

Editorial

BROAD EXPERIENCE? GREAT AUDIENCE?

John Barr, president of the Poetry Foundation, recently wrote that poetry is in need of reassessment (Barr 2006). He calls for fresh approaches that reflect today's experience and sensibilities. I believe that Barr's analysis fits the religion-and-science field as well as poetry. The editorials in the four issues of 2006 hinted at this reassessment: that in their actual practice science and technology express a sense of the sacred and thereby reveal our culture's operative spirituality (December 2006); that a focus on concepts overlooks the dimensions of practical-moral behavior and spiritual insight that are fundamental to religion (September 2006); that myth is an underlying ingredient for both religion and science (June 2006); and that the research agenda of the sciences is frequently generated by the common human insistence that there is more to nature than meets the eye (March 2006). (Editorials are available at http://www.zygonjournal.org/editorial_index.html).

To the extent that these four dimensions—the sacred, moral behavior/spiritual insight, myth, and common experience—are relatively underrepresented in the religion-and-science literature, they point to an agenda for the future of the field. The editorials in this forty-second year of our publication will continue to ask whether conventional approaches and agendas need to be revised. Several guest editorials will pursue this challenge from different perspectives.

Barr raises two interrelated issues: (1) the base of experience that sustains the conversation, whether in poetry or between religion and science, and (2) the nature of the audience that is involved in the conversation. The “breadth of the experience base available” for the conversation is correlated with the size and nature of the audience involved in the conversation. Taking a cue from Walt Whitman's comment on poetry: To have a great conversation between religion and science, great audiences must be involved. Greatness refers both to numbers and to composition. Whether the base of experience is derived primarily from within or from outside the academy emerges as an item of importance, because academics dominate the conversation. Interdisciplinarity, whether within the academy or outside it, is also a factor.

What insights are provoked when we bring these perspectives of breadth of experience and greatness of audience to the field of religion and science? Alfred North Whitehead's frequently cited comment that since religion and science are "the two strongest general forces which influence" human affairs "the future course of history depends upon the relations between them" ([1925] 1967, 181–82) certainly calls for thinking that reflects a broad base of experience and a great audience. Whitehead's vision cannot be confined within the boundaries of academia or of any other niche by which we ordinarily manage our experience. The contribution of academia is utterly essential because it provides a context in which rigorous thinking and critical discussion are encouraged and resourced. Nevertheless, its subject matter transcends the academic setting. Those who think and write about religion and science require a breadth of experience that reaches deeper and wider than their own context, whatever that may be.

Because religion is as broad and deep as human culture and experience, the great audience is never absent. Nearly every sector of society is interested in religion for one reason or another: the natural and social sciences, government, business, the arts, the entertainment and media industries, and, of course, religious communities themselves. Religion may be studied, thought about, written about, and made the object of strategies in all of these sectors, and they will most likely care also about the interaction of religion with science.

Can the experience base of those who specialize in religion and science match the base of those who are interested? The overlap of experience that scientists and religious thinkers share is so small as to be worrisome. When the larger audience is brought into play, the overlap is even smaller. In the audience of the larger society, the experience of scientists vis-à-vis religion seems to be more interesting and important than that of the experts in theology and religious studies departments. That a scientist believes in God is news; it calls up images of a rebel going against the stream. That a parish priest or bishop (or their equivalents in religions other than Christianity) accepts evolution will attract some attention, but the views of theologians resonate in a very small world. No doubt these asymmetries are rooted in the fact that those scientists who speak and write about their religious faith command a broader base of experience.

What experience base is it that resonates more broadly? I suggest that it is experience that speaks to a specific set of concerns, most of which have to do with transcendence. Is science compatible with belief in a larger, even transcendent, meaning to life? or with the sense that there is something transcendent that undergirds the world, a cosmic teleology? Can one be an honest, independent thinker and still hold to traditional values and religion? Is the marvelous world opened up by scientific studies a realm of transcendence and a source of healing? Such questions surface when religion and science is discussed in the media, at cocktail parties, in

bull sessions, and on blogs. They came to the fore in a number of events in the past year: The Dover, Pennsylvania, court proceedings on intelligent design; the excitement over *The Da Vinci Code*; the controversies over the debunking of religion in Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* and Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*; and in the Salk Institute conference "Beyond Belief." The explosion of interest in science and spirituality and healing, even in medical circles, is another clue to the presence of a great audience entering into the conversation between religion and science.

None of these signal events occurs in what we would call the mainstream of either science or in the academic study of religion and science. Academics play a significant role in each of the events I have enumerated, but they have had to travel outside the scholarly context. Even though these events echo the comments of Whitehead about world-historical significance, they bring issues to the surface that are not the meat and potatoes of the academic study of religion and science. Does this fact hold implications for how that academic study should be pursued? The contributions of the pertinent academic departments are irreplaceable—but do they draw upon a broad enough base of experience, and do they resonate with a truly great audience? Those questions must be given our attention.

The interplay of the experience base and the audience in our reflections on religion and science is much more complex than this brief discussion indicates. Nevertheless, it is clear that the nature of the interplay, the scope of the agenda, and the role of critical thinking are not clear enough in our minds. We have not brought our thinking to bear upon the range of experience and the vastness of the audience that are appropriate to the world-historical significance of our concern.

This first issue in our forty-second year encompasses a very broad base of experience, which, we think, bespeaks a great audience of potential readers and responders. The section of articles that leads off includes Léon Turner probing the dialogue of psychology with theology, while psychiatrists Nancy Morrison and Sally Severino develop a concept of altruism correlated with their psychoanalytical work in a medical school. Joseph Bracken, a philosophical theologian, presents a study of Whitehead, adding to his previous offerings in the journal, while Karl Peters, also a philosophical theologian, continues his efforts to relate theology to evolutionary modes of thought, this time with respect to creation and salvation. Jennifer Rindfleish, a sociologist working in the context of a business school, writes on "East-meets-West" spirituality. Theologian Michael Hogue elaborates a sophisticated biocultural approach to theological ethics and technology.

The second section focuses on physics—Carl Helrich dealing with the thorny issue of teleology and Timothy Sansbury providing a cautionary word on theological explorations of quantum mechanics.

A section on biomedicine and ethics brings together a very broad range of voices on one of the most urgent challenges we face—Ann Pederson

reflecting on the abortion controversies in South Dakota; Byron Sherwin plumbing resources from the Jewish tradition of the Golem; Mohammad Motahari Farimani and Fatima Al-Hayani expounding Muslim viewpoints on cloning and genetic modification; Stephen Modell (medicine) and Philip Hefner (theology) offering insights from a Christian perspective.

Christopher Southgate's poetry will appear in each issue this year, thus adding yet another modality of experience and thought. Here we present his poem "Crick, Watson, and the Double Helix."

We conclude with a symposium on the philosophy of C. S. Peirce and the biological thinking of Stuart Kauffman. The five symposiasts probe deeply into their subject, and the result is a rich feast of reflections. The hosts are William Kiblinger (religious studies), John Bugbee (history), Rocco Gangle (religious studies), Mark Graves (computer science), and Joyce Cuff (biology).

Let your reading of this issue be framed by poet John Barr's ideas of the base of experience and the great audience that assembles for the religion-and-science-conversation. Let it be informed by Alfred North Whitehead's insistence that there is world-historical significance at stake here. How far can you progress toward the goal of taking the measure of the experience that is represented in these twenty offerings? In that attempt the substance and the significance of the conversation will be revealed to you.

—Philip Hefner

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