

## *Editorial*

### THEORY AND PRACTICE: NEURAL BUDDHISM, ETHICS, AND CULTURAL CAPTIVITY

Does our work on the issues of religion and science focus more on theoretical concepts or on practical issues of embodied life in the world? My sense is that more is written on theory in our field than on practice. Most thinking about science and religion today takes place among academics who devote much effort to theoretical concepts that explain the nature of things. When they do reflect on practical situations—as for example we find in the fields of medical practice, feminism, and environmentalism—their work forms quite a different genre than when they work with theoretical concepts alone.

The problem with an emphasis on concepts alone is that it gives the impression that both religion and science exist mainly in the realm of ideas, whereas in actuality they are embodied in practice. We must ask: What is at stake in this contrast of categories, variously expressed as ideas/deeds, thinking/acting, theory/practice? What is the significance of urging religion-and-science thinking to take both sides of these pairs into account?

Theoretical concepts perform several important tasks. For one, they gather together a great many data, locate those data in the scheme of things, and clarify how they work, as the theory of evolution brings the life-processes into one purview, locates them in the history of nature, and elaborates the dynamics of emergence, selection, and survival. For another, concepts that deal with the same sets of data bump up against one another and elicit interactions—sometimes quite polemical. The concept of gradualist development in evolution, for example, can interact with the concept of development as “jumps” or punctuated equilibrium. For religious thinking, concepts correspond to doctrines and philosophical expressions of belief. The doctrine of creation brings together the diverse traditions of reflection on God’s work of creating the natural world. Doctrines that speak of God’s work as “creation out of nothing” bump up against those that depict God bringing into order chaotic material that already coexists with God, just as doctrines of God’s “continuing or ongoing creation” must interact with

“deistic” concepts that would have God perform an initial creative act and then retire from active involvement with the world.

When concepts play such a central role, religion-and-science plays itself out in interaction between scientific theories and religious doctrines. In Western thinking, at least, this is the way the religion-science conversation has unfolded—mainly between religious concepts of creation and scientific concepts of cosmology—and it has provided rich fare for thought, sometimes very fruitful dialogue, and on occasion dead-end polemic. Does Big Bang cosmology correlate with “creation out of nothing”? Do theories of anthropic fine-tuning suggest that humans are the goal of creation, as much religious thinking asserts? Does the theory of evolution call for reformulation of doctrines of creation, or does it render such doctrines impossible? Currently theories of emergence are receiving intense attention. Do these theories help us to understand how God has created humans from the components of material nature? Or does emergence theory’s emphasis on self-generation render concepts of God and creation unnecessary?

Even a cursory examination tells us that science and religion do not exist solely in a world of ideas. Many of the sciences, like physics, divide into theoretical and experimental communities, and even within the same scientific disciplines the relations between these two communities are marked by tension. The world’s religions are likewise marked by divisions between adherents who emphasize “orthodoxy”—ideas and beliefs—and those who give priority to “orthopraxy”—religious practice or behavior. Concepts play a different role when practice is the priority. Physicists can do their experiments involving quantum mechanics without worrying about the various philosophical interpretations of quantum theory—whether it is grounded in the way things really are (ontologically) or in the ways we come to know things (epistemologically). Likewise, Christians can receive the bread and wine of the Eucharist without having to resolve the various theoretical dilemmas of how divine presence is embodied in bread and wine. Science-and-religion-as-concepts scarcely touches the depths of science-and-religion-as-practice.

Opening our viewpoints to practice and embodiment extends the discussion in several directions. A concern for science and spirituality is one such an extension, and it brings to the fore the inherent mystery and sacrality of nature that is said to be opened up by scientific perspectives. Physicist Fritjof Capra (1975) and cosmologist Brian Swimme (1996) present powerful and appealing elaborations of this spiritual dimension. Ursula Goodenough probes the concrete phenomena of biological processes for her vision of the “sacred depths of nature” (2000), while the Dalai Lama has succeeded in convincing many—in both East and West—that his tradition of meditation fits into current neuroscientific understandings. Innumerable proposals, sometimes under the rubric of so-called New Age thinking, are current manifestations of the spirituality development.

David Brooks wrote a telling commentary on the approach from spirituality in his New York *Times* column of 13 May 2008. Citing Andrew Newberg (a frequent contributor to this journal), he writes:

Scientists have more respect for elevated spiritual states. Andrew Newberg of the University of Pennsylvania has shown that transcendent experiences can actually be identified and measured in the brain (people experience a decrease in activity in the parietal lobe, which orients us in space). The mind seems to have the ability to transcend itself and merge with a larger presence that feels more real..

This new wave of research will not seep into the public realm in the form of militant atheism. Instead it will lead to what you might call neural Buddhism. The cognitive revolution is not going to end up undermining faith in God, it's going end up challenging faith in the Bible. The real challenge is going to come from people who feel the existence of the sacred, but who think that particular religions are just cultural artifacts built on top of universal human traits.

In unexpected ways, science and mysticism are joining hands and reinforcing each other.. That's bound to lead to new movements that emphasize self-transcendence but put little stock in divine law or revelation. Orthodox believers are going to have to defend particular doctrines and particular biblical teachings. (Brooks 2008)

It follows that if religious doctrine is decentered by the developments Brooks speaks of, so, too, scientific theories as such and the dialogue with them will receive lower priority.

A second opening will put much more emphasis on moral and ethical possibilities of science and religion. When Don Browning writes that the journal should “go in two directions at once”: “it should continue to pursue fundamental theoretical issues” and also bring the “fruits of these inquiries” to bear on the “great plethora of disturbing new practical issues facing society” (Browning 2005, 530), we are reminded of the *Zygon* Statement of Perspective (see backmatter in this issue), to express “basic meaning, values, and moral convictions that provide valid and effective guidance for enhancing human life.” The founders of *Zygon* believed that while concepts are essential to shaping adequate worldviews, the goal of religion-and-science thinking is to offer resources for dealing with the disturbing practical issues of which Browning speaks.

The embeddedness of both science and religion in specific cultures and societies poses a third practical issue. Neither science nor religion exists in the abstract realm of concepts. If we are truly to comprehend the sciences or the religions, we must incorporate their embodied existence into our understandings. Theories may cross cultural boundaries, but scientists in different cultures bring different priorities and assumptions to their work. Religious communities struggle to maintain their identity across these boundaries, but faithfulness expresses itself in different and even contradictory ways in different cultures. Both religion and science are fully enculturated, the dark side of which is cooptation. Both religion and science are too important for cultures to allow them complete freedom; they must be bent to the values and goals of the culture in which they live.

Enculturation may give depth and vigor to science and also to religion and at the same time threaten to take them captive. How does either religion or science free itself from such captivity? There is a serious challenge here: What can conceptual thinking contribute if it is abstracted from the concrete situations in which it is embedded? Both scientists and theologians are known to argue that their pursuits transcend the circumstances in which they exist; their societal captivity is frequently dismissed as conceptually irrelevant. Those who insist that concrete situations must be taken into account propose a different strategy; they insist that concepts must be re-shaped accordingly. Ann Pederson and Lou Ann Trost (2000) call this the “messy world” that must be addressed. Søren Kierkegaard put it more harshly in his critique of Hegel’s metaphysical system: Concepts depict luxurious hilltop castles while everyday life goes on in less comfortable huts by the side of the road.

These considerations from the realm of practice may be radical in their implications for the religion-and-science discussion. They will very likely prove to be inescapable for our future work. If we follow their lead seriously and with imagination, the shape of religion-and-science thinking will take new forms that are as yet unforeseen. Clearly one of the major agenda items for the future is to explore these new forms.

The articles in this issue of *Zygon*, organized in five sections, probe many aspects of the religion-science discussion, including those of theory and practice. The first section focuses on a prime practical issue—Christian practice of sacrificial love. Jeffrey Tillman surveys work done by religious studies scholars, who are influenced by evolutionary studies. One of those scholars, Don Browning, writes a commentary on Tillman’s analysis. In the second section, under a more theoretical rubric, “Theology, the University, Metaphysics, and Respectability,” Gregory Peterson and Nicholaos Jones present contrasting proposals on how theology can do its work in the university. Peterson believes that these issues are critical for the religion-science discussion. Jones is more skeptical about theology’s role.

Third, we present four papers that focus on nineteenth-century developments in Europe and the United States; all emanate from a recent meeting of International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science. Patrick McDonald writes on two seminal German figures, Hermann Lotze and Gustav Fechner; Robert Deltete, on the French scientist Pierre Duhem; David Nartonis, on trends at Harvard University; and Frederick Gregory, on the concept of “scientific faith.”

Papers by Marjorie Hall Davis and Karl Peters examine the idea of evil, in a fourth section. In the final section we present three discussions. Helmut Reich writes programmatically on the interrelations of science, religion, spirituality, and theology. Craig Palmer, Lyle Steadman, Chris Cassidy, and Kathryn Coe are coauthors of proposals for incorporating cultural traditions—specifically those relating to totemism—into evolutionary psy-

chology. Finally, Tariq Mustafa outlines a rational approach to the concept of revelation. Each of these articles works within the dialogue between theory and practice.

—Philip Hefner

#### REFERENCES

- Brooks, David. 2008. "The Neural Buddhists." *New York Times*, May 13.
- Browning, Don. 2005. "Zygon at 40: Its Past and Possible Future." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 40:529–33.
- Capra, Fritjof. 1975. *The Tao of Physics*. New York: Bantam.
- Goodenough, Ursula. 2000. *The Sacred Depths of Nature*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Pederson, Ann, and Lou Ann Trost. 2000. "John Polkinghorne and the Task of Addressing a 'Messy' World." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 35:977–83.
- Swimme, Brian. 1996. *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis.

• Web site features •

*www.zygonjournal.org*

**Pentecostal Voices in Religion and Science—  
First-time Publication in December 2008**

Voices from Pentecostal Christianity have not been prominent in the religion-and-science discussion. In December 2008, *Zygon* will publish six articles from the annual meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies (SPS) jointly held with the Wesleyan Theological Society at Duke University Divinity School, 13–15 March 2008. The conference theme was "Sighs, Signs, and Significance: Pentecostal and Wesleyan Explorations of Creation and Science."

Professor Amos Yong (Regent University School of Divinity, Virginia Beach), who has edited these papers for the journal, writes that they reflect "an earnest effort on the part of both societies to take up the important questions at the science-and-theology interface."

*Zygon's* Web site previews these articles from the Christian Pentecostal tradition. Pentecostals are becoming familiar with the dialogue between religion and science. They express both a willingness to learn from the experiences of those who have long-practiced the field's dialogue and a desire that their unique perspectives be heard and respected even as they acknowledge that these views may likely set the teeth on edge of many in the religion-and-science community. As Pentecostals "come of age" in the religion-and-science dialogue *Zygon* wishes to recognize their both their desire to contribute "solutions" to our problems as well as their willingness to know more about the field.

