand that authentic religions exist fundamentally for one reason, and one reason alone: as enticements and aids for the overcoming of R.U.P.⁷ Students must read the writings and be introduced to the lives of the great spiritual masters and saints, and they must be encouraged to enter into these studies, not as passive recipients of yet additional data, whether commentarial or biographical, but as active researchers working within the laboratories of their own meditational practice.

In making this claim as to the real point of religion, I have of course simply assumed without argument that the truest Hindus are Yogins, the truest Buddhists are Roshis, the truest Christians are Hesychasts, and the truest Muslims are Sufis. Needless to say, not everyone is going to agree with me! I can think of at least three groups of people who would dispute this proposition: secular cynics, of course, for whom nothing about religion is true; the majority of my fellow religion professors, who have fallen into the habit of thinking that religions have no essence and thus no truest form; and many of the faithful themselves, especially Christians and Muslims, who are inclined to suppose that the truest form of their religion is of a devotional rather than an intellectual order. Defending my claim against the several voices of this unlikely alliance would only distract our attention from the main point of this short talk. I therefore gladly concede that the teachings and technical methods of the various masters I mentioned might well be mere rivulets compared to the great oceans of religion from which they flow. I am even happy to grant, if you like, that my required course not be called a “religion” course at all—though I am at a loss to know where else in the university anything even close to what I have in mind could be found. Call it instead a course in maps and methods of attention.

Regardless of the name or departmental classification of the offering, three related sets of ideas should be placed front and center. Since understanding the true nature of knowledge is going to require overcoming at least twelve years of epistemological

⁶ Unfortunately the Dawkinses and Dennetts are mostly right about much of what goes by the name of religion, though this is clearly not to excuse them for the even more that they fail to understand.

⁷ Of course, the religions do not put it this way; they speak of overcoming sin and ignorance. But it comes to the same, for the root problem is a misidentification of the containing “I” with the contents of “me”.

misinformation, I have expressed these ideas here in a negative form. Students will need to come to grips with what knowledge is *not* before they can begin to glimpse what it *is*.

I. Seeing oneself being the knower is NOT the result of adding new contents to consciousness, however extraordinary these contents might be. It results instead from a *transformation in the very structure of consciousness*, and this is something that takes place beneath or in back of the mind and not in front of it. It is not for nothing, after all, that the masters of the traditional spiritual schools explicitly rule out “experiences” and “phenomena”—as well as what the Hindus call *siddhis* or “attainments”—as at best irrelevant to, and at worst a dangerous distraction from, truly knowing what is.

II. The seeing at stake here is NOT something that comes and goes, like a mystical vision or audition, but *a timeless recovery of What was never lost*. In the classical language of Sufism, it consists in a *maqām*, or “station”, not a *hāl*, or “state”—a mode of being altogether beyond the reach of what certain researchers are now pleased to call the “cognitive science of religion”. Seeing oneself being the knower entails, if nothing else, complete independence from the changing circumstances of the world, whether within or around us, and it would be a contradiction in terms to suppose that this independence is itself subject to alteration.

III. Being what knows is NOT a miraculous, out-of-the-blue sort of thing, which “zaps” certain people for no particular reason. On the contrary, it can be deliberately approached and prepared for through specific practices or methods, undertaken in full consciousness of what one is doing. The initial step in this work, well within the capacity of every college student, is to realize that *ordinary, so-called waking consciousness is actually a sort of sleep* and that the minds with which most of us get through the day (or not) are almost completely out of control—the minds of scientists, philosophers, and theologians just as much as the minds of freshmen.

It would no doubt be asking too much to suppose that our students could proceed from these negative preliminaries to their positive sequel within the short space of a single semester. Eager though I am to break the scientific spell, I am obliged to admit

that more advanced methods, presupposing as they do the protection of a traditional spiritual lineage, clearly go beyond anything a mere college class could be expected to provide, even assuming a Yogin, Roshi, Hesychast, or Sufi were available for the occasional guest appearance! My required course would nonetheless make a point of insisting that there *are* such methods—time-tested strategies leading to the mental control the students will have discovered they lack; methods operating on every level of the self, including not just the mind, but the will, the emotions, and the body; methods eventuating in the only true knowledge there is—a *knowledge grounded in the ipseity of knower and known*.

Getting such a course off the ground would obviously not be easy. By no means the least of the obstacles would be convincing our Office of Research Compliance that the Subject of these methods is not a subject of research. And just imagine the hassle of trying to fit the anticipated “outcomes” into an assessment plan! The stakes are much too high, however, to be daunted by these merely bureaucratic details. For in the absence of such a course—or some comparable means of addressing the foundational questions I have posed—there is little point in trying to foster discussion between religionists and scientists. I am sorry to end on so critical a note. I certainly do not wish to disparage the admirable efforts and even more admirable intentions of this faculty forum. But unless we can come to some agreement about knowledge itself, based upon a careful examination of principles and informed by an experiential glimpse of the full range of what is humanly possible, a dialogue between our disciplines will never be anything more than a euphemism for parallel monologues between the academy’s current captains of complacency and its few, and increasingly fewer, radicals.