

Editorials

SCIENCE AND WELL-WINNED WISDOM: THE GRAND QUEST

Talk about “religion and science” these days and chances are that you’ll come across what journalists are calling “The New Atheism.” They refer to an avalanche of books, articles, interviews—a media blitz, by a number of leading scientists and others who are influenced by science—all to the effect that religion is intellectually confused and dangerous, with some calls to eradicate religion altogether.

Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science has given little attention to the furor that has arisen in the wake of this movement of New Atheism. In his guest editorial in this issue, Gregory Peterson gives his take on this current discussion. The journal’s Statement of Perspective printed on the last page of backmatter in every issue asserts *Zygon’s* hypothesis that religious traditions of “long-evolved wisdom” can be yoked with “scientific discoveries about the world and human nature” in constructive ways for enhancing human life. The key is *constructive interrelationships*—something that the current New Atheism debate seldom acknowledges. *Zygon* does not focus on the conflicts between religion and science so much as on the constructive possibilities in their relationship.

What we call long-evolved wisdom is not only central to the *Zygon* proposition; it also highlights an issue that needs to receive more attention. The issue is this: When modern science engages traditional religions and humanistic traditions, a fundamental question arises: How does our contemporary experience and knowledge relate to the whole of premodern, pre-scientific traditions of wisdom?

Restricting ourselves to our history as literate creatures, we may say that we are in possession of four millennia of experience exploring and trying to understand our world and our own human nature and fashioning strategies for survival. Our forebears, even four thousand years ago, were our equal in quality of mind and seriousness of intention, and they confronted just as urgent pressures from their environment as we do. The experience of those four millennia, together with our entire evolutionary history, has brought us to where we are today. That experience has made us what we are, and it is embodied in our genotypes and in our behaviors—in what Donald

T. Campbell (1976, 198) called “well-winnowed” traditions of wisdom. The religious traditions are among the chief carriers of this wisdom.

In our grappling with the legacy of our prescientific traditions of wisdom, we note several approaches. One is that of the highly publicized work of the New Atheists, which seems not to acknowledge that there is a tradition of wisdom in our prescientific experience. The critique of religion often proceeds as if religion, and for that matter all prescientific human traditions of thinking and perceiving, are obsolete and therefore of no constructive value in the contemporary search for understanding. The New Atheists apparently aim to construct a worldview apparatus that includes a complex of values and life-support systems that totally displaces traditional religion. Moreover, they intend to undertake their construction *de novo*—from scratch, so to speak.

Another view holds that there is indeed wisdom in traditional religion that rested on what Louis Martin (2007) calls “a faulty empirical foundation.” The task is to reconstruct the traditional wisdom on the base of contemporary scientific knowledge. Indeed, *Zygon’s* statement of perspective may be interpreted to support this view.

Both of these approaches assume that much of the prescientific legacy, particularly the religious traditions, is not credible, specifically their myth and ritual. It is asserted that this legacy has its “facts” wrong and hence has lost its credibility for us. The issue here is what to do with myth and ritual. Much prevailing thought operates on the assumption that myth and ritual are dispensable, unnecessary accretions that earlier humans constructed because of the darkness of their prescientific ages.

In light of the millennia-long experiential energy that has forged myth and ritual, as well as the depth of wisdom that is embodied there, a strategy of dismissal itself lacks credibility. We would do well first to ask why myth arose. It may well be rooted in the fact that we humans are creatures driven by meaning; meaningfulness is essential for us, and yet the world we live in often defies our quest for meaning; it isn’t amenable to common sense or even more sophisticated knowledge. The world’s possibilities for meaning are most often hidden or embedded in ambiguity—prompting the designation Martin employs, “*mundus mendax*”—a deceiving world, a trickster world. This aspect of our situation has not been changed or dissipated by modern knowledge even though it seems to be endemic to modern sensibilities to believe that that this trickster dimension of the world will be banished or rendered irrelevant by scientific knowledge. A great deal of myth has emerged from the effort to probe this mendacious world and grasp the meaning that eludes us. The wisdom of myth matters to us today, precisely because it is a repository of the perennial questions posed in our quest for meaning and human attempts to grasp answers. In its richness, this wisdom probes conundrums and motivations that are even now critical for our lives.

Our challenge therefore is not so much how to correct the premodern faulty empirical foundation, how to set the premodern facts straight, as it is to understand how to access this earlier wisdom and how to integrate it with our modern, scientific knowledge. The salient issue is how to interpret myth. How can we take our place in this long history of well-winnowed wisdom that our species has accumulated through the millennia? This is the grand quest that is opened up, ironically and unintentionally, by the New Atheism.

This issue—the last of our forty-second year—opens with five contributions to our series of guest editorials examining the agenda for religion-and-science discussions. Fraser Watts, psychology, argues for the primacy of the human sciences; Edwin Laurensen, attorney, limns the significance of scientific concepts of human self for our understandings of personal responsibility; James Haag, theology, calls for more theological involvement on the cutting edges of scientific research; Don Browning, religious studies, makes a case for religion-and-science's giving attention to pressing sociocultural challenges that face us today; Karl Peters, philosophy and religion, urges more focus on "whatever it is that diminishes and enhances human well-being, the well-being of other species, and that of the planet that is our home." Succeeding issues will continue the discussion of our agenda, including interpretive articles on this year's array of proposals.

Emergence thinking in science, philosophy, and theology is a major effort to probe the deep nature of the world and its evolution. Papers from the 2006 Star Island conference of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science, on the theme "Emergence: Nature's Mode of Creativity," provide a breathtaking glimpse into this theme. Offerings are by Loyal Rue (philosophy of religion), Bruce Weber (biochemistry), Ursula Goodenough (cell biology), Jeremy Sherman (evolutionary epistemology) and Terrence Deacon (biological anthropology), Stuart Kauffman (biology), Gordon Kaufman (theology), and George Fisher (geology) and Gretchen Utt (theology).

A group of articles follows: Ecologist Robert Ulanowicz with further reflections on emergence; Robert Geraci, religious studies, proposing theological interpretations of robotics and artificial intelligence; and biologist-theologian Celia Deane-Drummond drawing explicitly on traditional wisdom to reflect on evolutionary purpose.

James Bradley (biology) and Curt Thompson (theology) respond to Joel Garreau's Book *Radical Evolution*, whose title suggests its author's interpretation of the possibilities of biology in our time.

We close with Christopher Southgate's poem "Taboo." We are grateful to this remarkable poet whose work has furnished illumination and grace to the journal throughout the year.

The issues are intrinsically challenging; grasping their larger significance demands the deepest and most rigorous reflection that we can muster. That's part of the grand quest that I have described.

—Philip Hefner

REFERENCES

- Campbell, Donald T. 1976. "On the Conflicts between Biological and Social Evolution and between Psychology and Moral Tradition." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 11: 167–208.
- Martin, Louis C. 2007. "Mundus Mendax." *The Global Spiral: A Publication of Metanexus Institute*, 24 August. http://www.metanexus.net/Magazine/Default.aspx?TabId=68&id=7091&SkinSrc=%5bG%5dSkins%2f_default%2fNo+Skin&ContainerSrc=%5bG%5dContainers%2f_default%2fNo+Container.

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1—The symposium honoring Arthur Peacocke, appearing in the March 2008 issue. Excerpts by Gloria Schaab (theology, Barry University), Philip Clayton (philosophy, theology, Claremont Graduate School), Ann Pederson (theology, Augustana College), Nancey Murphy (theology, philosophy, Fuller Seminary), Gayle Woloschak (molecular biology, Northwestern University Medical School), Antje Jackelén (Bishop of Lund, Sweden). Available at www.zygonjournal.org.

2—"Crossing Species Boundaries," from the September 2007 issue. Authors are Neville Cobbe, research fellow at Edinburgh University's Queen's Medical Research Institute. Commentators on Cobbe's article are Stephen Modell, genomics researcher at the University of Michigan, and Bernard Rollin, biomedical ethicist and philosopher at Colorado State University. Available at www.blackwell-synergy.com/toc/zygo/42/3.

3—The March 2007 symposium on interfaith perspectives on biomedicine and ethics, with articles by Ann Pederson, Fatima Al-Hayani, Byron Sherwin, Mohammad Farimani, Stephen Modell, and Philip Hefner. Available at www.blackwell-synergy.com/toc/zygo/42/1.

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