

IN A NUTSHELL - by Isabel Carr

## Unitarian Universalist Perspective on SCIENCE AND RELIGION

*In this column, I have chosen excerpts from the writings of one remarkable woman. Helen Lutton Cohen is the minister emerita of the First Parish in Lexington, Massachusetts, which she served from 1980 to 2002. She is a life-long Unitarian Universalist, and the daughter of a research chemist and history teacher.*

...the successes of science help us understand ourselves and our world and make many new things possible, but they also challenge of our sense of what it is to be human beings, our ethical understanding, and our priorities. Though the popular media often presents these questions as *science vs religion*, Unitarian Universalists have historically viewed science and religion as compatible.

Our movement was founded in the context of a growing curiosity and optimism about the world. We believed with Unitarian minister Samuel Longfellow that "revelation is not sealed." ...we worked to adapt our religious understanding to the growing, sometimes astounding discoveries of astronomy, geology, and biology...We wondered, would science destroy religious faith? Does it neglect or dismiss the spirit? Can its discoveries undermine as well as support human morality?

The great William Ellery Channing, passionate advocate for reason and education once wrote, "Thought frees the old bounds...It holds nothing too sacred for investigation...a perilous tendency. Men forget the limits of their powers. They question...with an audacious self-reliance...and rush into an extravagance of doubt more unphilosophical and foolish than the weakest credulity."

...groups have risen up within our movement that have found science inadequate and sometimes arrogant in its limited picture of what is true....recent advocates of spirituality have argued that science ignores the immeasurable truths of the spirit. A divide has risen between deductive and intuitive approaches to truth, leading many to question whether science and religion are always compatible...we must be clear, the scientific search for provable facts and their application should be guided by our ethical understanding.

...science has uncovered enough about genetics to show us that we belong together within the human family...among all living things...When we live in the world with this understanding, there are few simple answers and fewer absolutes. We must be ready to open our minds and hearts to change, however convinced we are. We must also be ready to act, according to our best understanding and with humility. Science and religion together reveal to us a world of wonder. They make us grateful to be part of it, even in the face of the fear, pain, loss and evil that are also a part of it...God is in the details.