

THE DANGEROUS EDGE OF THINGS

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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Several nights ago, over dinner with friends who are not part of the All Souls community, my wife Holly and I found ourselves engaged in a wide-ranging conversation about religion. This seems to happen rather frequently when I'm around, though almost never at my instigation. With our friends—he's a sardonic Jew, and she's a wistful Congregationalist, both quite lapsed—we decried the appalling state of religion in the world. We wondered how people came to believe things that science tells us can't happen, such as the virgin birth and the resurrection. We mused about whether Christianity could be reformed thoroughly enough to become gender-neutral and still survive.

Then the wistfulness set in, as the Congregationalist longingly recalled the power of the hymns and Bible stories of her small-town Christian upbringing. Maybe Thomas Jefferson was right, Holly remarked, when he took the New Testament gospels and a scissors, and literally cut out the miracles and supernatural elements, keeping the rest. The sardonic Jew objected. Every religion has irrational elements, he said; that's what makes it a religion.

Not necessarily, I countered. Mystery and magic aren't the same thing. I don't believe in events that contravene the laws of nature, but some important elements of human life can't be put into a test tube or under a microscope. He persisted: if you can't prove something, it's irrational. Mathematicians can't prove the principle of addition, I responded, but that doesn't make belief in addition irrational. And so it went.

An hour later, we paid the check and said good night. It had been a wonderful evening: engaging, provocative, even profound. It reminded me of the conversations people must have had to entertain themselves before radios, televisions, and the internet presented themselves as substitutes.

But the evening was more than entertainment. Without intending to do so, we had stumbled upon what I believe is one of the most important issues facing our world today: the difference between science and religion, between reason and revelation, between knowledge and faith. The usual way of parsing this relationship is to say that knowledge is based upon human reason, and that faith is based upon a supernatural revelation. For those who accept this dichotomy, the problem comes when reason and revelation clash, requiring that one or the other be given precedence. We live in a world roiled by this dilemma. Within this setting, my goal is to clarify what we mean when we describe ourselves as people of faith.

You doubtless know about the evolution question that was posed during the first Republican presidential debate last month. The candidates on stage were asked to raise their hands if they did not believe in evolution. Sam Brownback, a Senator from Kansas, was one of three who raised their hands. On Friday, Brownback published an op-ed piece in *The New York Times* explaining his views on this issue in more detail.

He begins on a promising note: “The heart of the issue is that we cannot drive a wedge between faith and reason. I believe wholeheartedly that there cannot be any contradiction between the two. The scientific method, based on reason, seeks to discover truths about the nature of the created order and how it operates, whereas faith deals with spiritual truths.”

Brownback’s optimism that faith and reason can never clash, however, turns out to be ill-founded. Creationism and evolution, for example, describe the origin of life in significantly different ways. When forced to choose one or the other, Brownback does not equivocate: “The truths of science and faith are complementary: they deal with very different questions, but they do not contradict each other because the spiritual order and the material order were created by the same God.”

For Brownback, the supernatural revelation recorded in the Christian Bible ultimately trumps human reason. He says, “I firmly believe that each human person, regardless of circumstance, was willed into being and made for a purpose. While no stone should be left unturned in seeking to discover the nature of man’s origins, we can say with conviction that we know with certainty at least part of the outcome. Man was not an accident and reflects an image and likeness unique in the created order. Those aspects of evolutionary theory compatible with this truth are a welcome addition to human knowledge. Aspects of these theories that undermine this truth, however, should be firmly rejected as an atheistic theology posing as science.”

The Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, inverts Brownback’s hierarchy. In his book titled *The Universe in a Single Atom*, the Dalai Lama says that if science demonstrates a religious claim to be false, then we must accept the findings of science and abandon the religious claim. In other words, by helping us to identify and discard the magical elements of religion, reason helps us to embrace, with increasing confidence, the mystery that lies at the heart of religious faith.

But if we strip religion of its supernatural elements, those contrary to reason, doesn’t that leave people of faith on the boundary—sort of religious, but not really? For David Brooks, one of the op-ed columnists for *The New York Times*, the boundary is actually a good place to be. In a recent column, he describes three kinds of people: the thoroughly religious, the antireligious, and the quasi-religious. He points out that the Pope and many others speak for the thoroughly religious. Christopher Hitchens, with his book *God Is Not Great*, has written the latest best-seller to speak on behalf of the antireligious. But, Brooks wonders, who speaks for the quasi-religious? “Quasi-religious people attend services, but they’re bored much of the time. They read the Bible, but find large parts of it odd and irrelevant. They find themselves inextricably bound to their faith, but think some of the people who define it are nuts.”

Brooks goes on to claim that quasi-religious people often occupy a demographic sweet spot. Standing on the boundary between the thoroughly religious and the antireligious, they benefit from the cultural and economic strengths of being part of a cohesive traditional community; yet they are more individualistic, more future-oriented, and less bound by neighborhood and extended family than earlier generations. For example, quasi-religious Protestants built Victorian England. Quasi-religious Jews helped shape 20th-century American culture. And now quasi-religious Catholics are in the midst of an economic boom, which is the main topic of his column. If you really want to

supercharge the nation, Brooks says, fill it with college students who consistently attend church but are skeptical of everything they hear there.

Why would this work? Studies consistently show that college students who attend religious services regularly do better than students who don't. And students who come from denominations that encourage dissent (this is good news for Unitarian Universalist students) are more successful, on average, than students from denominations that don't.

His general strategy for successful quasi-religiosity is this: "Always try to be the least believing member of one of the more observant sects. Participate in organized religion, but be a friendly dissident inside. Enshrine yourself in traditional moral practice, but champion piecemeal modernization. Submit to the wisdom of the ages, but with one eye open."

Brooks' advice reminds me of the conventional wisdom often imparted to home buyers: always buy the worst house in the best neighborhood you can afford. While this strategy may indeed maximize your net worth, you are more likely to be happy if you do the opposite: buy in a neighborhood where you can afford one of the best houses. Even if you have a lovely home, you are likely to feel dissatisfied if all the homes nearby are much nicer than yours.

To put this principle into religious terms: we might be happiest if we are among the more devout members of one of the less observant religious groups. Believe less, but believe it more fervently. Hold fewer truths, but hold them more firmly. Practice fewer spiritual disciplines, but practice them more faithfully.

Whichever religious neighborhood you choose, it must be a place where both scientific knowledge and religious faith come under the scrutiny of human reason. Like Brownback, many Christians insist that true knowledge is impossible for anyone who does not first embrace orthodox doctrine. For them, belief in the Bible is a necessary prerequisite to understanding the natural world and human history. As the fourth-century church father St. Augustine famously put it, "I believe, therefore I understand." Children of the Enlightenment move in the opposite direction: not from belief to understanding, but from understanding to belief. Enlightened faith never asks us to set aside what we know.

But how do we decide what to believe? If scientific knowledge comes from human reason, where does faith come from, if it is not human assent to supernatural revelation? Let me be candid here. Faith is something no one fully understands. It peers into the realm of mystery and transcendence, of meaning and purpose, of value and satisfaction. In the modern world, people of enlightened faith live on the boundary between science and religion. For this reason, when we talk about faith, as the poet Robert Browning once said, "Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things. The honest thief, the tender murderer, the superstitious atheist." To which list we might add the skeptical believer. In my view, faith stands at the dangerous edge of things: on the boundary between things we know for certain and things we can never fully comprehend.

This boundary can be violated in two ways. The people Brooks describes as thoroughly religious can easily allow their faith to run roughshod over scientific knowledge. Antireligious people, on the other hand, can easily allow scientific certitude to drain life of the mysteries and satisfactions of faith.

What about quasi-religious people? Brooks appears to use the term quasi-religious to describe people who believe half-heartedly: they sort of believe things that they know

aren't true. But "quasi" doesn't mean half or partly. It doesn't convey ambivalence about the word that follows it—religion, in this case. "Quasi" is formed from two Latin words meaning "as if." Unbeknownst to Brooks, the term quasi-religious suggests an important insight: faith is a commitment to live as if certain things are true, even if we cannot prove them.

When we say that all people are created equal, for example, we are not saying that scientists have proven that every human being is equal in some objective sense. Rather, we are committing ourselves to live as if equality is a universal truth. When some element of our faith is proven false, however, it should be abandoned. When shown to be harmful to others, it should be reformed. When shown to be indifferent to the fate of the natural world, it should be rejected. Because faith stands at the dangerous edge of things, it is always at risk of either withering away or turning demonic.

At its best, however, faith is a commitment to live as if certain things are true, and thereby help to make them so. As the writer of the book of Hebrew in the Christian New Testament puts it, "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Faith is a commitment to live as if life is a wondrous mystery, as if love is divine, as if life is good, as if we are responsible for the well-being of those around us. Faith is a commitment to live fervently and devoutly, with eyes wide open and mind fully engaged, but also with heart open to mystery and soul attuned to the transcendent.

My point is that people of enlightened faith must attend carefully to the difference between mystery and magic. Supernatural religion has everything to fear when confronted by the purifying fire of reason, but faith has everything to gain. Once the dross of magic has been skimmed away, people of enlightened faith no longer need to be tentative or half-hearted. They can give themselves fully to their faith—as if it is true.