How do you understand the relationship(s) between science and your religious or secular tradition? – Dr. David Haberman

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David Haberman: 00:27 I don't represent myself as someone who is representing a particular religious tradition. So, I'm a professor in a department of religious studies in a large state university and I identify with the perspective that has come out of that context. And many I think don't know the story how religion became an acceptable academic topic in state universities, but that was really the product of certain Supreme Court decisions that happened only in the early 1960s. And there were constitutional concerns in that. Then one of the results that the Supreme Court decisions in the early 1960s did was to eliminate prayer from public schools. (01:15) But I think many people don't realize that the other side of that Supreme Court decision was that for the first time, the Supreme Court in a clear manner made a differentiation between the promotion of a religious tradition and the academic study of religious tradition. And they ruled that, although the first is constitutionally illegal, the second is not. In fact, they said it would be good for the nation if we had a better understanding of the nature of religion in human society. And with that, then there was an explosion into being of the state university, public university, religious studies programs. And I was really a product of that. (01:55) And that approach from the get-go is comparative, it had to be in terms of constitutional requirements and multi-disciplinary. So that, I guess if I represent anything, it is the comparative study of religion. I was trained as a historian of religions, in the plural. And that means that I take a historical perspective on religious traditions. So the first thing that I would want to say about the relationship between science and religion is that it's an old relationship that has been going on for some time, but is defined in terms of the particular historical dynamics that define the present moment, whenever the present moment happens to be. (02:37) So, one of the challenges today between scientific community and religious communities have to do with something like human origins and how that's thought about. But there have been other historical challenges that religious traditions have had to respond to, and their choice is either to respond to them in a way that actually addresses the issue, or be rendered irrelevant in the process of history. So it's really in that context that I look at any particular debate or any issue, any relationship then between science and religion. (03:17) I
can think back, the 16th century was a time of tremendous religious revolution in Europe and a time of great violence within the religious communities in Europe. The Yale based historian of European religions, Carlos Eire, said that during the 16th century, there was a transformation of the religion of imminence into the religion of transcendence, which means that the religious understanding of, particularly of Christianity, that emerged from the dynamic revolution that was taking place in Europe in the 16th century, the Protestant revolution, means that boundaries became firmer, I would say. Particularly the boundary between human and non-human, and between the divine and the world, became boundaries that were much firmer than they were in the previous area, the medieval times, which tended to look at those relationships in a more organic fashion. (04:22) And the religious revolution was paralleled completely by scientific revolution at the time also, so that the defining scientists of, say the 17th century, where a lot of this then settled out, were people like Bacon and Descartes, who both articulated in their own ways the great, great difference between human and non-human animals. And I think they would've even accepted human and non-humans, just human and animals. I think that the boundary was that firm. And so that we get someone like Descartes saying that animals are machines in a fact, right? And they aren't sanctioned, they don't have feelings as we have. (05:08) Well, I think today we're living in a very different historical period, both in terms of religion and science, so that it's precisely those boundaries that are being questioned again. And I would say that we might be, as a historian of religion of the contemporary period, one can never speak with any certainty. But it seems as though that we're moving back into a more serious consideration of the religion of imminence within the religious traditions that is recognizing divinity in the world, not somehow divinity that is divorced from the world. And the boundary between human and non-human in the sciences is being seriously questioned. So that an issue such as anthropomorphism has been called, not that long ago and still by many working in the area of animal behavior, the ethologists, will talk about anthropomorphism as a sin even, within scientific representations of data. (06:09) And there are certain scientists who want to hold that line. Probably the most famous publication is John Kennedy's book, The New Anthropomorphism, where he's really holding a Descartes line on anthropomorphism. On the other hand, we have people like Jane Goodall, probably leading the troops more than anyone else, Mark Bekoff and a number of others who are much more comfortable about talking about animal sentions, communication, use of symbols, tools, et cetera, again, eroding
those sharp boundaries between the human and non-human. (06:45) So I suppose what I'm trying to say in all of this is that there has been a complex relationship for centuries and probably beyond, between what we would call science. I suppose we might not want to talk about human exploration of the world as science necessarily, because I think we do identify that more with developments in the 17th century. But nonetheless, I think there've been complex relationship between those explorations of the world in non-religious terms and in religion itself. And so I'm fascinated with that. I think there's just lots of possibilities happening today, or being articulated, worked out, thought about today that probably haven't been for some time. (07:42) Being a student of religion, I'm interested to see how particular religious communities are using the story of evolution or the story of that we're coming to understand in terms of the birth of the universe some 14 billion years ago, and how we really think about that. I'm interested in concretely, how those stories are being used in religious communities. And I'm aware that particularly, I would say one of the most fertile areas for ecotheology, and that's something that all religious traditions are engaging in, again, I think that the environmental crisis is probably the largest challenge for human beings today at a completely unprecedented level. Many do use the term Anthropocene to describe the fact that human beings now seem to dominate the great majority of the planet's landscape. So human presence is huge. (08:40) And the question is how that's going to go. I think that's one of the largest questions of the day is, is this something we're going to be able to pass through in a way that the human species survives? Or are we going to, by our own means, unwittingly or perhaps not so unwittingly, going to really undo any possibility of a human future? I think that crises demands religious response. And religious traditions, I say, are always changing. If a religious community cannot address the huge issues of the day, it will have no future. Either because humanity doesn't have a future, if there's no humanity in the future, there's no future for religion. Or let's take a more hopeful approach, if it really cannot address the crisis of the day, that particular religious interpretation tradition will be rendered into the wastebasket of irrelevancy in history. (09:37) So I'm interested in, as a student of religion and one who's concerned about the environmental crises, to see how fertile, vital, productive the area of ecotheology is in all world religious traditions. I work a lot in Indian, see interesting things happening there, but probably the most productive area is within Christianity today. And I think of someone like Sallie McFague's book, The Body of God, where she's taking the story of the universe, evolution, the
understanding of how we are beings who are connected to a chain of biological life on this planet that goes back some 4 billion years, how that story can be read in a way that enriches our religious visions and how it can feed new religious visions. (10:29) I think that’s, to me, the most promising possibility that’s coming out of all this, is that it’s pushing humanity into thinking about issues in a way that we have not had to think about them before. We have never been able to take ourselves off the planet and a lot of life with us. And I think we’re coming to understand that we really do now have that position. And I think we’re also coming to understand that this is going to demand a transformation of consciousness, and there’s something very terrifying about that, right? We have our backs up against the wall of extinction, but we’re giving an opportunity to be transformed into something that could be spectacular. (11:15) And I think that’s the invitation that I see, the greatest promise that we’re being offered today. And a lot of it has to do with the science that we’re learning about. We have technology today that enables us to understand the history of this planet, the history of our own body. I just learned downstairs that 1 to 2% of the material that makes up our genes comes from Neanderthals and a decade ago, we didn’t even know that. When I was in college, the idea that a large body of some matter from outer space could smash into the earth and leave a huge imprint would have been considered complete nonsense. And today we understand that that’s something that has occurred and there’s geological record of that in the earth that is clear to anyone who wants to see it. (12:06) To the Hubble space telescope that has enabled us to peer back billions of years in time. These are technologies and tools that human beings have only had in the last few decades. And I think that they are part of what we’re being offered and it’s coming through science. Science alone, I don’t think is equipped, nor does it claim to equip to think about the deep meaning that comes out of that. (12:35) I see that there’s a wonderfully fruitful opportunity that is placed before us in putting deep religious questions side by side with the scientific evidence that we have of the length of life on this planet and the history of the universe at large. And I’m just excited about that. That question, who are we? What is the self? What is our relationship to the world? These are deep questions that have been asked by religious communities and religious thinkers for centuries, for millennia. And I think that the new science invites us to ask these questions with the information that we have available to us today. And for me, that’s just very, very exciting.
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