

**Thoughts Prompted by reading *Skeptics and True Believers, the Exhilarating Connection Between Science and Religion*, by Chet Raymo (MJF Books, New York, 1998)**

Raymo, in this book, suggests that the chasm between science and religion can be bridged by adopting a creation-centered, rather than a redemption-centered, spirituality. When I got to the part where Raymo decried the misuse of modern physics to support some of the same wacky claims I have attacked, I thought “Wow, this is a cool book, one with which I can largely agree!” At that point I sent a nice note to Chet Raymo thanking him for writing his thoughtful book. The note said:

"Discovered" your 1998 book at B&N and snatched it up because I am struggling with the same issue you are addressing, much to my delight.

I held my breath reading your section on quantum physics and was so relieved on page 190 that you saw it the same way I did that I immediately put down the book and searched up an email address for you to tell you I like and appreciate your book. I will be using it in a larger context, along with several others on the same topic, to make a statement about where I am now, at the ripe old age of 58, regarding my spiritual

notions as a human being and as a scientist, on my personal website.

I was so upset reading Zukav's *The Dancing Wu-Li Masters* that I posted a hundred page critique of it on my website. It is at:

<http://www.thoughtsandplaces.org/newin2002/Recognitions.pdf>

I am not suggesting you read it, but just wanted you to know that I am downright angry at the name-brand scientists who colluded on that mishmash of fact and wishful thinking masquerading as science. I know their motive, I think: popular support means political support and funding, but that is no excuse for selling your "soul" (whatever it is, it is us, and hence to sell it is to lose oneself).

I gave a lecture at Fermilab last year in which I got carried away with the mood of the audience and launched into a tirade against the Fundamentalists of the New Age movement, and I used as an example the case where Zukav, in his book, egged on by several of his 'real' physicist supporters, calls for the cessation of particle physics experimentation because all results are created by the expectations of the researchers. Total garbage, scientifically. How is this different from Rome chilling research by killing its practitioners when the results challenged dogma? It isn't, except that violence isn't available for enforcement.

That tirade, much to my chagrin, is available on the Internet at:

[http://vmsstreamer1.fnal.gov/VMS\\_Site\\_02/Lectures/colloquium/Van\\_luik/VF001.htm](http://vmsstreamer1.fnal.gov/VMS_Site_02/Lectures/colloquium/Van_luik/VF001.htm)

Anyway, I agree with your take on creation-spirituality as giving hope of bringing the separate science and religion minds in us together. I got upset with Matthew Fox and sent him a long letter once explaining that he was basically contradicting himself when he decried such modern innovations as the use of nuclear power in one of his books. That is another instance of Fundamentalism. As you say, we are the product of nuclear reactions, largely fusion, so to disparage learning to use these forces (for good only, I hope) is to try to keep us from knowing who we are in a very elementary way. Never heard from him on that one.

So, bottom line: I like your take on the issue. In a world going more fundamentalist daily it is nice to see there are still beacons of enlightened reason "out there." Thanks for writing the book. --abe--

Mr. Raymo sent back a note saying thanks for the kind words.

But I kept on reading. On the positive side I think Raymo did a good thing suggesting that the science/religion abyss can be bridged with the adoption of a new spirituality. He

suggests that human finite concepts like a physical personal God are idolatrous, since God is infinite and thus indefinable by finite humans. He suggests that the mystical experience of Union is readily available to the skeptic as well as the mystic. He suggests that an appreciation for the intricacies of nature is fully compatible with being in a state of awe when contemplating nature. He suggests that a creation-centered spirituality is the answer. I agreed with all of that, at one level.

At the very end of his book he says he is optimistic of a reconciliation between science and religion even though it seems the gulf is getting wider with the success of fundamentalist religions and the sale of 'angel' books. He sees a danger of falling into an unhealthy society with rampant diseases because of the rise of hopeful quackery and because of violence fueled by superstition if we fail to grasp this opportunity at reconciliation.

But he is a realist when it comes to the size and nature of the problem, we are dealing with personality types and their needs at a very fundamental level. Walking on the edge of the existential abyss in a state of awe while fully aware of our ephemeral nature simply will not fit the needs of those feeling their own immortality and importance as a basis for, and also as an outcome of, their religious faith. I doubt that any true-believers will find this book compelling. Yet, I found it compelling, and I definitely was a true believer at one time in my past.

Still, I am a pessimist on this bridging and reconciling issue. This pessimism exists in me even though for my self I feel I have successfully bridged the very gap he is talking about in much the same way he talks about it being possible: through adopting a creation-centered, rather than a redemption-centered, spirituality.

I also became aware, through my own intuitive revelation, of my being an integral part of a very large yet undefinable whole. That is the experience of unity that Raymo speaks of. These promised to be points of vehement agreement between us when I read the first half of the book and scanned some of the rest. And at this stage of my reading and agreement I sent my note.

But when I got about two-thirds of the way into the book it also became a point of disagreement. Minor disagreement? No, major.

Raymo suggests repeatedly, in his discussions of the mystical experience of unity, that we can obtain this insight without divorcing our native intellectual and intuitive functions. He insists that the integration of those two functions is what is required to heal the science/religion breach in our selves and then in society.

Maybe he is right. But here is my problem: one of the ways that I have learned to cope with the war within, the war between the intellect saying what Raymo says, that on the one hand I am an ephemeral entity, temporary in every

sense; and the intuition saying that on the other hand there is more to me than just that physical, material side.

To make peace between these two views inside me I learned to separate those two functions and consult them in series rather than in parallel. Naturally I believe that this is a good way to be, since it is how I am. As I began to realize how sharply Raymo challenges that way of being, I got more defensive and began to read and re-read portions of his book with more critical eyes.

So, should I change and integrate my intellect and my intuition as Raymo suggests I need to do? Maybe, who really knows, but for now here is where I stand.

Raymo begins his theme on pages 2 and 3 where he describes “Skeptics” and “True Believers.” Skeptics tend to be optimists regarding the human ability to make sense of and understand the world and life in it. They can live with uncertainty.

True Believers tend to be pessimists about the human ability to make things right or understand life, and seek certainty in a Deity or other source of knowledge from beyond the human sphere. They do not deal well with uncertainty.

There is more in Raymo’s descriptions, such as the surprising (?) observation that Skeptics are often “plagued by personal doubts and prone to depression.” The implied

suggestion is that by believing in absolutes regarding this life and in a better life hereafter, the True Believer successfully avoids doubt and depression. This is an attractive thing to believe, but there are exceptions in both directions of course.

On page 4 Raymo makes an important point, that Skeptics and True Believers can be religious and can be scientists, but science “can only thrive among Skeptics.” The discussion makes clear that scientists clinging to a current state of knowledge against all new information to the contrary are at odds with the scientific enterprise, which requires openness to new knowledge even if it challenges the old.

There are, of course, examples of attempts to keep contrary knowledge from being published by those whose research it called into question, but these are exceptional occurrences even if they are temporarily successful. Raymo hints at such things on page 6. I was made aware of such a struggle while at UCLA where a now famous cellular biochemist was thwarted for years in his attempts to publish data and insights that overturned a long accepted hypothesis concerning the structure of the cell wall.

On page 7 Raymo makes his statement regarding the inability and unwillingness for society, which freely acknowledges its dependence on the products and treatments made possible by science, to embrace one of the “clearest implications” of that science: *We are ephemeral,*

*contingent parts of a silent universe that is vastly larger than ourselves.”*

To escape that implication, says Raymo, people flee into belief systems, whether mainstream or New Age. Imagine me missing this upon my first reading, however, where Raymo directly attacks my way of being: “Still others talk about ‘complementary ways of knowing,’ and so compartmentalize their minds that they are able to keep science and traditional religious doctrines from coming into conflict.” Maybe I missed it the first time because it made the observation specific to those holding to traditional religious belief, which I can’t be accused of. But it really is more general than that.

While contemplating these ideas, I spent time reading and writing about Marguerite Porete (see Item #8 in the Journey in 2003 page). Marguerite, who lived 700 years ago and died by fire, was quite forthright about this very issue: to know spiritual Truth one must allow Love and Faith to rule Intellect. Is what she is suggesting an integration or a compartmentalization? It is probably the latter. When physical facts are involved, Intellect rules; when spiritual issues are involved, Love and Faith rule. That is my way of being. Thanks, Marguerite!

On the next two pages Raymo confesses to having moved from True Believer to Skeptic as he matured. He hungers for spirituality, a type of spirituality that is not dependent on literal dogmas about God and eternal life, but one that is

a . . . “fusion of knowledge with religious feeling” . . . that can “help stitch science back into the larger fabric of our emotional, intuitive, aesthetic, and sensual lives.” (p. 9)  
The rest of the book amplifies these themes and offers a solution.

I found Raymo’s description of his childhood faith and its eventual undoing familiar (pages 61 through 67). I found his inner longing for that sense of belonging very familiar (on p. 63):

Supernatural belief has much to recommend it. Religion in particular provides a sense of belonging to a group, a history, and a culture in which to take pride, great works of art, stirring literature, service to the poor and needy, satisfying liturgical celebrations of creation, and rites of passage. Looking back, I hanker for the cozy securities, the certainties, the cocooning warmth of the candlelight, incense, and Gregorian chant, the consolation of belonging to the one true faith, of being an *insider*.

Contrast the above with Raymo’s view of reality (pp. 66-67):

Everything we have learned in science since the time of Galileo suggests that the nebulas and galaxies are oblivious to our fates. Everything we have learned suggests that our souls and bodies are inseparable. Everything we have learned suggests the grave is our

destiny. Therefore, if the promise of eternal life is to have maximum drawing power, it is essential for Church and guru to undermine the legitimacy of science.

Intellectually I agree, intuitively I question these assertions. I think he is right; but I feel he is missing something.

In fairness, Raymo feels he is missing something too, so on p. 126 he asks and answers:

And the rest of us, the Skeptics, what do we hold on to? There is an irreducible intuitive core to our knowledge that is immune to organized skepticism: our sense of self, our sense of other, and our sense of the inexhaustible mystery of the world. We can no more deny these intuitions than we can deny the sensations of sweet or bitter or blue. They are givens. Nothing science says can make these intuitions go away or undermine their veracity. They are the bedrock of religious experience, upon which Skeptics will commence their search for emotional security.

When two pages later Raymo invokes the great mystic of the 1300's, Meister Eckhart, and a few pages after that (p. 132) invokes Eckhart's 'creation-spirituality' with reference to Matthew Fox, I was in fervent agreement.

Raymo correctly notes on page 132 that the Inquisition condemned a list of Eckhart's ideas, that his belief that all

things are in God and God is in all things was less than orthodox, "panentheistic" as Fox labels it. Raymo should be comforted knowing that Eckhart is being cleared of the suspicion of heresy and has been quoted by Pope John-Paul II! (See my pages on Marguerite Porete for more on this topic, Item # 8 in the Journey in 2003 page.)

It was uncanny to me how much Raymo has in common with me, sure, but also with another author I was reading simultaneously at times, On pages 10, and 61 through 65 Raymo tells of his loss of childhood faith. Similarly, Elaine Pagels in her latest book tells of her own fall from faith (I review that book here also).

Both Raymo and Pagels come to an accommodation wherein they can regain spirituality yet remain skeptics. I did that too.

What is the difference between the way these two authors adapted? And which is closer to my own manner of adaptation? Let's explore that at some length when I review Pagels' book. The more I think about these two books, the more they have in common, and the more clearly I can see the differences also, which is helpful to me personally.