

Vernal Equinox, Science & That Old Time Religion

My how different things can look after a week or so of rain and a few feet of snow in the mountains. Just a couple weeks ago we were preparing for another drought year, and suddenly things are looking a lot greener and wetter! In some Old Time Religions this would be the answer to prayers, sacrifices, and lots of rain dances. Today we rely on trained meteorologists using the best scientific data and measuring devices—sometimes they can forecast accurately almost 10 days ahead! Weather patterns can change quickly and storms can develop suddenly, but climate scientists can see the longer patterns and predict changes much further ahead. Astronomers give us other insights about the universe. Science helps us to know that we will experience the Vernal Equinox at 9:15 a.m. on Tuesday March 20th this year in Stockton. At the Equinox, the Sun crosses the Celestial Equator and the hours of daylight and darkness are approximately equal.

In regard to the longer term patterns, science has become increasingly concerned about the levels of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, Global Warming, changing climactic patterns, and especially melting polar ice. Old Time Religions might pray to the gods to fix such a problem, and some practitioners of newer religions might also leave it in God's hands, but scientists know that humans caused the problems now endangering life on earth and see multiple ways that humans should have and still need to mitigate the problems of pollution to air, water, and earth. It's not rocket science or brain science, but it is earth science and climate science, and ignoring the problems or believing that God will step in to fix the problems is at best short-sighted and at worst homicidal, suicidal and possibly genocidal.

I have heard very few religious leaders actually preach against doing something about climate change. And for that matter, it isn't religious leaders who kept the CDC from investigating gun deaths.

Since 1996, Congress has essentially banned any studies of gun deaths in the U.S. It is politicians backed by major corporations that have prevented the U.S. from addressing some of the most virulent problems plaguing society and threatening national and global health. Without federal funding, studies of climate science will struggle as much as studies of gun deaths and smoking have in the past. Broad scientific studies are very expensive, and wholly owned politicians who rely on corporate funding have reliably shut down funding of anything corporations have wanted to bury. Greed seems quite able to trump both religion and science.

Since the rise of the Moral Majority decades ago, politicians owned by corporations have most often also supported a distorted neo-conservative version of Christianity that believes God rewards the wealthy and that therefore the wealthy must surely be Godly wise men whose opinions on pollution, guns, abortion, the rights of women and minorities, and other issues need to be supported. With the exception of occasional general references to man being given dominion over the earth, the Bible is rarely even mentioned. Over the years these views have come to be supported by many churches who have become dependent on the contributions of wealthy sponsors. The extension of corporate rights to influence the political process accomplished through the Citizen's United ruling paired with the de facto loosening of restrictions on political action by religious groups under Republican rule has further emboldened corporations and some religious groups to take action against EPA scientists and others whose views differ from their own.

Neither old earth-centered religions nor modern religions have many core beliefs that directly conflict with science. It is the more recent accretions of flat-earth beliefs and literalizing assumptions about miraculous explanations of some groups that are preventing many adherents from seeing how science actually makes sense of many of the observations of the ancients. Some scriptures when taken literally in a fashion almost certainly not intended by the writers may conflict more directly but need not be a problem in light of other material regularly ignored.

Stephen Hawking, whose recent death we mourn, had concluded based on scientific evidence that there is no God. Even facing the point of death after an amazing scientific career while trapped within a body he mostly could not control, he still could not find much positive in religion.

For myself, if religious ideas had too much conflict with observable science, I have been more likely to keep the scientific explanation. That is just one of the many reasons why Unitarian Universalism has been a better fit for me than was United Methodism. The miracles in the Bible never made much sense to me anyway, nor did certain beliefs about the history of earth and creation, the virgin birth, and the resurrection.

One lesson from Stephen Hawking that particularly resonates with me is the reminder to look up into the heavens. Science, and religions old and young have always been fascinated by the stars, planets, comets and the universe of mystery beyond this old earth. There is nothing more spiritual to me than looking up into the heavens on a dark cloudless night from some place out of the city and just wondering about all that is out there! So many answers are out there, and so many mysteries remain!

What mysteries draw your attention? Where do you experience wonder? Religion can stifle the quest or open up the heart to possibilities unseen. Science can draw us to explore amazing facets of the universe. Either can open us to new discoveries, but some religions are too ready with set answers, beliefs ossified into doctrine, dogma, and creed. Unitarian Universalism offers groups that study and discuss Building Your Own Theology and invites everyone to write their own credo or statement of belief, not as an endpoint but as a marker along the journey.

As we reach the Vernal or Spring Equinox, this marker of the change of seasons, with the winter rains and snows coming so late, we recognize powers we cannot control and often do not understand. Science can describe it, but there remains a spiritual mystery in the actions of nature. The ancients tried to appease the gods with sacrifices, feasts, and prayers, asking for rains and snows to fall, the sun to return and warm the seeds and the seasons, and for good hunting, fertility, and prosperity.

Today science attempts to answer all the same questions and more, but so many questions remain only partly answered and so many mysteries continue to draw human curiosity. We are but a step or two ahead of those people we would call superstitious primitives. We think we know so much, but we have often merely created bigger problems with more elusive answers than all that came before!

Science and religion may offer us many different worldviews or perspectives from which to understand ourselves and the universe. From the same basic facts and realities, we may see things in vastly different ways. That has been more clear than ever before in the differences between progressives and supporters of Trump in the last 2 years. Never in my lifetime have the same realities been seen so differently by so many people. Not that either progressives or neo-conservatives are monolithic groups. Within each there are many factions, some aligned along single issues, others on many, but few agreeing on all things.

Even within Unitarian Universalism we have many differing positions along with the many places that our beliefs and positions coincide. Some of us would happily spend hours in deep discussions of matters scientific and political, while others would far sooner prefer to meditate and explore matters spiritual and religious. Yet others want to write letters, send e-mails, and march for justice. Some would like to do all those things, while others are satisfied by none of them. And we are just a small church from one small, but amazing, religious tradition!

So what have we learned in the time since ancient Druids stacked up monuments like Stonehenge? How have we homo sapiens changed the world for the better? Other than getting rid of most of the wilderness and wild animals, cutting and burning the forests, polluting earth, water, and sky, what good have we done? We humans have built millions of monuments to ourselves, but what have we done of lasting value?

We may not have the staying power of the cockroach, but we have long since taken control of this planet, at least at the surface. Whether we can infest other planets remains to be seen, but there are efforts ongoing to

colonize Mars. Are the beliefs of modern religions better or more convincing than those of the Old Time ancient earth-centered traditions? Does science offer more or less comfort in this age? Where are the centers of meaning for modern persons? Who are we and where are we going? What good have we accomplished and what difference have we made in the grand flow of the universe?

If the 20th Century was the era of mighty machines, with trains and cars and trucks and ships and planes and rockets, and power unleashed by dams and oil and nuclear fission, what will 21st Century humanity add to the cause of progress? The great Cathedrals of the middle ages were built over hundreds of years, but today the construction of walkways and bridges must be rushed into days to avoid slowing progress. And human lives are no more sacred than ever except before they are born and can make political points. And where is our center of meaning, and what can we do to give life more meaning and make the universe better?

As we contemplate the coming of spring and enjoy the flowering and leafing out of the trees, the warming of the days, the various expressions of new life among plants and animals, may we take time to explore and discover the world around us, and may we seek to make a positive difference among our own kind as well as those other species with which we share the planet!

And as we prepare for Spring, I invite you each to share a word or two about the meaning of the changing seasons, and our religion, and your life!

Thank you for sharing your thoughts, your lives, your stories!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!