First let me say a little about what I take to be the role of a philosopher in discussions like these. Someone once said that philosophers try to understand what worlds are possible, and scientists try to figure out which of those possible worlds we live in. I think that’s a fair assessment of what we do. In accordance with that picture, I hope to lay out for you the different logically possible positions people can take on the relation between science and religion, and recommend one of those positions as preferable to the others.

To begin with, we can divide the possible positions into two kinds: you can think either that science and religion are incompatible, that is, that the claims the two systems make cannot all be true, or that they are compatible. If you think they are incompatible—call this view **Pessimism**—you have a decision to make. If they can’t both be right, you know one of them is wrong, but the incompatibility alone doesn’t tell you which one. So, some people, having great faith in the ability of science to get at the truth about the world, have decided that religion is intellectually disreputable, and so abandon all religious claims. Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and virtually every enlightenment atheist that ever was take this view. They believe science is by its nature directed toward truth, and there is no reason to suppose that religious traditions have that same truth-directed quality.

But not all pessimists are scientific pessimists. Some, reasoning that science admits it is fallible, but that God (or the Vedas, or the Buddha) cannot be wrong, decide
to jettison science instead. In this camp we find creationists, and Intelligent Design theorists like William Demski. It’s important to understand that it is not only Christianity that harbors religious pessimists of this kind. In the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, a Muslim philosopher named Al-Ghazzali applied rigorous logical reasoning to matters of cosmology and philosophy, and decided that the whole enterprise was self-refuting. He then gave up philosophy, became a Sufi mystic, and wrote a book called *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. He would say that if reason contradicts God, then so much the worse for reason. He would surely make the same judgment about science, which is, after all, just a regimented form of common sense, a way of reasoning about the world. Moreover there are Hindus and Buddhists who take their scriptures claims about the origin of the universe and humankind as literally true, and therefore reject the claims of modern science.

Actually, there is a third kind of pessimist position one can take, but it isn’t very popular: You can think, like Tertullian, the second and third century Christian thinker, that science and religion are incompatible, and that is perfectly OK. It’s a little funny to talk about second century “science,” since science is really a modern idea, but there certainly was an idea of knowledge of the natural world then. Tertullian is famous for having said “Credo quia absurdum est,” which means “I believe it because it doesn’t make any sense. He thought that the very inconsistency of Christian doctrine with common sense was a mark in its favor. For him, incoherence is not a problem. OK, so that’s an odd position. There’s a reason why he’s not Saint Tertullian.

But one can also be an optimist, and think that science and religion do not ultimately contradict one another. Optimists come in two kinds, that I will call *Cowardly*
and Brave. The cowardly optimist believes that science and religion are compatible because they are not talking about the same thing. Just as quantum physics and literary theory are compatible, because they aren’t even addressing the same subject, religion talks about one thing, and science another, so there is no occasion for incompatibility. Stephen J. Gould, in his recent book Rocks of Ages, argues for a position like this. He calls this idea Non-Overlapping Magisteria (borrowing the idea of magisterium, or teaching authority, from Catholic doctrine). It turns out, of course, that religions do make claims about some of the same things science talks about, including cosmology, geography, history, psychology, and more. So Gould has to make his claim different; he has to say that science and religion ought not to talk about the same things. It’s a noble idea, I suppose, but it’s not likely to make converts of either scientific or religious pessimists. That’s why it’s cowardly: it buys compatibility at the price of forbidding discussion.

Finally, one can be a brave optimist. This is the view that science and religion are compatible because they are both avenues of knowledge about the one reality we all inhabit. Truth has nothing to fear from truth, so scientific truth and religious truth will converge on the same picture of the universe. This is the position I would like to recommend to you this morning. It does require courage, though, because there will be cases in which the claims of science and the claims of religion seem to conflict, and then the brave optimist has a decision to make. The challenge is to try to figure out how to respond to apparent conflict without retreating into pessimism.