

“WRITING THE AGENDA,” SUMMARY AND RESPONSE  
TO THE PANEL PARTICIPANTS: V. V. RAMAN, GRACE  
WOLF-CHASE, IAN BARBOUR, VÍTOR WESTHELLE

*by Ann Milliken Pederson*

*Abstract.* This essay highlights the basic issues, goals, and questions for the future of ZCRS.

*Keywords:* Ian Barbour; borders; consonance; dissonance; imagination; liminality; V. V. Raman; Vitor Westhelle; Grace Wolf-Chase; ZCRS.

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Examining the future agenda of the Zygon Center for Religion and Science (ZCRS) entails scrutiny of its mission and goals. In the essays that follow, which are versions of their presentations at the Symposium, four panelists who have been involved at a variety of levels and in many different ways offer their perspectives on shaping the questions and issues for the future of ZCRS. The agenda set by the panelists corresponds to the mission of ZCRS: “. . . the purpose of the Center is to bring together scientists, theologians, and other scholars to discuss and carry out research on basic questions and issues of human concern” (Program Notes 2003, 9).

My purpose here is to pull together and highlight five of the basic questions and issues.

1. A distinctive task of ZCRS is interpretive—to help us “understand the world in which we live and our place in that world” (Program Notes 2003, 9). The panelists, particularly Vitor Westhelle, remind us that this task requires an examination of not only what we know but also what we do with what we know. Interpretation is both an epistemological and a pragmatic task that draws us back to basic boundaries and relationships.

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While many in the religion-and-science dialogue advocate a kind of consonance between religion and science, attention must be paid to the distinct differences that each brings. To utilize a musical metaphor, the relationship is one not only of consonance but also of dissonance. Dissonance is not outside of harmony; the harmony itself embraces the tensions. Paying particular attention to those dissonances may raise new questions and agendas for the religion-and-science dialogue. Dissonance, a model for interpretation, highlights the differences and distinctions as well as the similarities between religion and science. For example, Westhelle makes a modest plea for science to “take into account precisely the experiences and knowledges in the liminal borders of its domain as questions that might broaden, instead of threatening, the territory of modern science” (Westhelle 2004, 386). The same can also be said for religion and theology. The challenge is to continue the expansion of what religion and science include and how that shapes and changes the dialogue. What counts as data in the dialogue? Who determines those data? The interpretive task is complicated, nuanced, fluid, and expansive. The challenge of the Center is to negotiate this task, which “promotes dialogue and cooperation,” while remaining sensitive to the tensions and dissonances that arise (Program Notes 2003, 9). Westhelle uses the metaphors of borders, liminality, and twilight to articulate the agenda for ZCRS. It will be at these edges of the conversation between religion and science that ZCRS will find its center.

2. The future of the human community is frightening and uncertain. To understand our place in the world requires a kind of fearless examination of the changing nature of what it means to be human. Every day new scientific and technological discoveries challenge religious and theological practices and beliefs. Ian Barbour notes that these current debates “raise fundamental questions about human selfhood and are relevant to personal and social choices we have to make today” (Barbour 2004, 391). The challenge of ZCRS is to help human beings understand these questions and provide discernment through the ethical mazes that we face daily. ZCRS can help both the scientific and religious communities confront these ethical tasks in a spirit of cooperation. This requires nuanced discussions that give credence to many different points of view. Pluralism is both gift and challenge.

3. Grace Wolf-Chase warns us about the disconnection between not only science and religion but also “public perception and understanding of both” (Wolf-Chase 2004, 393). If ZCRS appeals to promoting the “welfare of the human community,” it must pay specific attention to the zeitgeist of that community (Program Notes 2003, 9). What is the role of education for ZCRS? Toward whom is the Center reaching? What is the relationship between the public and the academy? What impact will the Center have on the dialogue, not only at the level of the professions and academy but also of people in their personal lives and communal life in the

public square? ZCRS resides in a university-centered neighborhood and within a faith community. The diversity that this location provides shapes the educational mission of ZCRS. The religion-and-science dialogue must address cosmic issues set within the particularities of people's everyday lives, especially in a world that is filled with pain and suffering. What difference will this dialogue make? ZCRS can be a leading and prophetic voice in promoting agendas that help contribute to the "common goal of a world where love, justice, and ecologically responsible styles of living prevail" (Program Notes 2003, 8). This is indeed a risky task.

4. With powerful zeal, Varadaraja V. Raman issues a call "to spread the message to the world of religion that one can have meaningful religious experience through the complex world-pictures of science, and to the world of science that one must also recognize and respect the religious dimensions of the human spirit in whatever mode of manifestation" (2004, 399). Raman alerts us to the challenges of pluralism but also reminds us of the dangers of a religious history that "is marred by persecutions in the name of God and scripture" and that "growths from scientific knowledge have resulted in pain and potential disaster for our species" (p. 398). He advocates building a relationship not only between religion and science but also among the faith traditions that reside in the human family. As ZCRS continues to maintain this challenge as part of its mission, the possibilities for making a difference in the world that needs healing from so much religious conflict are desperately needed.

5. To a world fatigued by the commonplace and vulgar, ZCRS can provide imaginative insight into the task at hand. The fine and performing arts can provide such imaginative insight into reality with new metaphors. In the words of a Finnish composer, Einojuhani Rautavaara, "Music is a language where we can probe those other realities, without words. Besides immense pleasure, music gives to the listener information. The information is not anything you can transcribe in words" (Heffern 2002, 30). To interpret is to give information. To understand is to find new images about the world, which is often a reality that we can better describe without words. Such is the task of ZCRS. All of the panelists offer vision, imagination, challenges, and deep insight into the world in which ZCRS lives out its mission.

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