

## GOD AND THE SCIENCES: A SERMON ON PSALM 19

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Chaim Potok's *The Book of Lights* contrasts two important strands of thought regarding light in modern Jewish life. One is the little known mystical tradition among Jews involving light, and the other is the atom bomb. In this novel, Potok portrays Albert Einstein speaking at a graduation ceremony after WWII.

There are times, I must tell you, when I regret a certain act of mine. I made perhaps one great mistake in my life—when I signed the letter to President Roosevelt recommending that atom bombs be made. There was some justification to that act—the danger that the Germans would make them. They did not succeed. We succeeded and dropped them on Japan. It ended a terrible war. But also it stained us forever. All that cannot be undone. It is damage human beings have done to themselves that cannot be repaired.<sup>1</sup>

Potok's point is that Jewish Americans especially felt the weight of this invention since many of the most important scientists involved in the Manhattan Project were Jews who had fled Nazi Germany.

This stain that Potok speaks about is a part of the legacy of science in the United States. While we enjoy many of the benefits of science and technology in our daily lives, many are concerned about the legitimacy of science. We hear of the war between science and religion; we read in the paper about the threat of the ACLU to sue our school board if an evolution disclaimer is not removed from the regulations; we fear the cold, hard-hearted, calculated thinking that science and medicine sometimes thrust into our lives.

Is there an inherent conflict between science and Christianity? Is science stained with a humanism that is foreign to the Bible? Are the

pluralism and relativism of the social scientist a threat to the theologian's task? Is theology divine work, while science is "dangerous human wisdom"? Ted Ward has pointed out that Psalm 19 unites the study of nature and the study of revelation into a single, sensible paradigm that gives security to the Christian layperson, scientist, social scientist, and theologian.

The text naturally falls into three sections. Verses 1–6 exclaim that the "heavens declare the glory of God"; verses 7–11 hammer in that "the law of the LORD is perfect"; and verses 12–14 summarize with "who can discern his errors?"

The Psalmist begins his praise to God by bluntly stating, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." The idea that there is some kind of conflict between the creation and the creator is rudely dismissed. Instead, the creation tells humans something about the creator—"declare his glory," "proclaim his work," "display his knowledge." In the Psalmist's paradigm there is no tension between science and religion. Science as the exploration and understanding of God's creation is inherently a religious activity.

Perhaps verses 4–6 begin to illustrate where this modern tension between science and religion originated. First, many try to read the Bible as a science book. Thus there is an inherent discrepancy since verses 4–6 portray a universe where the sun not only revolves around the earth, but is also to some degree personified. A better understanding of the Bible is that it is a collection of inspired writings of many types, none of which resembles a modern scientific treatise. These verses here are poetic, and their purpose is to demonstrate that even that powerful sun, on which humans depend for survival, is subject to the creator God. A second root for the modern tension between science and religion is embedded in the context of early modern science. Modern science began during and is dependent on what is called the Enlightenment for its view of knowledge, but the Enlightenment itself was a reaction to a social context. Most of all, the Enlightenment began as a response to the religious wars of the seventeenth century and an attempt to end the conflicts. If the wars had been fanned by unbridled emotions, the Enlightenment would focus on reason.<sup>2</sup>

Although many early scientists were followers of Christ, the overarching view of knowledge was antireligious. It was assumed that

<sup>1</sup> Chaim Potok, *The Book of Lights* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981) 106.

<sup>2</sup> C. Leonard Allen and Richard Hughes, *Roots of Restoration* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1988) 76.

religion was inherently emotional and that science could be inherently nonemotional—pure reason. This worldview stood strong in scientists' minds and permeated Western culture—until the atom bomb! A friend told me of regularly meeting one of the scientists from the Manhattan Project during evening walks. Each time, over a period of several years, the old man compulsively brought the subject up. "We didn't know! We were so involved in this rapidly advancing edge of nuclear technology that we never realized that this bomb would wipe out entire cities! I'm so sorry! We're all so sorry. If only we had stopped to think!" Pure reason, or reason without morality, can lead to disaster.

The paradigm of the Psalmist was that, while the creation displays knowledge, "the law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul." There is no misunderstanding—while the creation tells humans something about God, God's revelation is perfect, not human reason, not human technology. Verses 7–11 hammer in the concept, using the words *law*, *statutes*, *precepts*, *commands*, *fear*, and *ordinances* to refer to this knowledge-giving revelation. The section concludes with this tempting picture of God's words:

They are more precious than gold,  
                   than much fine gold;  
 they are sweeter than honey,  
                   than honey from the comb.  
 By them is your servant warned;  
                   in keeping them there is great reward.

The purpose of the knowledge that comes from the creation and the perfect law of the LORD, in the Psalmist's mind, is to answer the question "Who can discern his error?" This is a pertinent question to the retired Jewish physicist, as well as to all of us. Verses 12–14 explain that the purpose of knowledge is to 1) discern one's errors, 2) receive forgiveness, 3) avoid willful sin, and 4) be transformed, blameless, and worshipful. The purpose of knowledge is not to increase material comfort, but to understand one's self better, especially in relation to the Creator.

Is there then a tension between science and Christianity? Yes, if science is seen as pure reason, devoid of emotion, intent on the promotion of knowledge regardless of the consequences to human life! No, if science is seen as an orderly way to learn something about the creation (and hence the creator) and is held subject to God's revelation. God revealed himself in diverse texts and types of literature. While these contain many facts, most of the Bible deals with God's actions in history, not orderly descriptions of matter. The Christian need not fear the scientist, nor the

theologian the social scientist. As John Yoder put it:

Believers have a bigger picture, an older vocabulary and a richer narrative with which to illuminate and guide their alternative modes of struggle and forms of community than the social scientists have, but the story happens and is told and retold in the same world.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Howard Yoder, "To Our Tents, O Israel," *SR* 18 (1989) 358.