

Problems of Definition by Bob Dennis

Is there a 'progressive wing' of the UMC? If there is, I would like to see the documentation and characterization of this group, because I have not encountered any 'progressive wing' in my own church experiences. The last progressive I can positively name was a professor in my college from 1964. Even in courses taken at Wesley Seminary, I met only mildly middle-of-the-road professors, no progressives. It might speed our progress to use the terms literalists and parablists, respectively for those who read scripture literally (as if the first human being was actually named Adam; as if David really slew a giant with his slingshot) and those who read the Bible as stories, parables, metaphors, teaching moments (Adam is a human representation of God's creative power; David and Goliath is a parable about faith; neither Adam nor Goliath is a historical personage like George Washington or Napoleon).

As to "biblical literacy" (either for literalists or parablists), we again have a problem of definition. Do we measure such a quality by the quantity of specific details known of the characters and stories in the Bible, or do we measure how much a person understands about the text and its messages as "literacy"? There has to be a middle ground where a common vocabulary is established. As Prothero pointed out in *Religious Literacy*, "challenging conversations ... were not possible without some common knowledge... need to have some shared vocabulary, some basic religious literacy." That basic religious literacy must include both facts of the text and means of understanding the text.

By biblical illiteracy I mean the persons, even if they can read the texts, do not really understand how to understand their own canonical texts, but rely on old folk tales, old imagery, old misconceptions of just how the Bible came about. They also appear to not understand the idea of parables or symbolic storytelling, when they insist on literal readings of scripture. They do not understand the method of mythological speak. Even a suggestion of mythology within the texts is a dangerous flare to literalists.

There is an analogous problem seen with the "new atheists". These scientists have fixed their views to a concrete point where no theology is adequate. For them all theology is nonsense. I call this scientific literalism. To be successful at increasing dialogue and the meeting of minds over theology and science, we must fight both scientific and religious literalism. Theologians cannot posit theological principles which violate scientifically observed fact without appearing stupid. Likewise, scientists cannot address the existence or non-existence of 'God', simply because we cannot define 'God' in any way that we can then measure 'God'. When scientists speak about things they cannot measure, they appear stupid.

As to the question, "What can Genesis 1 and Rev. 21:1 possibly mean in 21st century?", the very manner in which the writer poses this question suggests a determination to have an answer only from a scientific/technological viewpoint. But biblical texts are purely theological assertions, not requiring, indeed not allowing, any scientific examination. Science and religion

do not intersect, in my opinion, thus cannot arrive at a common point with two different answers; i.e., they cannot conflict. Theology and law may conflict due to common interests of law, society, religion, and theologians, but not science.

Consonant with a non-literalist, or parablist, view of the Bible, these passages, theologically speaking, probably mean very nearly the same thing to us today that they meant to the persons who wrote them, two thousand and more years ago. Genesis 1 simply states that God, the object of our worship, is also the force of all creation, the force of our very being. The Revelation 21:1 passage is likewise an assurance – or reassurance – of the power and fundamental essence of this same God, whom the scripture writer asserts will figuratively create something entirely new, when and if it suits God’s purpose. Neither passage should be taken literally, as the literalists insist, and as is so often pushed as ‘education’ in our Sunday Schools. I would also assert that the mysterious writer of Revelation was not speaking figuratively or literally about the fall of Babylon, nor about any end to the Roman Empire, but entirely theologically in order to encourage adherents to the faith. Thus, no literalism.

Neither passage should be held to correspond with modern physics, atomic theory, or modern cosmology, on which scientific literalists so insist. Richard Dawkins and other ‘new atheists’ insist that if biblical texts are not scientifically demonstrable, then people must either become atheists or be deemed fools. They are wrong, and rather dense for not seeing the enormous empty chasm lying beneath their own inconsistent arguments.

The many different and differing texts of the canon are neither literal recipe books for beginners on how to be holy, nor scientific textbooks nor history books. Biblical texts are instructions for religious life; for how each of us must relate to God. The individual tales may be structured like myths, in parables, in folksy stories, in humorous skits; the writers were quite talented and creative in how they formed their instructive materials. And as very late inheritors of the text, we must also deal with redactors, editors, and various rearrangements of the materials, to say nothing of the problems of translation. The biblical text itself instructs us to not take this written word literally, but points out how mankind would not understand anything if it were told straight. “So he spoke to them in parables...”

Scientists and theologians must work to avoid both textual literalism and scientific literalism in reading or reacting to religious texts.

Cultural backgrounds for the biblical texts are significant, but much more problematic is the way in which we read those texts. Biblical texts are canonized not because they are historical or old, but especially because their meanings clearly apply to ongoing generations, apply to problems of today just as they applied to problems of long ago. Updating canon to today would be a wonderful way of including new insights, but such updating would not throw out the essentially eternal value of insights found in Ecclesiastes, Job, Genesis, and almost every other biblical text. We are no smarter – science and engineering excepted – than those men living in

the Near East two thousand years ago. For that matter, we may be no smarter than the cavemen. Without written records we just don't know how they thought about the universe, creation, God, etc. In my view, human is human. Aside from specific survival skills and modern conveniences and entertainments, the Neanderthal reasoned pretty much like I do. Morally we have not gotten any better, nor any worse. We still have a human distribution ranging from Leon Lederman to Donald Trump, all within the same biological species.

As the writer highlights, we must take contemporary biblical scholarship seriously; we must pay attention to archaeological discoveries; and we must constantly adapt to linguistic changes. While a three-tier universe is not how we see creation today, this does not mean that we need ignore the musings of those for whom that model of the universe was a reasonable idea. The process model for the individual relating to God has not changed, no matter how the individual views the universe. God is still creator, and all else which we theologically assign to God.

The writer asks why we would use mythological language of the Bible, when he says "we know better". Mythological constructs are not a matter of "knowing better". We use mythological language when simple everyday concrete imagery does not do the job. For example, to describe the receipt of a faith by a people, the New Testament writer speaks of the Holy Spirit entering them, and the people speaking in various languages. How would you describe the extension of faith into a population using only scientifically definable words? We know the faith penetrated into hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people. But this was not done by pouring a magical chemical over them. This was not done by a game of "gossip" process. The gospel writer (actually Luke-Acts) described what is a spiritual process. Only spirit words would avail. Science has its own set of mythological constructs: light wave, electron, etc. So yes, sometimes we need to use mythological language to convey our ideas, both in theology and in science.

Whether the insights of science (i.e., of observable phenomena) yield more accurate stories of origins is a debatable question. Many say that only science can answer such questions, but most folks would disagree with this scientific literalism. Cultures forever, as far as we can determine, all had creation stories. Science has only recently come up with its own creation story. That scientific creation story is something which science by definition cannot come up with strictly scientifically, because scientific method demands measurability. Since we were not there at the creation, how does any scientist propose measuring it? And before anyone goes out on that Big Bang limb too far, remember that such a model depends upon running equations backwards for several trillion years, a time lapse that makes for enormous error bounds, whether you run the equations forward or backward. Science is valid when it treats measurements; just as theology is valid when it treats God and man-God relations. Theology cannot address atoms or evolution or cures for disease; science cannot address sin, salvation, or creation of the universe out of nothingness.