

Editorial

RELIGION-AND-SCIENCE, THE THIRD COMMUNITY

The news is out that I will retire as editor of this journal in 2009, after nineteen exhilarating years in the position. Counting this issue, five more issues will bear my editorial mark. I intend, in the editorials of these five issues, to express my own personal assessment of the religion-and-science work to which I and this journal have been dedicated for more than forty years. All editorials reveal the personal positions of the author, but in these concluding pieces I will make in a more pronounced fashion my own insights and viewpoints. This is my way of offering a “salute” to *Zygon* and to the readers who have made it the journal it has become.

Religion-and-science—note the use of hyphens to indicate that religion-and-science is identical to neither religious nor scientific communities but an entity of its own—holds a place in the present cultural and intellectual scene that can be described as one of irony, expressed as a “third community” vis-à-vis both mainstream science and organized religious communities. I use the term *irony* to underscore the strange situation: One would expect that efforts which concern religion-and-science (R-and-S) would be closely bound to the communities that pursue science as well as to those which practice religion—and furthermore be welcomed by those communities; in fact, however, R-and-S exists in an uneasy relationship with those other communities. There seems to be a necessary tension between the three communities. R-and-S does not live within the communities of science and religion; it rather inhabits a somewhat precarious perch between them—hence the suggestion that it is a third community vis-à-vis the other two. The unease and precariousness of this third-community situation is what I speak of as the irony of R-and-S.

R-and-S aims to integrate scientific knowledge and worldviews with religious understandings—or, for those who resist the label *religious*, with one’s philosophy of life. In the broader range of religion-and-science, this community is in fact a “silent majority” whose composition mirrors the larger society. It includes intellectuals, the affluent managerial class that is found in government, business, education, and in the nonprofit sector. It also counts in its membership working-class people, both young and old,

as well those who are politically and culturally both liberal and conservative. We call this grouping a silent majority of the population because of its lower visibility in the public discussion, particularly as reported by the major media outlets. It does not have a ready voice, particularly because it is not easy to identify and even more difficult to speak for.

I have said that R-and-S is a third community because it is perched between, not within, the formally recognized scientific and religious communities. Recognizing this distinctive perch is essential if we are to understand what religion-and-science is about.

The scientific community as such cannot be a home for R-and-S, because religious questions and their relation to science are not part of the method and agendas to which scientists per se are committed and for which they receive institutional and financial support.

The religious communities, whether in academia or in established denominations, are also mostly uncongenial. Academic departments, with the exception of those in religiously supported schools, are dedicated in principle to descriptive studies rather than normative thinking; integrating science within one's philosophy of life is definitely a creative normative enterprise. Normative creative religious thinking is in fact theology, whereas most academic departments concentrate on religious studies, which is more closely related to the social sciences and hence more easily justified within the university or college context. It is not too much to say that, historically, the relations between theology and religious studies have been marked mostly by hostility and suspicion.

In principle, the denominations could welcome R-and-S. After all, its concern is the interpretation and expression of religion within the contemporary cultural context. In actuality, however, R-and-S results in creative and critical religious ferment and therefore inevitably suggests new ways of framing traditional belief and practice that established institutions generally do not welcome; on the contrary, those institutions are frequently threatened by the ferment that R-and-S generates.

Thus we can discern the cultural and intellectual geography that marks religion-and-science as a third community between these two—the scientific and the religious. But why call this a place of irony? For three reasons, all of which have to do with the ambivalence that marks the relations between the communities. First, even though as such they cannot be a home for R-and-S, many, if not most, of those who pursue R-and-S are members in good standing of the scientific and/or religious communities. Even though they desire the integration of scientific knowledge and religious world-views, their work of integration must of necessity be carried out as an extracurricular activity. Their activity qualifies as ironic, because while it is of fundamental importance to these members-in-good-standing, it is marginalized by the communities to which they have given so much of their lives.

Academia generally fosters the critical thinking that is essential, but it is ambivalent about religion-and-science, because the latter also requires discernment, authenticity of experience, and confessional thinking; none of these fit academia's criteria of success and advancement. Academia rather prizes the distanciation that is only one part of religion-and-science's enterprise. In light of these considerations, there is good reason to doubt whether R-and-S will ever become an academic *field* in any conventional sense of that term. Religious communities welcome processes of spiritual discernment and the confessional stance, but by and large they consider distanciation to be a defect. Furthermore, they do not consider scientific knowledge to be an important factor in the processes of discernment.

A second aspect of the irony I speak of has to do with the actual relations between R-and-S and the other communities. R-and-S requires the other two communities, scientific and religious, for its own well-being. It scarcely needs mentioning that R-and-S needs to cultivate its roots in the scientific community, where the actual work of science goes on. Established religious communities are likewise the nourishing agents of the traditions that have for millennia shaped human life and culture. Despite the present atmosphere in which the established communities of religious belief and practice are under attack from several directions, it is these communities that maintain the traditions that constitute the substance and forms of human religion.

That R-and-S is thoroughly dependent on the communities of science and religion and yet finds no nurturing home in either is genuinely ironic. Not infrequently, we witness attempts to escape this irony. Such attempts tend to fashion surrogate forms of both science and religion that enable an easier fit between the two. Some of these fall into the category of New Age phenomena, frequently focusing on individualistic mystical worldviews that are said to correlate with quantum physics or the neurosciences. There is, however, no easy way to integrate science into our worldviews, no painless path out of irony.

That the mainstream scientific and religious communities also need the community of R-and-S is a third facet of the irony that characterizes their relations. The experience of modernity in the past two centuries demonstrates that human life and the life of the planet cannot be adequately nourished by science alone or by religion that insulates itself from the impact of science on both its beliefs and practices. We have come to recognize, paraphrasing an older aphorism, both that science is too important to be left to the scientists and that religion is too important to be left to its established organizational forms.

The calling of R-and-S is to throw light on the depth dimension of the world that science describes and at the same time to lead traditional religion through the refining fire of the new ideas and methods that science has introduced into our common life as well as our theoretical thinking.

The depth dimension elicits basic questions: Where did we come from? Where are we going? What is the purpose of living? These are the perennial human questions that have been explored for millennia in myth, literature, and religion. Without sensitivity to these depth questions, sometimes called the dimension of ultimacy, life is unsatisfactory. It is not the role of science to probe these questions; its inestimable value lies in its success at exploring the penultimate world of nature. It is only reductionist thinking, “scientism,” that claims that the penultimate is all there is and all that matters, and thinkers who argue in this fashion, even if they are scientists, are engaging not in scientific thinking but in their own kind of “theology.” On the other hand, religious and philosophical reflection on the depth dimension does not serve us well if it is not engaged with the world as it is understood through scientific knowledge. We must ask the perennial questions in language and ideas that are commensurate with today’s knowledge. We are speaking here of the “zygon” function, yoking the ultimate and the penultimate. Yoking is the criterion that R-and-S brings to bear on its work, and it is the only community that does so.

In light of what I have said thus far, the geography of irony that marks the location of religion-and-science reveals the genuine interrelatedness of the three communities and also the essential tension that exists between them. The “science” of R-and-S will seem strange to the one community, while the religious insight will often be threatening to the other. R-and-S requires courage in its practitioners—it must not break its bonds to science and to religion, and it dare not relax the tension between them.

Religion-and-science draws its identity and its strength from its third-community location. Sitting astride the communities of science and religion and drawing its lifeblood from them gives R-and-S its foundations and its resources. Distancing itself from the other two communities and recognizing that it cannot be assimilated into them provides R-and-S its distinctive calling in our culture today. It puts its resources, drawn from the scientific and religious communities, toward a different function than conventional science and religion and thereby opens new and vital visions that would otherwise lie undiscovered. R-and-S is a community on the margins, and it is there that it finds its nurture and its calling.

We open this forty-third year with a focus on a thinker who was single-minded in its explorations of how we access through science the depth dimension of the world and our lives in it: Arthur Peacocke. This man is well known to *Zygon* readers from the fifteen articles published here over a period of more than thirty years (1972–2004), as well as from his many books, of course. (See more at www.zygonjournal.org.) In February 2007, the journal and the Zygon Center for Religion and Science organized a symposium honoring Arthur, who died in Oxford in October 2006. A wide range of thinkers participated in this event with papers and more informal reflections on the man and his work. Many of his basic themes

are explored in these pieces. To list them is instructive: evolution and theology (Gloria Schaab), panentheism (Karl Peters), hierarchies (Philip Clayton), intellectual honesty (Antje Jackelén), incarnation (Ann Pederson), naturalistic Christian faith (Nancey Murphy), and chance and necessity (Gayle Woloschak), concluded by Ian Barbour's personal reflections.

The second section of the issue presents four articles. Lluís Oviedo offers a comprehensive interpretation and assessment of the approach of the cognitive sciences to religion. William Grassie proposes a rather breathtaking study of religion in light of the sciences. Ecotheology receives a probing analysis and interpretation by John Grula. Historian Jacques Arnould has devoted himself to developments in space exploration, which he relates to religion.

"The Agenda for Religion-and-Science" headlines the third section. Biologist John Carvalho and biochemist/theologian Sjoerd Bonting provide overall interpretations of the symposium on this topic that ran throughout the 2007 issues of *Zygon*. Taede Smedes poses a critique of the work of Ian Barbour, to which Barbour responds, eliciting a further statement by Smedes. The discussion of the agenda has stimulated enough thinking that we may extend it well into this year 2008.

Current literature takes center stage in the final segments of articles. Chris Tilling assesses Hans Küng's proposals concerning theology science contained in his book *The Beginning of All Things*. Amos Yong takes the measure of the important literature on "divine action." Karl Peters's review of Gordon Kaufman's constructive theology of *Jesus and Creativity* and James Haag's review of neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga's *The Ethical Brain* conclude our offerings.

—Philip Hefner

Note: The abstract that appears on the following page corrects the one that appeared in the September 2007 issue of *Zygon*, p. 701, which contained errors, for which we apologize.