



Crossroads Cultural Center and Columbia Catholic Ministry

In collaboration with the Center for the Study of Science and Religion

“WHAT’S FAITH GOT TO DO WITH IT?”

FAITH AND SCIENCE: Are they in conflict?

October 22, 2008 at 7:00 pm, Columbia University, New York, NY

Speaker: Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete

**transcript not reviewed by the speaker*

Crossroads: Good evening, and welcome on behalf of the Crossroads Cultural Center. We would like to thank our co-sponsors: the Columbia Catholic Ministry and the Center for the Study of Science and Religion at Columbia. Tonight we are pleased to have again Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete give the second lecture in the series “What’s faith got to do with it?” This series of four lectures is dedicated to the relationship between faith and life in four important human phenomena (politics, science, economics, and affectivity). And we’re very honored to have here Professor Robert Pollack who is the Director of the Center for the Study of Science and Religion and also a biology professor, and he’s going to give us some opening remarks. Professor Pollack--

Pollack: I’m Bob Pollack. I am indeed a professor of biology and I am indeed the Director of the Center for the Study of Science and Religion, but I am not here in those capacities. I’m here as a friend of Lorenzo Albacete. Lorenzo and I know each other for more years than we would like to admit, and we both have written more or less about the same subject with each other in mind, so that makes us friends of a certain sort that goes across the borders of professional overlap—physicist and biologist, and religious overlap—Catholic and Jew, academic overlap, childhood, place of birth overlap—all of those things, set them aside. Lorenzo and I ask, I think, the most important question that one can ask in any context and that is: How do you know you’re right? And I would just like to say, by introduction of him, that it’s my experience that as a scientist, I know that I don’t know I’m right because of the data of nature. And so why I know I’m right cannot be drawn from my work. This is a limit on my science. I think it is an absolute universal limit on science, and it opens the door to the obligation to ask, how then do I know I’m right? And I know no better guide to that question for a scientist than Msgr. Albacete. So here he is.

Albacete: Well I was hoping you’d tell me how I know I’m right. Since neither one of us knows we’re right, let’s just call it off. Move on.

Alright, moving right along towards *Faith and Affectivity*, the real interesting one, tonight we have to say something about *Faith and Science*. I want to start with two things that were said last time that seemed to have caused a certain surprise, perhaps because of the content or because of the author of those views. The author of those views was Joseph Ratzinger, and the text where you can find them—*Introduction to Christianity*, published in 1968, in English in 1969, and re-published recently by Ignatius Press after the author got another job. The content of those views—the story of the *perhaps*. Faith must be willing to allow a *perhaps* to its claim. *Perhaps* yes, *perhaps* not. The faith I practice, the faith I have learned from

the Catholic Church, and I can only speak about that, allows this *perhaps*, in fact, requires it in order to be to be true faith.

The idea comes, in fact, from a Jewish source, as I said, and that was Martin Buber, who wrote as follows, and he is quoted by Ratzinger in the book *Introduction to Christianity*, so let's get the actual words because last time I forgot the book.

An adherent of the Enlightenment [writes Buber], a very learned man, who had heard of the Rabbi of Berdichev, paid a visit to him in order to argue, as was his custom, with him too and to shatter his old-fashioned proofs of the truth of his faith. [He's kind of like the Christopher Hitchens of those days.] When he entered the Rabbi's room he found him walking up and down with a book in his hand, wrapped in thought. The Rabbi paid no attention to the new arrival. Suddenly he stopped, looked at him fleetingly and said, "But perhaps it is true after all". The scholar tried in vain to collect himself – his knees trembled, so terrible was the Rabbi to behold and so terrible his simple utterance to hear. But Rabbi Levi Jizchak now turned to face him and spoke quite calmly: "My son, the great scholars of the Torah with whom you have argued wasted their words on you; as you departed you laughed at them. They were unable to lay God and his Kingdom on the table before you, and nor can I. But think, my son, perhaps it is true." The exponent of the Enlightenment opposed him with all his strength; but this terrible "perhaps" which echoed back at him time after time broke his resistance.

And then Ratzinger comments:

Here we have, I believe – in however strange a guise – a very precise description of the situation of man confronted with the question of God. [This story, according to Ratzinger, offers us a very precise description of where we are when we raise the question of God.] No one can lay God and His Kingdom on the table before another man; even the believer cannot do it for himself. But however strongly unbelief may feel itself thereby justified it cannot forget the eerie feeling induced by the words "Yet perhaps it is true." The "perhaps" is the unavoidable temptation which it cannot elude, the temptation in which it too, in the very act of rejection, has to experience the unrejectability of belief. In other words, both the believer and the unbeliever share, each in his own way, doubt and belief, if they do not hide away from themselves and from the truth of their being. Neither can quite escape either doubt or belief; for the one, faith is present against doubt, for the other through doubt and in the form of doubt. It is the basic pattern of man's destiny only to be allowed to find the finality of his existence in this unceasing rivalry between doubt and belief, temptation and certainty. Perhaps in precisely this way doubt, which saves both sides from being shut up in their own worlds, could become the avenue of communication.

Last time I proposed to you in the simplest way possible, we don't have time to go over the consequences, the claim, the proposal that the intersection between faith and at that time we discussed politics, was precisely to allow human reason in the light of this *perhaps* not to close down, not to surrender to the lack of confidence in itself, the lack of confidence in the ability to reach any truth, less truth itself. And I showed you how, when the Holy Father was dis-invited from La Sapienza University and he released his speech, he said that the contribution that he wanted to make, that the Church, that the Pope, that faith hopes to make to the life of the university is precisely this encouragement to reason, to make sure it doesn't fold down, that it persists in its search, to create this space for this *broadening of reason*—one of the favorite terms. And we saw him also in the precise discussion on politics with Jurgen Habermas, making

essentially the same point, and in that context he said, (the second point that apparently surprised some people) that he was not prepared to appeal in his presentation of what faith offers to a natural law because he says, today's view of nature, especially coming from biological science, shows the lack of any direction or any particular rationality of what to expect, and for that reason therefore, since the natural law discourse requires some kind of sense of meaning, of *logos*, of rationality to be discovered in human nature at least, it cannot be used at a time in which we have reached this point. Again, I recommend that that you can find in the book. I just bring the books, *Introduction to Christianity*. I'm also plugging (I don't know why since I don't get paid for this!) *The Dialectics of Secularization* by Habermas and Ratzinger. Good stuff, good material there.

Well, he's right. The second point, the point of where we are at this moment in the encounter between faith and human knowledge, and now in particular scientific knowledge, does present that problem. The argument, perhaps the strongest argument about the humanness of belief comes from this denial that there is anything in human nature that serves as a guidance of a direction somehow inherent in the natural itself. Questions of meaning and purpose are therefore set aside.

Now in this particular presentation of that, at this point, whether he were here or not, I would like to turn to the work of this man who just introduced me. I want to make sure that I erase all the denunciations of his thought that I had prepared since he said such nice things. I am not a biologist. I read and write. I read daily *The Anchorage Daily News* and other journals, and I can only accept what I'm told. And this is what he says in the splendid book that I am also plugging: *The Faith of Biology and the Biology of Faith* by Robert Pollack. This is the best stuff around. You want to find out what's going on and find how he suggests the reality of the *perhaps*, then there's nothing better, and look—the best books are not that big. I just received the book *Do We Manufacture God?* or something like that, which was the biggest thing and completely incomprehensible. But anyway, this is the best. It's small, very small. Look at how these little small books contain everything you want to know, ladies and gentlemen. And they're brought to you, and I am brought to you by Poland Spring, the water of the unknowable! Have we taken care of all commercial obligations? We can move on.

I, in fact, admit in here [*God at the Ritz*] that whatever I know about this situation of science today, this claim, I have learned especially from Bob Pollack, so he will correct me. He didn't say anything when he read it in the book, so I think it's safe to read some of his words, or some of my words quoting him.

According to current scientific thought, [And this is what Ratzinger had in mind when he said that we cannot really think of the natural law, at least not initially, at a point of encounter between faith and human knowledge today, especially when applied to the area of ethics.] the existence of the human species can be totally explained by “natural selection.” All species share a common ancestor. Species compete for survival in a world of limited resources, not to mention unpredictable catastrophes. Species can be defined by their genoma, composed of the chemical DNA assembled in chromosomes. Each individual of a given species carries the defining genome of the species in each of its cells. Individuals within a species differ from each other because of errors in the copying of the DNA genome from generation to generation. Eventually these differences, by enhancing or diminishing survivability, lead to the emergence of other species.

In the human brain, this process has led to that DNA-based configuration that

enables the human species to acquire and pass on information through language, leading to the capacity to formulate, learn, and teach the ideas of others. [At this point one is reminded of the claims of] Richard Dawkins...[who] coined the expression “memes” (analogous to those DNA sequenced called “genes”) to designate those ideas that survive the natural selection process. Human life therefore could be described as composed “of memes and genes.” All those concepts that deal with purpose and meaning are collections of surviving memes. In human societies, it is the “meme struggle” that determines society’s fate.

The meme-constructing capacity is localized in the human brain, but we have yet to learn how its integrated operations, which culminate in thought and consciousness, are related to specific brain activity. However complex its operations may be, there is absolutely no scientific reason [and this is the point I want to make] to postulate any force at work other than the laws of physics and chemistry that guide the formation and evolution of all life. Therefore there is no scientific basis for the existence of an immaterial, transcendent world.

It’s not just that science, [please understand this particular point] because of its method of inquiry, is unable to grasp spiritual realities; [many people see their way out of this by simply claiming that, that science cannot get to these invisible realities that faith somehow grasps because its method restricts itself in an *a priori* way to exclude these. And fine, maybe it has to, and that is the way it is, and period, but one could, in theory, argue that that’s not the end of human thought, that scientific reasoning is not the only form of reasoning, and somehow or other walk a dualistic way, like I was accused of doing when I started my pilgrimage of life that led me here, namely of being faithful to the scientific method Monday through Friday, but on the weekend to run off and believe things like the dead can rise again. And they asked me, “Who is the real you?” That, as I told you last time, started my real search. But, as it says here,] It’s not just that science, because of its method of inquiry, is unable to grasp spiritual realities; it’s that the existence of spiritual realities is seen as superfluous. Spiritual realities are not needed to explain all the phenomena associated with life, including human life. And if they are not needed, it makes no sense to explain a phenomenon by introducing more factors than are necessary for its comprehension. Of course science cannot “prove” that a spiritual order of existence beyond the laws of physics and chemistry does not exist, [it cannot prove that] but to believe it does exist appears to be a matter of an irrational preference rather than fidelity to the concrete evidence available to science.

I would say this is about as radical a claim as one can make. It’s difficult to imagine anything else, a claim that makes very difficult what appears to be, as we saw last time, more and more a necessary encounter between the world of religious convictions and secular life—science, politics and we will see economics, and so forth, as seen in the discussion between Habermas and Ratzinger. Upon what can we find some kind of agreement so that we can today “tame power”? We must remember the concern of that discussion. Or are we at the mercy of the most powerful powers at all levels of human life? If there can be no conversation about anything in common, between the scientific mind and the religious mind, then we’ve got a problem.

When I read Bob’s book, I was very impressed by his stating as clearly as he could...and his adherence to the view of science’s relation to what is known about human life. And I read with

great interest how he proposed to justify the fact that in his own life he has somehow managed, perhaps in recent times, to go beyond this impasse, this apparent impasse, and actually be involved with something like the Center for the Study of Science and Religion here at the university, but especially in the coming together with other people to seek to provide exactly what Ratzinger and Habermas were talking about, and it is some kind of common ground to guide ethical choices that must be made because of the dangers of being abandoned entirely to the greatest powers around.

And so this is, and he's right here to denounce it if he wants to, more or less how I understand his proposal. He postulates that reality can be... I want to use the exact words... I don't know that it is divided. It can be perceived in some way by postulating three areas. Again, in this thing the words always fail especially when one of those areas is the unknowable. That's why I advertised the water as the water of the unknowable. This is reality that is intrinsically unknowable, and so what else can be said about it? At the moment nothing since it is unknowable. The rest of reality is made of the unknown and the known. The known is constantly pressing on the border towards the unknown, expanding the area of knowledge, and the unknown continues, one hopes, surrendering to this, so that more and more of what is now unknown becomes known. The scientific way of understanding reality is at this frontier between the known and unknown. The scientific method is designed to be a rational way of advancing the frontier of the known into the unknown.

But all this is existing within, if you want, this reality that he calls "the unknowable," and the more and more you go from unknown to known, the more and more the known advances its frontier, and in no way affects the unknowable that remains unknowable. This seems to suggest a hopeless dualism, as hopeless as it can get since the unknowable is always unknowable and never changes from being unknowable. Well then, what the heck am I going to do about it? Go have some spaghetti or something like that.

Scientific testings of hypotheses advance the frontier of the known, therefore scientific hypotheses about the unknowable are by definition not meaningful. What justifies the work of science is the idea, the insight, giving rise to the hypothesis that is then tested. That's how science advances. That is how the frontier between the known and the unknown is broken. These ideas, these insights come, they are formulated as hypotheses and then they are tested. Bob asks, "But where does this insight come from?" It cannot come from the world of the known; that's absurd, as all ideas are an insight into reality that was not there before. It cannot come from the world of the unknowable because otherwise they would be but logical deductions of what is known. They occur; they've in fact made science possible.

So he postulates that we can see this scientific insight, the human experience of the scientific insight as and coming from an intersection into the other world, the world of the unknowable. "Can these hypotheses," he says, "that the unknowable exists and that it would remain unknowable, can it be tested through the methods of science?" Certainly not. As they posit notions that resist testability, but they are nevertheless a fair representation of worldwide human experience outside of science. Or to the point today, they are as well consistent with the actual experience of scientists, and not the institutional ideology of organized science. The fact is that science itself depends on the periodic emergence of the unknowable for its own progress.

Without the unknowable, there would not be new ideas to test, not really new, to test scientifically and move ahead. The point seems to me is that this moving ahead does nothing to make the unknowable any less unknowable.

My only concern, and Prof. Pollack knows this and it's in my book, I can accept all of this. In fact, I can accept it and certainly use another vocabulary that briefly I will propose to you to see more clearly its correspondence, how beautifully it corresponds to the Catholic tradition. Again, as I say, it's the only one I can speak from, and within that the one represented by the man who is our Pope now. One of the things about the terminology that concerns me is the fact that he calls the unknowable the irrational part, the word *irrational*; irrational that has no chance of being brought under rational control. I understand, but I would, if anything, call it the super-rational or the beyond-rational because *irrational* seems to be too negative a term for my own satisfaction.

In the thought of Fr. Giussani, the man whom I follow in most of these things, instead of using the word *unknowable*, he uses the word *Mystery*. Some might use the word *God*, but the problem with that word is that it means everything and nothing. Mystery is exactly what Prof. Pollack understands as the unknowable.

I like his insistence that scientific insight, his proposal that scientific insight indicates a point of contact somehow that has to be understood better, the emergence of something from the world of the unknowable into the world of the known and unknown, but also he underlines in his book that this is not the only example of such a contact. "There are other events. [I love it immediately because these are not in the form of abstract information or ideas, that he was sitting around and suddenly it's like somebody whispering in your ear or infusing knowledge in your brain. The word *event* is closer to what this is like; it's something that happens, that occurs. It has certainly an intellectual dimension and immediately one moves to explore its possibilities, but it's much more than that.] These other events occur rarely, inexplicably, unpredictably, and give meaning to our lives. They are kind of breakthrough moments, meaning a new understanding drawn from the internal, emotional context of the experience of this encounter, of this event. It is a source of a sense of meaning." And again, it is not one derived from the known, unknown, possible. It is one encountered. It is based on an experience and it is an experience that gives birth to what we call the sense of meaning, purpose, etc...

The question is how to understand this, with what methods? This is not a matter of an intellectual understanding which may follow, as it does when experimentation proves scientific insight to be useful. "Meaning, purpose, direction, teleology, the end of things—these are not notions that we naturally associate with science, still such experiences are commonly called *religious*. Yet the central event in science is so similar to these religious experiences that I see only a semantic difference between scientific insight and what is called in religious terms *revelation*." That's quite a statement.

One could respond to that that what is not known today must and will be known tomorrow or the next day, and that this will go on until everything is known so that to postulate a reality of mystery or the unknowable is, in fact, not allowed. It's not needed. What perhaps one needs is patience and big funds so that we can advance the frontier. Money and patience—I love that proposal! I would quickly abandon my allegiance to the unknowable for big bucks. (Secretly I would believe.) The problem with this view is that this patience is based on what? What is the origin of such certitude? The certitude is not justified by science itself, the certitude that just with a little bit of patience and money everything will be known. That is a dogma. "The notion that nothing exists except what is knowable is entirely unprovable," he says. "Holding to this belief in the absence of any way to test it through experimentation, and despite the counter-evidence of scientific insight itself, puts science at the risk of trapping itself in dogma." Trapping itself in

dogma, restriction of possibilities, certainly the process of broadening and opening reason is discontinued by an arbitrary limitation; it cannot be therefore, although I cannot prove it in any other way. You can only hold that sooner or later you will know everything.

That is like what we saw in politics last week. At that time we saw, for those of us who believe, that we can propose that the intersection between faith and the scientific enterprise, just as it was between faith and politics, will have...nature and effect precisely the removal of this limitation to reason, and through that *perhaps* will open the path to greater conversation and mutual understanding through dialogue.

This broadening of reason appears again as a way of looking at the interaction between faith and the human enterprise, in this case also at the level of science. For this to be the case though, religious proposals, faith-based proposals, must themselves be reasonable, must themselves show this opening. If they do not, it cannot have this broadening of reason. That's why I would not call the unknowable the irrational. I would use *mystery* because it doesn't commit to anything, and however understood, its unknowability is affirmed. Mystery is encounter. The test of such an encounter is insight, but I would also underline that this is not just an intellectual insight, but an insight tied to the experience of wonder and awe, and this becomes the starting point for rational analysis, unleashing within us a hope that encourages us and moves us in a real way, in an exciting way to search for its source.

There's much more here, but I think we can move on. I want to touch again on the calling that experience, that point of contact with revelation, using the word *revelation*. We can play a game, if you wish, a mental exercise, using as your sources of research, whatever is a valid one, the question: If the unknowable exists, if from it emerges an insight or these experiences that are suddenly there, if that is the case—(remember the words here have to fail), but if somehow the unknowable, the mystery has intersected with this world, what, other than this experience of an absolute amazement, an awe beyond words, a hope, an enthusiasm, could we understand better what to look for to see whether that has happened? I don't know if it's clear. In fact, I will go directly to the point that I want to make and that is the one brought up by the Jewish philosopher Levinas in his essay *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other* in which he asks such a question in terms of the occurrence of an incarnation.

It has at the moment absolutely nothing to do with the Christian proposal about the incarnation of the mystery. This is about the revelation of the mystery. Somehow or other there's a revelation of the mystery that we grasp—the mystery has in some way managed to enter the non-unknowable world. Can that be? Only if it remains unknowable. But if it remains unknowable, doesn't that render it invisible? Do you understand the problem? If the unknowable is to remain unknowable, you can stop here and say, "Let's not even talk about it since there is no way, no rational way, no way you could test any evidence of that reality, and that's that." But if you say, "Oh, there is a way; the unknowable can actually have an impact on the world of the known and unknown." Well if it has an impact, how can I tell that it's there? What do I look for to see? And I can tell you, well, awe, amazement, the arrival of the raising in you of a hope that goes beyond anything—"hope against hope," as St. Paul says. These are all signs that there has been contact made, signs that protect the unknowability of the unknowable which we have to because otherwise you have the unknowable absorbed by the world of known and unknown or you have the world of known and unknown totally divinized, if you wish, rendered unknowable in order to understand. How can we understand this presence? And this is a question that Levinas asks himself in this essay *Entre Nous*, and it's an amazing proposal. His answer is:

“If such an *incarnation*, [better, maybe that word is too loaded with other meanings] if such an *intersection* can take place, can happen, what we would see, what we should be looking for is a manifestation of an absolute humility. Immediately the presence of the unknowable in this world would invite against it persecution, and you would find it in the circles of the persecuted of this world. This is the only way that the unknowable can be present without losing the unknowability. It is a way of knosis.” He calls it “the self-inflicted humiliation of the Supreme Being.” These are the words of Levinas.

It would show itself, therefore, as a radical otherness present in my world. An encounter with it would take me out of myself totally into the embrace of the other. Remember, we’re not talking about a little Mickey Mouse emotion here; in fact, the encounter with this reality, with its absolute humility, its victim nature, if you wish, would illicit from me immediately a sense of responsibility, of caring, taking me out of all selfishness, depending of course on the degree of the strength of my encounter with this reality.

This opening, therefore, of reason, as it is proposed that the affirmation of the unknowable and its possibility of its intersection with our world being grasped, will not only free, say, scientific research outside the bonds of service to ideology—ideology either of a political nature or of its own manufacturing, and facilitate the experiences of newness and hope and enthusiasm—affirmation from the human adventure of knowledge without limits. Not only will it do that, but at the same time and for the same reason it will open a path of ethics and behavior based on absolute respect and embracing of the other as a responsibility. I want to insist that this is not that it teaches ethics to us, or that it inspires us. It is the same phenomenon that expands reason this way, the same one will open up the path to liberation from ideology that is inhuman, that persecutes and threatens the other. It’s not just the beauty of how faith contributes something, an ethical source; it is the very nature or same phenomenon of the contact between the mystery, the unknowable and the knowable.

So that little *perhaps*, which is the initial test of whether this is working or not, because if either side here is not willing to embrace a *perhaps*, shows itself to be extremely important. It is a *perhaps* that has to be there because the point of intersection between the unknowable and the known can only unleash a call, an attraction to us to put ourselves at the service of the other, but it cannot force us; it has to be a free decision. What moves us to do it is because it’s a beautiful thing. Freedom, beauty, responsibility for the other, truth—they are inseparable. This is the proposal that animates and should animate the exciting dialogue between faith and science today.