

## **“Terroir”**

**John 4:4-26**

**Rev. Rob MacDougall**

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What are we to make of the relationship of science and religion, of empiricism and the spiritual? Is there a relationship? Are they contrary to each other? One of the kids in the church asked me after worship a few Sundays ago, “How do we know that Jesus actually lived on earth?” And a follow-up question he might have asked, “How do we know that what is written in the Bible really happened?” These were great questions and I was so glad he asked. He was experiencing the collision between his worlds – his world of faith and his world of chronological history; his world of spiritual/unseen matters and his world of provable/seen data.

When these worlds collide and when they have collided in the past, it seems that there is a human tendency to choose one world or the other, to say that one perspective is valid and the other is false. We might even say that one disproves the other – evolution disproves creationism or vice versa.

Historically, the church has had great fears regarding the expansion of the sciences. The church has regarded the acquisition of knowledge and the exploration of the physical world as heresy, if not sin.

Consider two of our most ancient Hebrew stories describing the perils of pursuing moral reasoning and technical engineering.

When Adam and Eve are plunked into the middle of the Garden of Eden, the story says that they were given all they needed to live in comfort and splendor. But these two frolicking young people were told not to eat of one tree in the garden, the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Without eating the fruit from this tree Eve and Adam would, supposedly, have remained innocent of this knowledge –they would have remained ignorant regarding what was right and what was wrong. The story doesn’t say that good and evil would be non-existent, only that people would not have knowledge of it.

For whatever reason, the Bible tells that people would be better off ignorant than knowledgeable. The pursuit of knowledge becomes the source of sin.

Consider a second ancient story, that of the tower of Babel. In the time when this story takes place, all the people of the world spoke the same language. The story goes that this

common element, language, provided a vehicle by which people could gather information and become ever more creative with what they could do with this information. One thing they created with this shared information and construction ability, was that they built a tower that reached to heaven.

When this happened the gods decided to confuse the people's understanding of each other less they continue to create their own paths to heaven. From this story we learn that God out of concern that people might enter realms they/we were not meant to enter, established barriers to prevent this from happening.

From these two stories that biblical scholars say were written by temple priests, we hear how the pursuit of knowledge, moral and technical, are rooted in sin. Because knowledge moves us closer to the realm of God it is wrong to seek it. It is also true that priests and leaders of the temple wanted to control the realms of knowledge and creativity because they provided the church with power.

When people started translating the Bible into many languages other than Latin, the church had them killed for committing heresies. Only the church and its priests were to read and interpret scripture.

When I saw the incredible sculptures of Michelangelo's "Slave" at the Louvre just over a week ago, they were powerful male figures whose arms and chests had constricting straps wrapped around them. These were the artist's portrayal of how the church bound artists from full creativity and expression.

We, as Christians, bear the burden of a history that has rejected the advancement of knowledge, discovery, expression, and the uninterpreted offering of them. Our religious tradition has had an adversarial relationship with science.

If we don't acknowledge this when we explore conversations between the field of science and the practice of religion we will be much more likely to be adversarial in our claims and far less able to hear what each other is saying.

One of my mentors in the ministry offered up a humble, pithy truth regarding human faith that is helpful to me when engaging the relationship of religion and science, he simply said, "God is beyond our comprehension but not beyond our experience." Faith from this perspective is more than what we can say about God. As soon as we say something like, "God is our father," we immediately understand that God is more or beyond what it means to be a human father. So we might say, "God is like a father is some ways, but God is also

like a mother in some ways, or a grandparent in some ways,” and on and on. We can’t put into words all of what we believe God is like, but we know whatever God is like our comprehension of “our ground of being,” as the theologian Paul Tillich put it, is hugely inadequate.

But even if we cannot begin to say all of what the divine is, we can say something of our experience of the divine.

I want to describe for you an experience that we had in France last week that illustrates how people interpret their experience of an unseen presence.

When we were in Beaune, a town located in the Burgundy region of France, we went to a winery and listened to the winemakers description of the wine taste in each of about 8 bottles. After alerting our senses to the differing tastes he said all of the grape vines that produced these distinct wines were of two varieties, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. The fermenting processes of the wines was nearly identical, the factor he attributed to the differing tastes of the wines came from what he called the “terroir”.

The French believe that grapes acquire their particular qualities from the earth and its unique composition, this is the “terroir”. He said that people in California, Oregon and other parts of the world don’t believe there is “terroir”. He said in most of the world people irrigate their grapes and so the roots of the vines don’t go down into the earth far enough to locate the unique qualities of the earth, but in France they don’t irrigate and the roots go deep, deep into the ground.

Perhaps it’s just a good marketing technique for French wines to speak of “terroir”, I don’t know for sure, but I do know that each bottle we tasted had its unique taste – most of which were wonderful. Does “terroir” exist? All I know is what I tasted.

In the Bible there is the story of the man born blind who Jesus heals. When the priests and Roman magistrates question the man about his miraculous recovery, they ask him about who Jesus is. The man responds, “I do not know if he is or isn’t the messiah, all I know is that I was blind and now I see.”

Mystery is not beyond our experience. Science could produce an explanation for why the wine tastes as it does, and it could research a medical origin for the man’s recovery of sight, but they cannot account for the human experience of the earth’s goodness and the gratitude found in the human heart. Without these elements and so many more gifts that permeate life, existence would be empty.

I always found it interesting that one of the first teachings of many protestant catechisms is this – “the purpose of life is to enjoy God.” No kidding, that’s what they say, the purpose of people/life/us is to enjoy God!

These catechisms lift up that which binds science and religion together. It is not that science and religion address or describe separate realms of life as many contemporary people liked to say about the co-existence of these two areas of focus, rather they are in my estimation two gifts that enhance our enjoyment of God and life. Science and religion together serve a greater purpose than each of them alone. The two provide the language, perspective, insights, meanings, expressions that each one lacks by itself.

Unlike much of our historic approach to these arenas of life, we do not need to defend one from the other, we need to let the two collide and to pay attention to what happens when they do. It seems relevant to ask an old biblical question as it relates to the science/religion conversation – biblically Jesus asks the question, “are people made for the Sabbath or the Sabbath made for people?” The answer is “the Sabbath is made for people,” meaning that God gives Sabbath time to enhance our lives. But we can ask a similar question of both religion and science, “are they gifts meant to serve people, or are people made to serve them?” The answer must be that science and religion are meant to serve people.

And how are they to serve us? I suppose the answers to this are vast in number but I think they might include – they serve us by enhancing our experience of life, they help us see beauty in all its forms, they help us ease and heal pain, they lead us into wonder, they open us to ourselves, they break down barriers and dispel fears. If religion and science don’t serve us in these ways they are not worth our time and resources, but from my perspective the two have contributed to these gifts in remarkable and horrifying ways.

Like so much of our monotheistic, Trinitarian, Christian, ecumenical, interfaith teachings, what we strive to discover are the dimensions of life that bind us together and actually deepen our enjoyment of life and God. We are not living in the dark ages and the time of the Inquisition. We live in a time when science has explained many dimensions of life that would clearly be met with open arms by Jesus, but we also know that science would fail miserably without the moral grounding often demanded by people of faith.

Together religion and science have a far greater chance to serve people, and I believe God’s purposes, than they would alone. Let us embrace this reality rather than fear it.