

## A CHRISTIAN SEMINARY'S SUPPORT FOR RELIGION-SCIENCE DISCUSSION

by *William E. Leshner*

*Abstract.* A Christian seminary supports the study of religion and science, in order to relate its faith to people living in scientifically oriented cultures. It invites the scientific and university communities to join in developing a model for dialogue that may be a basis for more ecumenical efforts at relating religion and science, so as to ease tensions between religious communities. The work pioneered by the Center for Advanced Study in Religion and Science and by *Zygon* is giving rise to new enterprises, including the coming establishment of a Center for the Study of Faith and Science at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

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I confess that I was surprised to be asked to participate in this symposium. While I am an enthusiastic supporter of this enterprise and do my best to run some administrative interference for it, I am strictly an auditor of the content itself. My role as a seminary president, as I see it, is to orchestrate the theological resources clustered in this place—not to specialize in playing one of the parts. But I readily accepted the invitation to participate when it was explained to me that I was to speak out of my church context and, in a sense for this seminary, about such matters as the seminary's real stake in the religion-science discussion, our intention and motives for our involvement in these studies, and the nature of our invitation to the scientific and university communities to join us in this venture.

As I plan for one dimension of our seminary's assignment, namely, the responsibility to relate the Christian faith to the modern world, the study of religion and science becomes, in my judgment, the most urgent and challenging task before us. Its urgency is not in the fact that

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it is immediately apparent to our church leaders, constituency, colleagues, or even our students that religion and science are critical disciplines to be linked. It is urgent because Western culture and all the major world cultures are becoming scientifically oriented in the sense that science supplies the methods and the accepted descriptions of the physical, social, and psychological characteristics of our world, and because the faith and practice of every religion is related to its culture and to the changes in its culture.

At this basic level, therefore, the seminary's interest in this area of inquiry is the fundamental commitment of the seminary to the search for truth. This quest is a dynamic one for Christian theology, even though the theological task has, at times, been interpreted by some in a static way. In my own tradition, we speak of the *viva vox*, the living word that is not fully captured in historic formulations or sacred texts but which springs to life when these elements of the tradition are related to vital ideas, in the current context, in the lives of real people. So, with this understanding of the theological task there is no option for the church. Bringing science and theology together, stimulating and maintaining a dialogue between the best way of knowing about the world and the truth claims of the faith, is essential—if the commitment to relate faith to changing culture is to be pursued.

What does the church, through the seminary, expect to accomplish in this discussion? Our goal, at least initially, is to assist theologians by providing space, climate, and resources to probe the findings of science in a variety of fields and to translate these findings into meaningful questions for Christian theology. It is a task of understanding and translation, of developing language that can make the questions posed by science into theological questions with implications for the Christian religion and the practice of faith in the modern world.

To put it in the language of the church, mission means crossing frontiers. The task of translating the Christian faith into the idiom of the global scientific culture of the future is perhaps the most formidable challenge confronting the church today.

Why then should we invite the scientific and university communities to join us in this venture, and why might they be inclined to accept the invitation? The invitation is essential because there is no way for theology to accomplish this task alone. Theology in this discussion is understood to be the function of relating the system of religious thought called the Christian faith to another system of thought that results from the application of scientific methods of inquiry. Theology will seek, first, to explore contrasting styles of inquiry, perceptions of reality, and conclusions reached and, second, to struggle to find ways for these systems to have access to each other through the discovery of common

concerns, common elements, and the formulation of linguistic symbols that permit a freer and more general discourse. So systematic theology, by its nature, requires a dialogue with science; and we intend to make an attempt to provide the space, create the climate, and gather some of the resources that can help this to happen.

Why scientists and university colleagues might accept this invitation is, of course, more speculative on my part. But, in the first instance, I would not preclude the possibility that, either because of intellectual curiosity or personal faith, a person may have a desire to join in such a creative venture in spite of the academic risks involved. A second reason might simply be the responsibility that we all have within the academic community to share our expertise so others can apply it to their fields of research. I think here of the way historical literary critics shared their expertise with Biblical scholars to set in motion a whole new approach to the study of the Scriptures and, consequently, the role of Scripture in the community of faith.

A third reason why others may want to join theologians in this dialogue is more visionary, perhaps, but may for some people be the most compelling reason of all. A member of the Rockefeller family, being honored by an Eastern seminary for a gift given to facilitate dialogue among world religious groups, asked whether the world religions were a force for peace in the world and, therefore, for human survival, or if they will be a force for continued enmity, separation, and hostility. As a person committed to a religious tradition that has and continues to have a divisive effect in many parts of the human community, I find this simple and naively stated question highly perplexing. I am sobered by the many incidents of conflict, historically and in the world today, where different religious beliefs, attitudes, and self images are at least a part of the complex of issues, if not the major cause of dissension. I tend to agree with those who suggest that it is unlikely that there will be peace on earth until there is a semblance of peace between the faith systems of the world. But before that dialogue is likely to occur in any significant way, there must be some evolution in the theologies of all the world religions. The blessings and benefits, as well as the ethical norms for adherents, must be related more universally to all humanity and to conditions in modern life. The emerging global scientific culture which clashes with the ancient norms of Islam ever more strongly than it does with the tenets of dogmatic Christianity is making such an evolution a necessity for us all.

In our own North American context, we have the opportunity to do the intellectual work required to identify the Christian faith with the more universal norms of the global scientific culture. This is research and development work—the sort of thing that goes on at the end of the

hall and from which no quick results are expected. But it is carried on—and will be by us—because of the potential to assist in the evolution of the Christian faith and to model a process of dialogue between one religion and the system of scientific thought that may be a basis for a broader ecumenical dialogue regarding the study of religion and science.

Without question, I am projecting a future for continued study and dialogue between religion and science in this seminary and in the broader theological community in North America. It is, to some extent, risky business in a time when the conservative tendencies in church and society are on the ascendancy. But the study of religion and science for the purpose of building links between these disciplines, which increasingly are phases or parts of many people's lives, is also an idea whose time has come. There is a strong community of support slowly being identified in the Lutheran churches of this country and other denominations as well, which is eager to encourage, support, and participate in this discussion.

I believe that CASIRAS and *Zygon* at age twenty should be regarded as pioneers in a field that will grow stronger and more rapidly—not only in academic circles but also in the churches in the years ahead. For our own part, the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago plans to build on the work of CASIRAS with the development of a Center for the Study of Faith and Science. This center will promote scholarly research in the area, hold conferences, support publications, and maintain relationships with similar centers around the world. The center will relate to the doctoral program of the seminary, build a constituency to broaden interest and access to faith and science discussions, and supply the needed support to forward these activities. The Board of Directors of the seminary has received a proposal to this effect and it has authorized the development of such a center. It is our hope that by the Silver Anniversary of CASIRAS the LSTC Center might be regarded as a worthy offspring.