

RELIGIOUS TRUTH VERSUS SCIENTIFIC TRUTH

I confess that I had qualms about accepting to speak at BIU. After all, BIU participates in crimes against humanity by oppressing the Arabs, and the eminences of the British Association of University Teachers have banned Israeli professors, esp from BIU, and whom am I to flout such distinguished objective scholars? Nevertheless, as an American whose country came into being by thumbing their noses at Britain, I shall suppress my misgivings and agree to appear here this evening. ואֲתֵּם אֶל תִּירְאוּ אֶת עַם הָאָרֶץ כִּי לִחְמֹנוּ הֵם סָר צֶלֶם מַעֲלֵיהֶם וְה' אֱתָנוּ אֶל תִּירְאוּ

The nature of a "religious university" – such as Y.U. or B.I.U.—is such that at bottom it turns on the fundamental question of the search for truth, and hence the contest between the religious and scientific visions of truth. It is to this theme that I address my remarks.

- ✓ 1. The question of "Rel Truth vs Sci Truth" has a long history in the Western world, esp Christianity. Careers were made and broken, indeed lives were enhanced and lost, in the bitter polemics on this theme. One need mention only Galileo and Copernicus.
the evolution, we really all know... (the modern days)
- X 2. If that was a problem for Chty, it was at least as troubling for Jsm which had to contend not only with theological problems but also w Hal and its extension into the realm of practical life, carrying its theological bias into the empirical realm.¹
- X 3. A list of such problems would include מציצה בפה, killing an insect on Shabbat, the viability of an 8-month fetus, the age of the universe, etc. etc. I shall expand on some of these in the course of this lecture.
- ✓ 4. In addition to these practical halakhic issues, there are as we all know the imposing principles of modern science, such as Darwinian evolution which is *the unifying theme of biology*. Without evolution and expansion, modern biology and cosmology make little sense."²
- ✓ 5. For us, therefore, unlike Chty, the problem can be quite complicated – but fortunately while we experienced much *sturm un drang* but ~~had~~ suffered no bloodshed, as each side, Judaism and the natural sciences, spoke in the name of Truth. For many, these truths surely collide and one is forced to make a choice: either Rel Truth or Sci Truth. Indeed, there are many on either side of the divide who maintain that their side has a monopoly on truth and the other is the realm of the benighted, boors, bloated, and brutish.. →

¹ After finishing the preparation of this paper, I discovered a source I had long forgotten. It was an article in *Masmid*, 1948, the Yeshiva University annual undergraduate student publication, on this very theme. I am in full agreement with the point of view expressed in that article by a Junior at Yeshiva College, although the style could be improved. I am distressed at my failure to remember that article, especially since I was its author.

² *Scientific American*, March 2005.

5-7 Each side has its extremists who have all the answers but none of the questions. On the "Rel Truth Only" side you have the bans on Rabbis Reiman, Kaminetsky, and Slifkin who were harassed as their books were banned or condemned to burning. On the "Sci Truth Only" you have those whose contempt for religion is surpassed only by their ignorance of its most basic and sublime elements. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz relates that some 20 years ago a poll was taken of American university professors. On the question, "Do you believe in God, and if not, why not?," most of the professors of science said they believed, whereas most of the professors of humanities said they did not. The reason for the latter? – because science had proven religious claims to be false!

6. For those of us who consider themselves heirs to both traditions, such clear cut answers are interesting, even beguiling, but unsatisfactory and unavailable. We are unwilling to give up our souls *or* our minds. How then have we managed this contradiction? I shall mention briefly harmonization and then move on to those who go beyond reconciliation to a deeper and more philosophical posture.
7. Often, the efforts at harmonization by means of "reconciliations" referred to above are trivial-- apologetics at its worst. Others are quite ingenious, but ultimately, as I shall contend, unnecessary. Thus, to take one of the less troublesome problems: the age of the universe. Tradition holds that it is now 5,765 yrs old; the cosmologists – between 11.2 and 20 billion. The reconciliation? The statement of the Midrash (Koh.R. 3:14) that הקב"ה בונה עולמות ומחריבן בורא עולמות ומחריבן עד שברא את אלו is often used to "explain" the age of the earth according to geologists and others.

The Maharal of Prague³ finds interesting support in a single letter! הוי"ו של ויהי ערב היא וי"ו החבור שמחבר דבר לדבר, ואם לא היה סדר זמנים קודם לא שייך לומר ויהי ערב רק יהי ערב ומזה למדו שהי' סדר זמנים קודם לכן. ובא ר' אבהו לפרש, כי סדר זמנים שהי' קודם לכן היינו שהי' בונה עולמות ומחריבן ומחבר וי"ו של ויהי ערב אל סדר ראשון. (Note that the quoted passage is not in the past tense but in the present: He *now, at this very moment*, is creating and destroying worlds – sound scientific doctrine.)

8. But not all rel predicates or sci dicta can be disposed of quite that simply. Thus, the reason given by Talmud (*Shab.* 12a) that הורג כינה בשבת is permissible acc to Bet Hillel is that certain lower forms of life do not reproduce sexually and therefore killing them is not in violation of Shabbat. Here is how the Rambam (הלכות שבת פ"א) formulates the Halakha: רמשים שהן פריץ ורביץ מזכר ונקבה... ההורג אותן חייב כהורג בהמה וחיה, אבל רמשים שהויתן מן הגללים ומן הפירות שהבאישו וכיוצא בהן כגון תולעים של בשר ותולעים שבתוך רמשים: הקטניות, ההורגן פטור: Clearly we have here a confrontation between Hal and Sci. The Rambam merely records the halakhic view without explaining its relevance; but one cannot blame him, for Louis Pasteur had not yet arrived on the scene.
9. I believe that the responses of observant Jews basically fall into two categories: the halakhic monists and the halakhic dualists. The monists are those who dismiss either side of the conflict; they affirm only the Rel and dismiss the Sci vision. Their loss of a karger vision is compensated for by greater zeal and sense of righteousness. The dualists see value in both sides, but this comes at the price of having to resolve the differences between the two "Truths."

³ ספר באר הגולה - הבאר הרביעי

The halakhic monists reject reconciliations as compromises that are unworthy. One example comes from a Hasidic master whom I admire (except in this case), R. Zadok Hakohen of Lublin, whose biting criticism presents the case for the halakhic monists: a stand-pat anti-rationalistic position defending the total integrity of the traditional views versus “scientific” or other alien systems. He cites a Talmudic text (*Eruvin* 13b) תנא תלמיד ותיק היה ביבנה שהיה מטטר את השרץ במאה וחמשים טעמים.⁴ Instead of deriving from this tale a teaching that there are multiple truths but in practice only one may prevail, he concludes that “reason” alone is inferior to the received tradition:

כי לא על ראיות שכליות יסמוך האדם... אבל ראוי לדעת האמת במה שהוא אמת, ואחר כך להסמך כל טעמים וכל ראיות השכל אל האמת, ויהיה השכל נמשך אחר האמת לא האמת אחר השכל.

For R. Zadok Jsm is a zero-sum-game--it is either rel truth or no truth: Halakha trumps the 150 putative reasons for declaring the שרץ pure. However, one can draw the opposite conclusions, and say it does not necessarily deny the validity of the 150 reasons. Practice, הלכה למעשה, certainly prevails as halakhic truth, but in many cases a rejected opinion participates in a “truth” other than formally decided halakha. In the same text in *Eruvin*, the Talmud relates that שלש שנים נחלקו ב”ש וב”ה הללו אומרים הלכה כמותנו והללו אומרים הלכה כמותנו יצאה ב”ק ואמרה אלו ואלו דא”ח והלכה כב”ה

Indeed, in the opinion of certain Kabbalists, after ביאת המשיח all decisions will be reversed – in favor of Bet Shammai. A multiplicity of truths is therefore not anomalous.

11. On the other side of the divide are certain Sephardic Maimonists, also monists, who read the Jewish narrative metaphorically and thus avoided a frontal clash with philosophy and what then was regarded as science. Probably the most prominent and quite radical representative of this group was R. Joseph Ibn Kaspi (1280-1340), a Maimonidean intellectual who operated in the Aristotelian rationalist tradition and whose intellectual biography was brilliantly presented by the late Prof. Isadore Twersky.⁵ Following Maimonides, he considered an unphilosophical religion illegitimate, but going one step further than Maimonides he insists on the non-literal reading of the Bible, Ibn Kaspi applies the rabbinic dictum דיברה תורה בלשון בני אדם to mean that not every Biblical statement is true in the absolute sense. A religious proposition, if contradicted by a scientific or philosophical “truth,” is really a concession to popular ignorance, to the vulgarities of the masses. This means that religious statements need not be taken literally – or seriously, unless they are reinterpreted in the light of philosophy or science. Hence, the accepted understanding of the Jewish religion is so attenuated, that the conflict with “science” virtually disappears. Ibn Kaspi was roundly attacked by later scholars, although he was by no means alone in insisting on a metahalakhic framework for the Halakha.
12. A serious problem for the halakhic monists is the question of medicine in the Talmud. The monists are all literalists, and this means they must accept at face value the various remedies we find in the Talmud. Modern medicine contradicts most of the therapies recommended in the Talmud (especially in *Shabbat* 109b-111a) and considers them ineffective or worse. Early on, R. Sherira Gaon, the Toasafot, R. Abraham the son of

⁴ ספר אור זרוע לצדיק - מאמר על מהות לשון הקודש

⁵ Isadore Twersky, “Joseph Ibn Kaspi: Portrait of a Medieval Jewish Intellectual,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1979)

Maimondes, as well as others cautioned against using those remedies and even pronounced a ban against those who followed the Talmud's therapies and prescriptions⁶.

13. There is one extremely relevant case where the Halakha conflicts directly with scientific knowledge and here the Rambam takes up the issue openly: The Mishna (חולין פ"ג) enumerates a number of טריפות that are not viable and therefore are forbidden as food. Rambam comments on the discrepancies between the Halakha and medical knowledge:

הלכות שחיטה פ"י ב"ב--אין להוסיף על טריפות אלו כלל שכל שאירע לבהמה או לחיה או לעוף חוץ מאלו שמנו חכמי דורות הראשונים והסכימו עליהן בבתי דיני ישראל אפשר שתחיה ואפילו נודע לנו מדרך הרפואה שאין סופה לחיות: (וג' וכן אלו שמנו ואמרו שהן טריפה אף על פי שיראה בדרכי הרפואה שבידינו שמקצתן אינן ממייתן ואפשר שתחיה מהן אין לך אלא מה שמנו חכמים שנאמר על פי התורה אשר יורוך:

This is an extremely important source for Rel/Sci Truth in area of Halakha: Whether or not the Sages expressly declared their halakhic judgments to be based on factual evidence, and even if they were mistaken in their scientific opinions, once the halakha was proclaimed, it remains impervious to scientific involvement: שנאמר על פי התורה אשר יורוך. Clearly, the Rambam emerges as a halakhic dualist who professes both truths without fear of contradiction or inconsistency while identifying one of them, the religious one, as that which prevails in practice. There is a Rel truth and there is a Sci truth and despite their differences they complement each other but do not belie each other.⁷

(TIME) 15. Another interesting source for dualism is the statement by an eminent halakhist, R. Aryeh Leib Hakohen (1745-1813) in his Introduction to קצות החושן—that Hal Truth need not accord w any other "truth." Thus: ואל האדם ניתנה אשר לו שכל אך לא ניתנה התורה למלאכי השרת, ואנושי...ונתן לנו את התורה כפי הכרעת השכל האנושי אעפ"י שאינו אמת...והאמת יהיה כפי הסכמת החכמים בשכל האנושי

(TIME) 16. I suggest that a difference of the interpretation of a well known passage of a Mishna in פרקי אבות can be traced to the differing views of the halakhic monists and dualists. The Mishna reads הפך בה והפך בה דכולא בה. The Gaon of Vilna takes that to mean that Torah contains *everything*, every form and branch of wisdom. Meiri, however, on the same text, comments that Torah provides its own answers to its own problems. So, Gaon holds there is only one truth, whereas Meiri holds there are multiple truths, each in its own realm.

17. Of the sources I mentioned in support of multiple truth in Jsm, the dualistic, can be traced to a well known talmudic gem that clearly supports the idea of halakhic truth versus theoretical truth: (תנן התם חתכו חוליות ונתן חול בין חוליא לחוליא רבי אליעזר מטהר וחכמים מטמאין זה הוא תנור של עכנאי... וטמאוהו). תנא, באותו היום השיב רבי אליעזר כל תשובות שבעולם ולא קיבלו הימנו. אמר להם אם הלכה כמותי חרוב זה יוכיח. נעקר חרוב ממקומו מאה אמה ואמרי לה ארבע מאות אמה. אמרו לו, אין מביאין ראיה מן החרוב. חזר ואמר להם אם הלכה כמותי אמת המים יוכיחו, חזרו אמת המים לאחוריהם. אמרו לו, אין מביאין ראיה מאמת המים. חזר ואמר להם, אם הלכה כמותי כותלי בית המדרש יוכיחו, הטו כותלי בית המדרש ליפול... חזר ואמר להם, אם הלכה כמותי מן השמים יוכיחו. יצאתה בת קול ואמרה: מה לכם אצל רבי אליעזר שהלכה כמותו בכל מקום. עמד רבי יהושע על רגליו ואמר, לא בשמים היא מאי לא בשמים היא אמר רבי ירמיה שכבר נתנה תורה מהר סיני אין אנו משגיחין בבת קול שכבר כתבת בהר סיני בתורה אחרי רבים להטות. אשכחיה רבי נתן לאלהיו אמר ליה מאי עבד קודשא בריך הוא בההיא שעתא אמר ליה קא חייך ואמר נצחוני בני נצחוני בני (ב"מ נ"ט ע"א וע"ב)

⁶ See R. Yaakov Neuberger, in *Mind, Body and Judaism*, pp. 34-41 and, in great detail, in "השתנות הטבעים" (Jerusalem: 1995), chap. 5.

⁷ On Rashba's attitude on this matter, see David Horowitz, *Torah Umadda Journal* vol. III, 1991-1992, pp. 66-67