Science, Religion, and Joseph Priestly
The Rev. Steve Edington
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As the COVID vaccines are being administered, I guess it was inevitable—given the tenor of the times—that a counter, anti-vaccine movement would emerge. One latest episode of this phenomenon happened last week when anti-vaccine protesters temporarily shut down a vaccine site at Los Angeles' Dodger Stadium. Among the wilder conspiracy theories making the rounds in this movement is one holding that Bill Gates is somehow behind the whole vaccine roll-out with some nefarious purpose since he is, quoting from some of their literature, "a satanic, pedophile eugenicist."

There has long been an anti-vaccine movement in this country. It has found new life and new energy as the COVID-19 vaccines are produced and administered. This phenomenon is actually part of an even larger one that holds any number of suspicions and conspiracy allegations towards the whole scientific enterprise itself. As any reputable scientist will tell you, their knowledge is always incomplete and ever evolving. This, to my way of thinking, is what makes scientific knowledge reliable. It is always open to further examination and exploration.

But not everyone sees it that way. There are people—particularly those of a certain religious bent—who, for one reason or another see certain scientific discoveries and advances as threats to their beliefs, if not their very ways of living.

The event at Dodger Stadium reminds me that it was an anti-science, and a religiously motivated, mob in Birmingham, England in the summer of 1791 that led a British scientist, theologian, and political philosopher to flee his home and eventually come to America. One of the things he did when he got here was to plant a flag for American Unitarianism. That would be Joseph Priestly. We'll pick up his story in a few minutes.

I'm offering this sermon, in part, as my contribution to the Clergy Letters Project, to which Vince Ribas introduced me early on in my ministry here. The Clergy Letters Project asks participating ministers to devote a sermon in February, close to the birthday of Charles Darwin, on the topic of evolution. I did one last February shortly before the pandemic shut down our sanctuary services. Rather

than revisit that specific topic today, however, I'll use my "Darwin Sunday Sermon" to speak to what I see as the necessary—and I do mean necessary—interplay between science and religion or philosophy.

I'll be using two avowed Unitarians, who lived some 250 years apart, to get at our topic. One is the just mentioned Joseph Priestly. The other one—which we'll get to near the end of this sermon—is the late novelist Kurt Vonnegut. In between those two I'll speak to why I think science and religion actually need one another. And I'll do it all in the next twenty minutes.

We start with Priestly. I'm going to offer this piece of my sermon if I were making it into a movie. This means you are about to witness my very short-lived career as a screen writer.

We open with a blank screen. Then the words *Birmingham, England. July, 1791* appear. The first shot is through a living room window where we see 58-year-old Joseph Priestly and his wife Mary spending their evening. Yes, their names really were Mary and Joseph. An interior scan of their home shows Joseph's laboratory and study. The camera then looks out the window to the Unitarian Church next door where Priestly is the minister. He was one of the founders of British Unitarianism.

The Priestley's hear angry crowd noises outside, and windows breaking. They smell smoke as their house is set on fire. Their church is torched as well. Joseph and Mary flee their home with whatever possessions they can grab and escape to London to take refuge with friends there.

Quick backstory: This mob attack was actually instigated by an Anglican Bishop, Richard Horsley, who had been fiercely attacking Priestly for both his anti-trinitarian religious views, and his calling for the end of the British monarchy. Rev. Horsley denied any personal responsibility for the riot—his inflammatory rhetoric towards Priestly notwithstanding. (Sound familiar?)

Back to our move: After showing the Priestleys escape to London, more words come onto the screen: *Two Years Later*. Now we see Joseph and Mary setting sail for America, where two of their grown sons have settled.

The rest of the movie is a combination of prequel and sequel showing the events in Priestley's life that led up to the Birmingham riots and some of what came afterwards. The Priestley's eventually settle in rural Pennsylvania near their sons, after Priestley helped to found a Unitarian Church in Philadelphia. While there was Unitarian sentiment in some of the more liberal Congregational Churches up in New England at that time—the one in Philadelphia was the first one in America to actually call itself "Unitarian."

Joseph Priestley was a fascinating individual. His life constituted a very creative mix of science, religion, and politics. He was born in 1733 and lost his mother at age 6. His financially strapped father sent him off to the care of a wealthy aunt who paid for his education. He mastered several languages by the age of 16 and originally prepared for the Presbyterian ministry.

His Calvinist-oriented ministerial studies, however, led him to reject Calvinism; and to embrace the Unitarianism of that time with its emphasis on the life and teachings of Jesus as the basis for human salvation, and not his death to deliver humans from the supposed taint of original sin. He taught languages at various English universities and pastored several British Unitarian Churches. He and his wife raised four children. All in all, theirs was a pretty conventional life for persons of their standing during the time and place in which they lived; but with some pretty unconventional ideas.

Priestley met Benjamin Franklin in 1766 when Franklin visited London. By now Ben had done his thing with the kite and electricity, and he regaled Priestley with stories of some of his other experiments. It was Franklin who pushed Priestley into the scientist part of his life—adding it to his career in religion, politics, and academics. It was Priestley the scientist who was able to isolate and identify oxygen. He shared his findings with a French scientist named Antoine Lavosier, and together they are credited with the discovery of oxygen.

Around this same time, Priestly also discovered and isolated carbon dioxide which he called "heavy gas." He devised a way to dissolve this gas into water, which gave the water a tangy taste. That is to say, he invented the carbonization of water—for which he was elected to the French Academy of Sciences. So, there you have it: One of the first persons to bring Unitarianism to America also made the discovery, and came up with the process, that paved the way for Coca-Cola.

Now, to scientist, minister, theologian, and academic we can add radical political philosopher. Priestly learned, by way of his French contacts, of the stirrings of democratic ferment in that country as they led up to the French Revolution of 1787. From his friend in America, Ben Franklin, he also learned of the fledgling democratic experiments that were happening in this country following our revolution that gained us our independence from Priestley's England. It all led Priestley to issue a trove of writings defending both the French and the American Revolutions, and calling for an end to the British monarchy; which gets us back to those Birmingham riots of 1791.

What was originally passed off as random violence by a bunch of street hooligans, actually proved to be a carefully orchestrated attack on Priestly, both for his radical politics, and his so-called "heathen" religion, by certain highly placed, and very powerful persons, within the British ruling classes. Their most vocal spokesperson was the aforementioned Anglican Bishop Richard Horsley. Having his house, library, laboratory, and church destroyed in a riot that was deliberately instigated by persons high up in the British government—and knowing that his life was in danger—was what brought the 58-year-old Joseph Priestly, and the Unitarian religion, to America.

We UUs, then, arrived in America on the wings, or on the ocean waves, of a scientist, a Unitarian minister, a theologian, an academic, and a radical (for his day) political philosopher—all in the same person. And yes, there is an equally important Universalist side to our American story that I'll share on another Sunday.

Priestley remained in America for the rest of his life, continuing with his writings, and his scientific pursuits, while also gathering a Unitarian congregation in his home in Northumberland, Pennsylvania. He died in 1804. The UU Church in Northumberland today observes an annual Joseph Priestly Sunday in his memory.

When I look to Priestley's life and legacy, then, I see much more than a person who was one of the avatars of American Unitarian Universalism. He is that, to be sure, but his overall legacy is far broader. Priestley demonstrated what I earlier referred to as the necessary interaction of science, religion, and philosophy. And what do I mean by "necessary"? Well, it's all because of evolution.

We human beings are the species on this planet—most likely the sole species—whose brains and minds have evolved to the point that we are able to ask both the "how" and the "why" questions of our existence. There's an irony for you: It is human evolution that has brought us human beings to the point where we can have debates about evolution!

As to that science and religion/philosophy relationship: It is the scientists who pursue the "how" and the "why" (with a small "w) questions and challenges of both our human existence, as well as the workings of our earth and universe. It is the scientists who explore the questions of how things work, and why certain processes play out in the way that they do. It is these kinds of scientific endeavors that have given us the great tools of civilization (many for good and some for ill) over the course of human life on this planet.

Tools: Think of that opening scene in Stanley Kubrick's movie *2001.* A bunch of apes are milling around in a clearing, with some of them pounding on the ground with clubs torn from tree limbs. One of the apes stops pounding and stares at the club in his hand, apparently wondering what else it might be used for. He throws the club up in the air where it morphs into a giant space station, which is the setting for the rest of the movie. That is Kubrick's, as well as that of the author of the book on which the movie is based, Arthur Clarke's, story of human civilization in just a few seconds of screen time. It's the story of the development and shaping of our tools, which in turn have developed and shaped our lives. We shape our tools, and then our tools re-shape us.

The role of the science, then, is to probe the how's and why's as to the workings of our world and universe and how those workings apply to our lives. Part of that probing includes learning how we as a species came into existence.

The accompanying role of religion and philosophy in this process, as I see it, is to probe the questions and the challenges of what I'll call "The Big Why"—Why with a capital 'W' that is to say. As science pursues the how's and the why's of our existence when it comes to their processes, it is religion, at its best, that pursues the Bigger Why of what does all this ultimately mean? Is there some greater, overarching Meaning or Purpose to it all as we move from clubs to space ships?

Just as science can be used for both good and wonderful purposes, as well as for horrible and destructive purposes; the same goes for religion. Science has given us great civilizations and has greatly improved our lots in life as human beings, like cures for diseases—such as the terrible disease we're dealing with right now. And it has also given us atom bombs, horrible weapons of war, and certain kinds of waste that threaten the very life of our planet.

It's the same dynamic with religion. It can be a wonderful force for good. It can help us as human beings seek and discover the deeper meanings of the lives we are living. This is why I chose to remain in the ministry even after I could no longer accept much of the religion of my upbringing. I still regarded religion as a force for good, if it is in the right hands.

And, as we well know, religion can also be used for some horribly destructive ends that I don't feel the need to elaborate on here, except to say this: The thing that sickened me the most in watching the Capitol riots this past January 6th were the signs carried by some saying that they were acting in the name of Jesus.

Alright then, going back to the person whose life we've been considering, Joseph Priestley was one of those who gave us the best of both science and religion. He was one of our forebearers who paved the way for the UU congregations we have today where, in the words of Kenneth Patton that Susan read for us earlier, we offer "A house of truth seeking, where scientists can encourage devotion to their quest, where mystics can abide in a community of seekers."

We have one more round to go this morning. You may consider this a teaser for the sermon I'll offer in two weeks on the life and writings of another Unitarian—or Unitarian Universalist as we've now become—the late Kurt Vonnegut.

In his novel *Galapagos* Vonnegut writes of an ill-fated cruise, in the fall of 1986, from Guayaquil, Peru to the Galapagos Islands where Darwin's observations of life there led to his formulating of the Theory of Evolution. I'm not going to touch on the novel's narrative, which, even by Vonnegut's standards, was rather weird. Beyond the story, however, is the even more weird part in that the novel's narrator is a ghost named Leon, who is floating around from one million years into the future, while looking back to, and relating, the events in the book. He

loses his earthly life in the story itself, but instead of getting into any kind of an afterlife, he just hangs around as a ghost.

The recurring line that Leon the Ghost uses in narrating the novel, is “this was all back when our brains were too big.” What’s happened is that after a million years we humans have evolved, or devolved, into a post-human species, where our brains have shrunk to the point that we no longer consider those how’s and the why’s of the scientists, or the greater “How’s and Why’s” of religion. We just live in a kind of immediate existence. As Leon the Ghost sees it—from his perspective of a million years into the future—the world is actually a better, more peaceful, and safer place because of these small-brained, post-human beings. They aren’t smart enough to do all the terrible and destructive things their big-brained human ancestors did from a million years earlier.

Behind this literary device is Vonnegut’s often dark and sardonic humor that I’ll say more about in two weeks. It seems he wrote this novel while in one of his more pessimistic moods about the human condition.

My takeaway from this novel is that, for better or for worse, we have the brains and the minds that human evolution has given us. Certain human beings have used their big brains, as well as their hearts and souls, in some wonderfully creative and life enhancing ways. Not only have they given us our great tools of civilization—they have also given us art and music and poetry and literature and religion and philosophy. And, as we well know, our big brains have also been put to terribly deadly and destructive uses as well.

In Joseph Priestley, as well as in many other wonderful human beings, we see someone who put his big brain to good use; and we UUs are among the many benefactors of his legacy, in the realms of science, religion, and politics.

“With joy we claim the growing light; Advancing thought and widening view.
With larger freedom, clearer sight; Which from the old unfold the new.”

Think not only on Priestley, but on all of those who have reflected the wisdom of these words as we sing them together.

Rev. Steve Edington—February 7, 2021