

Talk #14 At Home in the Cosmos

In some respects, science has far surpassed religion in delivering awe. How is it that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, “This is better than we thought! The universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander, more subtle, more elegant. God must be even greater than we dreamed”? Instead they say, “No, no, no! My god is a little god, and I want him to stay that way.”

– *Pale Blue Dot*, Carl Sagan

I would define [the Gnostic] position as a return to the fundamental, virginal interrogation of man faced with the problems of his life, with his need to escape from the yoke of systems and to arrive, in every instance, at a point of absolute zero in knowledge. . . . We can see quite clearly where the task of a contemporary Gnostic would lie: in attacking the new . . . faces which evil is forever putting on and which today we call ideology.

– *The Gnostics*, Jacques Lacarriere, p 122

Thea: Are we ready for that talk about religion’s quarrel with science?

Guy: Probably as ready as we’ll ever be. I guess now is the time.

Thea: At least we understand each other’s positions pretty well by now.

Guy: I’m not sure we do. We agree on so much. The issues dividing us are not so easy to grasp. Can you state clearly what we don’t agree on?

Thea: I doubt it. But then intellectual clarity is not so important to me as it is to you. I think Pascal was right that “The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing.” The wisdom in that remark is confirmed every day of my working experience.

Guy: That’s all very well, but it’s hard to have a sensible discussion if you won’t take a clear position.

Thea: Well, I can’t say I have any really clear position – just a fuzzy one. When you come right down to it, what is life, according to your science, but an infection that some planets catch? True or not, this is just not acceptable. The only thing I’m certain of is that people can’t live with knowledge of this kind. At least, most people can’t. We need a story that gives our lives some meaning.

Guy: I understand that perfectly well. We all tell ourselves hero-stories to turn our lives into some kind of quest. Philosophers use philosophy that way; scientists use science. The quest for knowledge makes a very fine hero-story.

Thea: For the scientist, perhaps, but not for the ordinary man or woman. Few people have the luck to find “a path with a heart” in their daily lives – a game that absorbs their passions, and that truly feels worth playing. Dedicated scientists may find such a path in their research, but that is

little comfort for the average citizen. “I lived, struggled suffered, maybe grabbed a little fun along the way; and died” just doesn’t cut it as a life story. But that’s all your science seems to offer to those of us not passionately committed to tearing down the veils of mystery. Which is why, as fast as scientists tear down old veils, people are replacing them with new ones, often sillier and more superstitious than the old.

house and home

Guy: I wish I could say you’re wrong. But clearly, most of the public does not just ignore the scientific world view, but actively rejects it. It clings to mysteries where there are none, just to avoid seeing what is before their eyes. It seems to need those mysteries to reassure itself, against all evidence, that the universe really cares about human beings, and is mindful of our welfare.

Thea: I think you’ve just conceded my case. That’s what I’ve been arguing.

Guy: I think you want something more, though I am not sure what. If that is indeed all you are arguing, we have no quarrel at all. In general, I think the conflict between science and religion would go away if people could accept that humanity’s need for meaning and its need to understand how the universe works are constraints on one another. Honestly conducted and kept within their spheres, science and religion are doing two different jobs – both necessary – which need not oppose each other.

Thea: Which jobs?

Guy: If we think of the world as a house we live in, then a house is not a home as the saying goes. Exploring the house you’ve just moved into is one legitimate function; turning that place into a livable home is quite another.

When you buy a house, you get lawyers to do a title search to make sure there are no liens on the property. You get an engineer to report on the structural soundness of the building. You get a surveyor to verify your boundaries. Such activities aim to establish the relevant facts, as objectively as possible. They have the feel of science. But when the keys are handed over, you move your furniture and belongings in, and begin the process of turning the house into your home. You decide which rooms to use for what purposes. You might repaint the walls, or restore old woodwork. You sew some curtains and hang a few pictures. These activities may exploit your knowledge of the property, but they have a different purpose: to appropriate the space as your own.

My suggestion is that art, music, poetry and religion are home-making activities that work from, and try to make the best of the world as we find it. When we go exploring we may not like what we find. It may not be the house we would have bought if we’d had a choice. But we have to make the best of it somehow – preferably without wishful thinking. Change what we can change; live with what we can’t change; have the wisdom to know the difference.

- Thea:** The AA prayer. . . Staying sober one day at a time with the help of a Higher Power. Can science find room for such a Being?
- Guy:** Just drop the idea of a Being. Otherwise, we all live one day at a time with the help of a Higher Power. Whether that power is money or family or knowledge or political power or whatever, there is for each of us a Key Idea or Master Value – one or more of these – that gets us through the day, and through some long nights. I know this as well as you do. It’s a finding of anthropology, if nothing else. Explicitly religious people who call their Higher Power “God” need not be superstitious about it. At least they are aware of, and able to think about this shaping factor in their lives, as many cannot.
- Thea:** Knowing how staunchly committed you are to a scientific epistemology and world-view, I’m surprised to find you so generous toward religion. Most science-minded types seem to regard it as nothing but superstition.
- Guy:** Well, organized religion has a dismal history of living parasitically and with willful ignorance off that human need for meaning. Science has fought some bitter battles for its freedom of inquiry and these have by no means ended. It’s not surprising that so many of us “science-minded types” now regard religion as an enemy. But I would say, the polarization of loyalties between “science” and “religion,” both properly understood, is itself a major superstition.
- Thea:** Then what would not be superstition, according to you? And what do you mean by superstition, anyway?
- Guy:** As the etymology suggests, superstitions are beliefs and practices that stand over us: that run our lives, immune to critical examination. Any idea or practice or opinion that we are unwilling or unable to question is superstitious. Our consciously chosen, critically considered commitments are not superstitious, especially once it is understood that they are just personal commitments and not universal truths. But myths or theories that demand to be taken on faith and/or authority most surely are superstitions, especially when contradicted by others that merely ask for tentative allegiance after an honest review of the evidence and argument.
- I would say that religion per se need not be superstitious, though many religious people are extremely so – partly from sheer wishful thinking, partly because they lack philosophical sophistication to use concepts accurately, and draw some necessary distinctions. Organized religions, unfortunately, have institutional motives for encouraging superstitious belief in their flocks, even when the shepherds themselves know better.
- Gordon Allport, once defined religion in a way that makes superbly clear what intellectually respectable religion is about. He said: “A man’s religion is the audacious bid he makes to bind himself to creation and to the Creator. It is his ultimate attempt to enlarge and to complete his own

personality by finding the supreme context in which he rightly belongs.”¹
Now, an ecoDarwinian universe, as a self-organizing system need not have a Creator. But the task of finding a context for one’s identity and binding it back to the Cosmos remains as valid as ever.

Thea: For me – for most people, I think – a religion without God would not feel much like a religion.

Guy: As a term for Allport’s “supreme context,” the word “God” is convenient, familiar and short. With that definition, no one is asking you to do without God; and indeed, it then becomes a category error to ask whether someone believes in God, or whether God exists. The context of your life, and of the universe as a whole, is what you understand it to be. One person may take that context to be the Biblical God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Another may take it to be the laws of physics (as we understand them) and/or the theory of self-organizing complexity (as we understand that). For both, there is a God in Allport’s sense. Just different Gods, is all.

Thea: I think you’re missing my point. Most believers understand quite well that the God they believe in is not Michelangelo’s geriatric superman on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel. They understand that God is ineffable, and beyond human comprehension. But a God conceived as self-organizing complexity doesn’t cut it for us. The God we believe in is a coherent, loving Self, whose preferences and commands provide a ground for moral choices, values and meanings. He is a reason to will and do the right thing. He gives meaning to the concept of sin as transgression against His will. Though we can acknowledge that people understand Him differently, He must be the same God for everyone.

Guy: Two points: First, to insist that a being that no one can observe, and that people understand and imagine differently must be the same for everyone is a good way to tie yourself in hopeless conceptual knots – if not into religious wars. These can be avoided simply by dropping the issue of existence, and conceiving God simply as a name for the existential context that an individual finds for his own life. If you find that context in an organized religion, God bless you, as they say, so long as you leave other people and their contexts alone.

Second, it is fine to say that your life must have a moral context as well as a physical and biological one. Mine too, I hope. We all have ethical choices to make, and some moral context in which we make them. For example, I think it’s wrong go around shooting or dropping bombs on people you don’t like. I think it’s wrong to deprive poor people of their livelihoods by imposing economic change on their communities in a heedless way. I think it’s wrong to turn our planet into a garbage dump. But the Biblical God doesn’t help you make the relevant decisions. Mostly, he confuses these issues by turning them into problems of scriptural interpretation. And then he helps you rationalize your choices

¹ Gordon Allport, *The Individual and His Religion*.

after the fact with the claim to be doing his will.

- Thea:** But at least he gives us a conceptual ideal, and sets us the challenge of living up to his goodness. The only challenge that Darwin sets us is that of passing our genes to another generation. And even Darwinians don't say that extinct species were bad – merely that they were unlucky, or unsuccessful.
- Guy:** I think eco-Darwinism sets us the tremendous challenge of transcending the Nature it has shown us – not by wishful denial of our animal origins, but in some intellectually respectable, and non-superstitious way. But why do you need a personalized God to set you a moral challenge? Or punish you for doing wrong? If you want to lead a Christian life, or any other kind of life, you are free to do so – or to strive to do so. I can see why you might want a single tyrant God to manipulate or constrain other people. But how could that idea help you decide what good and evil mean for you? If a book or a preacher or whoever tells you what God expects of you, you still face the problem of deciding whether that suggestion is to be followed.
- Thea:** I understand that for you, cognitive life – including spiritual life – just means participation in an ecology of suggestions. There is no Truth to look for anywhere.
- Guy:** Not quite. What I value is intelligent, creative participation in this Cosmos. I work from a bottom-up constructivist, pluralist, ecoDarwinian paradigm that regards our understandings of the world as so many human constructs intended to capture certain aspects of experience for human purposes. I don't look for, or feel the need for, some absolute Truth that would be authoritative for everyone everywhere. I doubt there is such a thing. But I definitely think that some understandings fit the world better than others, work better than others as a basis for our choices, and are in that sense truer than others. To call a statement “true” is just a short, careless way of suggesting that it fits experience well in the currently relevant respects. In that sense I can and do look for true ideas and statements – even about ethics.
- Thea:** Well, I know your arguments by now, but I can't help feeling that you strip both religion and science of real meaning when you reject the concept of absolute, God's-eye truth. Religion is more than just an aspect – even the ultimate aspect – of an individual's attachment system. Authentic religion has always been a quest to know God's truth, and to live in its light. Science, in its beginnings, was an attempt to read the mind of God in the book of Nature. Deep down, where I live, and despite you clever post-modernists, that's what religion and science remain. They can't be anything else.
- Guy:** You know, I hear you. And I even sympathize. But I don't see how you can have what you want. Even physicists these days work with alternative theories that can't be tested. Geologists and biologists work with various

models, none definitive, but each revealing aspects of the systems they study. Historians, social scientists and shrinks like you most certainly deal in interpretations and understandings, not apodictic truths. Ironically, a chief reason why there can be no absolute truth today, even in the sciences, is that we know too much.

Thea: Well, I still have to ask, What sort of home can we hope to make in the world that science shows us? What are the implications of your eD psychology for a spiritual outlook and practice?

Guy: At the moment, those implications are a matter of personal judgment and taste. It will be a long time, if ever, before the new paradigm settles down to a stably consensual world view, with or without an institutional structure. But if I had to name spiritual antecedents for the emerging paradigm, I would mention Taoism, Buddhism, Nature worship and Gnosticism. I might describe myself as a Darwinian Gnostic – something like that.

Thea: A Darwinian Gnostic? What's that? It doesn't sound like something that could be very popular.

a Darwinian gnostic

Guy: Actually, I don't care much whether my kind of home-making in this universe catches on or not. I have my own needs for meaning in this world; and I offer my suggestions as best I can without caring about their uptake. You ask, "What sort of home can we make in the world that science shows us?" I can offer you a tour of the home I've made – am making – for myself, but you and everyone have to make your own.

Sometimes I think of the world as a smörgåsbord of spiritual and intellectual offerings – suggestions – all tempting, in one way or another.² You can go to the table and fill your plate as many times as you please, but you have to choose; and everyone must choose for himself. If you don't choose well, you'll go spiritually hungry or get a nasty indigestion. You shrinks then have the job of helping people correct or live with their poor choices.

Thea: Stop. Just tell me what it means to be a Darwinian Gnostic.

Guy: Well, the first part you already know, as we've been talking about it for two weeks now. I call myself a Darwinian (short for "ecoDarwinian") insofar as I regard the paradigm of self-organization and ecology as our best available approach to an explanation of Being. We ourselves, everything around us, and our very thoughts about the things around us seem to have emerged through self-organizing processes of the kind we've been discussing, and seem to follow similar principles on every level we can study.

² See Talk #12 on Society.

Thea: That's an approach to scientific explanation. It's hardly a religion.

Guy: True, but it blends readily with some religious sentiments to produce a strain of spirituality with the concept of self-organization at its core. For example, as we've seen, it's on all fours with the Taoist notion of *zi-ran*; and it draws the Taoist conclusion that going against "Nature's way" will probably bring you grief. It confirms the Buddhist concept of the unity of life; it categorically rejects the notion that the Earth is just human real estate for human use; and it easily takes the short step from our discovery that Nature is sublime, beautiful and marvelous toward a pagan impulse to Nature-worship. Certainly, it makes clear that we need to put ourselves into some kind of harmony or alignment with Nature whether we feel like worshipping or not.

Thea: And the Gnostic bit? What's that?

Guy: Ah. . . I call myself a Gnostic with trepidation because there never was any coherent body of Gnostic doctrine, and because a great deal of nonsense often collected under that name. At the same time, I think the Gnostics advanced some good ideas, and that the name of their movement is too good to be scrapped because they made so many mistakes. What can I say? Like other religious movements, Gnosticism sprouted in a superstitious age; but not all of its ideas are superstitious.

Thea: Apology noted. So why do you call yourself a Gnostic?

Guy: From Gnosticism, I draw the idea that spiritual growth is a matter of knowledge (or the striving after knowledge) – not of faith. We can learn what we need to know; and this learning is an active process: We can ask questions and test the answers we are given. For authentic spiritual growth, it seems obvious to me that doubt is better than faith.

I also follow Gnostic precedent in accepting that the cosmic context is indifferent to our human concerns and interests. Nature can be described as holy or sacred, (in the sense of being beautiful, awe inspiring and altogether sublime), but it is neither all-knowing nor "good" in any human sense. The world is not optimally suited to human needs; life is cruel more often than delicious. Darwin saw this clearly. What we are apt to call evil is woven into its very fabric. It is a blatant lie to blame the world's evil on human disobedience, or any other human shortcoming. We are what evolution – the demands of reproductive fitness – made us. Or what it has made of us to-date.

Thea: Interestingly, the Hebrew Bible is ambiguous on the matter. Genesis tells the story of the Fall, but Job is quite clear that the ways of God are inscrutable and that Job's sufferings are not a punishment for his sins.

Guy: The Gnostics went even further, declaring that the Maker of this bloody, pain-racked world was not the supreme God at all, but only a rebellious, incompetent demiurge. We need not follow them in their eccentric myth, but they were surely right that something in us repudiates and rises above

the cruelty of Nature. We cannot unconditionally obey Nature, nor dominate it, nor fully transcend it. I would say, the relationship between Man and Nature is a politicious one: ambivalent, complex and troubled on both sides. In the past, the Biblical myth of a Fall out of Nature may have served us fairly well, but today it is altogether too simple.

Thea: I can see why you describe yourself as a Gnostic with reservations.

Guy: Yes, the Gnostics were a peculiar lot. But I revere them for their staunch affirmation, more than two thousand years ago, that knowledge per se is a spiritual good – as against the Christian preference for obedience and child-like faith. This alone makes them memorable in the history of religious thought.

Thea: No, I can't see you having much respect for faith. It has its uses though. It makes for simplicity and peace of mind.

Guy: That's just why I'm suspicious of it. Gnostics understand that the price of knowledge is a willingness to endure confusion and uncertainty. When you begin to learn, the first and last thing you perceive is the extent of your own ignorance.

Thea: Maybe so, but most people don't have time for confusion and uncertainty. They need straight, simple answers to help them get on with bleak and bitter lives. Gnosticism is an elitist doctrine.

Guy: Sadly true. And time out of mind, that has been the distinction between religion and authentic spirituality. Organized religion is a kind of franchise operation – much like MacDonaldd or Tim Horton – in what I'd call the feel-good industry. Local "priests," trained and ordained in some fashion by a "home office" (with however many levels in between) administer a certain brand of spiritual benefit to paying customers, and remit a portion of their take to the home office – in exchange for services that standardize the product and maintain a degree of quality control. There are many variants of the religion business, but that is its core idea. Please understand that I am not being cynical now. I'm just describing its organization structure. Quality of the "product" is another matter. It may be shoddy and over-priced, or may be very high indeed. I was a dues-paying member and operator in such an organization for years, before turning into the maverick I am today – with my own thoughts about spirituality, shared as pure suggestions, with no organization behind me.

Thea: The distinction you've just drawn is a hot issue in some circles. Many deny that there can be authentic "spirituality" without participation in some organized religion. What do you mean by that word? What is "spirituality" for you?

Guy: Spirituality is about the human creature, naked in the universe. I'd say that religion is more about the human creature in society. It confronts the issue of our nakedness only to get us clothed in its own garments again as quickly as possible. For the present purpose, we can define spirituality as the personal project of making a home in this universe. It seems to mean: learning to draw upon the energies and wisdom of the unconscious mind; achieving a harmony with Nature and with the people one lives among; learning to live in the present. Spirituality is seeing beneath the surface, to the nature of things. It means taking life as it is – steadily and whole. Above all, perhaps, spirituality means love, as its masters have always taught – first, for the specific people and creatures in one's life, and finally for life and Nature in the abstract.

Thea: That's a pretty convincing definition, and I would have to agree. What I find striking, though is that it does not touch the social and political dimensions of religion at all. That leaves a pretty large gap, don't you think?

Guy: Admittedly. I think authentic spirituality has always been, and must be, a personal quest or project. If anything it is anti-social. Attending church and following the rituals are a great way for busy people to participate in their communities, but a very poor way to learn to feel and think for oneself. As a therapist, I'm sure you know that.

Thea: OK. What else can you say about the convictions of a Darwinian Gnostic?

Guy: Their central point – the sticking point for most people, I think – is that in a self-organizing world, no one watches over us. You can, if you wish, imagine Nature or the whole universe as a loving parent; but then, what it seems to love mostly are its own powers of generation. It has too many children to care much about any of them, and it is always busy making more. Today, I think we have to recognize that authentic spirituality must be an unrequited and disinterested love of the world and life – a love we value for its own sake, and not in hope of reward.

On the evidence, the universe does not care what we do to ourselves or to each other. It will continue much as it is, regardless. We may devise laws or codes of conduct to live by, but these will be precarious social devices, nor cosmic absolutes. In this sense, we are free; and, correspondingly, we must learn to function as moral adults. We can think of our lives as a probing on the edge of the possible, but always at our own risk. Nothing but good will, intelligent foresight or dumb luck will save us from happenstance or from ourselves.

Thea: That won't be enough for most people. I don't know if it's enough for me.

Guy: Well it's all I have to offer, I'm afraid. If you need a personalized God, you'll have to look elsewhere.

Thea: In most religions, love (however understood) is more important than knowledge. I think your emphasis on knowledge is overblown.

Guy: Perhaps. I've been something of a glutton for it. I won't apologize though. The "perennial philosophy" has always taught that love and knowledge depend on one another. To know anything one must care about it enough to give the time and attention that it requires. One cannot come to understand anything one does not love sufficiently, as the great mystics insisted. And conversely, love is meaningless without genuine knowledge and understanding of what is loved. How many parents love a fantasy of their children, rather than the children themselves? How many husbands love a fantasy of their wives, and vice versa? It's a truism that knowledge without love is cold and brutal; but I've always felt that love without clear-sighted knowledge is mere sentimentality.

perennial philosophy

Thea: I would agree, up to a point. On the other side there is Eliot's great line³ that "humankind cannot bear very much reality." There is a point where knowledge becomes toxic. Another finding from psychotherapy, perhaps. Freud characterized psychoanalysis as anamnesis – "unforgetting" – but we have learned from experience since his time that not everything needs to be remembered, that some things are better forgotten.

By the way, before we go on, I've heard that expression, "perennial philosophy," but I don't know what it means. Which philosophy are you talking about? And why is it perennial?

Guy: The expression denotes a cluster of ideas that appear again and again in many times and places – always essentially the same, though with countless variations. Its core idea, perhaps, is that the phenomenal self and its world are illusory – not to be taken at face value.⁴

Thea: That sounds a bit like Nietzsche and the post-moderns: What people call "reality" is unknown and unknowable. "There are no facts, only interpretations."

Guy: But the so-called "mystics" who developed their versions of this philosophy were not into relativism. On the contrary, they believed it was the supreme purpose of life to reach the plane of absolute reality by seeing through the world's illusions. Accordingly, Yoga, Zen, and numerous other spiritual practices attempt to lead their adepts beyond the ego to . . . salvation, enlightenment, liberation – whatever you want to call it. They insist that what we call a normal adult personality is still deluded in important ways – certainly not the ideal and final goal of human development.

³ *In Burnt Norton.*

⁴ The phrase "perennial philosophy" was coined by Leibniz and taken up by Aldous Huxley. See Huxley's book of that title.

- Thea:** No, that doesn't sound like the post-modern types.
- Guy:** Not at all. On the other hand, most of those ancient disciplines, in one form or another, are still being practiced today, and in a distinctly post-modern mood that is not religious in any traditional sense. As with post-modern relativism, one often feels that people's interest in them is a reaction and development from the Modern – from the rationalism and humanism of the Enlightenment.
- Thea:** In my own field, there's a school called transpersonal psychology⁵ – not quite respectable in most circles – that counts William James, Carl Jung, Abraham Maslow, Roberto Assagioli and Ken Wilber among its founders. In their view, the adult ego that emerges from childhood and adolescence is by no means the highest stage of a person's development. Rather, they hold that the mystics were reporting accurately when they described their transformative insights, and right again in teaching that such insight is potentially available to all who take the path that leads to them. I've never really looked into this movement, but it sounds something like what you're calling perennial philosophy. How does it gibe with the Darwinian paradigm, and with current neuropsychology?
- Guy:** I don't think anyone really knows yet. I have looked into the transpersonal school a bit – on a hunch that ecoDarwinian psychology, transpersonal psychology and perennial philosophy might be three names for the same thing. I suspect that what is now called transpersonal psychology is perennial philosophy recast in bottom-up Darwinian and ecological language.
- Thea:** Can you support that claim?
- Guy:** I can make it plausible, at any rate. The “higher reality” that the mystics spoke of has been variously called “the One,” “the Atman,” “the Kingdom of God,” “the World Soul,” and many other names. It may be that the higher “reality” these masters were pointing to was simply a personal experience or intuition of the mental ecology we've been discussing.
- Thea:** If your ecology of mind corresponds to their Supreme Reality, no wonder they thought it was ineffable, and beyond human comprehension!
- Guy:** Yes. And its amazing how far we've come toward understanding that Reality in the language of modern science – and how many new questions and fields of investigation have been opened up.
- Thea:** Then our “normal” understanding is defective (you and those mystics and the trans-personalists would agree) because it dwells too much on our separateness and individuality, and fails to see how we are connected

⁵ See, for example, www.transpersonalacademy.co.uk/ and www.jobnvDavis.com/tp/.

to each other and to the world around us?

Guy: Yes; and there is agreement on some practical points as well: For example, that we take language too literally – thinking of it as denoting an objective reality, not just as a pointing at shared aspects of subjective experience. That we over-estimate our powers of rational agency, failing to see how our tools and toys shape and manipulate us as much as we manipulate them. That thoughts and feelings and impulses, often received as if they were transmissions from some external “god” or “demon,” are really aspects of our selves – messages from the unconscious as we’d now say.

Thea: It feels like tremendous arrogance on our part to think that science can now tackle the ultimate mysteries of existence, giving rational answers on matters long thought to be beyond human comprehension.

Guy: At all events, it seems clear that science and the old spiritual traditions are meeting at last – not in agreement (not by a long shot) but in the great questions they are asking: the questions of ultimate human concern that every child asks as it begins to reason.

Thea: The origin of the universe, the earth and life. The nature and workings of our own minds. The place of an individual life and mind in Nature and society.

science wars

Guy: Yes. Religion has always supplied mythic answers to those questions, embodying the collective wisdom and daydreams of the tribe. But, within the last few decades, science has developed to a point where it is equipped to tackle these same questions, but in a more empirical and critical way.

Thea: Which means that, more than ever, it’s on a collision course with certain teachings of religion – not just on tangential matters like the Earth’s position in the solar system, but on matters of vital concern such as the nature and needs of a human soul.

Guy: To me that conflict seems totally unnecessary. Like so many others, it could easily be avoided with just a little intelligence and self-restraint.

Thea: Then why is it happening?

Guy: There’s over-reaching on both sides, I think. Religions have often placed themselves in opposition to science by insisting too literally on certain of their teachings – by failing to recognize the nature of poetry and myth. Some religious leaders make themselves ridiculous by taking the Bible as the literal word of God, all serious Biblical scholarship to the contrary. On the other side, scientists have often shown insensitivity to the religious project, failing to recognize that it can serve legitimate values of its own, quite different from those of science.

Perhaps one source of useless dogmatism has been a classical theory of knowledge which leads both sides to represent their claims as absolute truths, rather than as suggestions which may sometimes be helpful. If people understood the difference between a fact and an interpretation, between a true-or-false belief and a personal commitment, between a statement and a suggestion, much of the conflict might disappear. What remained in dispute could then be treated much more intelligently as a negotiation and/or philosophical and political debate amongst competing value systems.

Thea: You're probably right. But you know that isn't going to happen.

Guy: Well it might, eventually. Political arrangements too are outcomes of an ecoDarwinian process. There's no knowing what wisdom may emerge once the alternatives are exhausted.