

## COMMENTARY ON THEOLOGICAL RESOURCES FROM THE PHYSICAL SCIENCES

*by John F. Hayward*

Theologians have been dealing with boundary conditions for years and have been taking criticism for the habit, especially from their colleagues in the sciences. Human life poses its own questions about the boundaries. Religions respond to these questions and theologians, in turn, seek to understand the religious responses. The merest child wants to know where he came from and where his ancestors began. He also contemplates his own death in wonder and in fear. Unless these boundary questions of ultimate origin and ultimate destiny can be given some formulation and response, however vague or tentative, the actions of the steady state are suspended in nothingness and all motivation and explanation are seriously undercut. Hence the perennial struggle in human culture to conceive of God, to understand the relation of man to the drama of a sacred history, and to envision an immortality of human quality and effort beyond death. Yet every time theologians go out to the boundary of the beginning of man or the beginning of time, or to the other boundary, to the end of man or the end of time, we are asked to forget such speculations and are called back to the steady state. We are asked to pay attention to man as he now is and to his powers and problems as they now are. It is alleged that the questions of human existence could not possibly be answered by considerations drawn from the boundary. But now I am pleased to learn from a physicist that it is important to study boundary conditions. Therefore, some comparison of method is in order.

I do not know how you get out to the boundary in physics, but I would like to try to say by way of stimulating discussion how we get out to the boundary in theology.

If you start with immediate experience, that is, with the steady state (which really is not so steady), you find yourself pushed by two factors, one of meaning and the other of mystery. There is always a sense of inviting quality which needs explanation; that is, there is always a sense that what is happening to you and what is taking place around you need further explanation. All scientists, all the king's horses and men, and all the devotees of the arts and humanities, each in their own voice,

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try to express their own meanings. But right along with every achievement of meaning is a pervasive, annoying, never-assuaged sense of mystery which keeps the whole machinery driving. If Beethoven's *Opus 135 Quartet* were the "last word" in instrumental meaning, it would also be the end of music. But the very success of Beethoven is also the restlessness of music generally. Composers do not quit because Beethoven was great. On the contrary, they are all the more eager to do something new. This combination of meaning and mystery, of achievement and restlessness, is the basic data for theology.

However adequately you give voice to the richness of what is going on, you are driven back to some sort of original picture which carries within it hints of the infinite fulness that you have experienced and are trying to express.

The immediate data of theology consists in the paradoxical experience of meaning and mystery; the method or vehicle which theology uses to move toward the boundary situations of this combination of meaning and mystery is the body of myth inherited within a given religious group or derived from one or more contrasting religious groups.

To what do these myths refer? I agree with Northrop that they do not denote a static substance or object which can be clearly and impersonally analyzed. They are dramatic pictures of the corporate intuitions of a people seeking to give voice to the boundaries inherent within the paradox of their experience. Their meaning is bounded in mystery, but the mystery itself is pregnant with potential meaning. It is a positive mystery, a power—not a void or an empty cipher. The myth becomes the people's way of piecing out the mystery with a substance compatible with its positive impact. It is a shape and form denoting their relationship with something by which they are fructified, supported, and bounded. It is the full strength of their existence, plus its limitations upon them.

Please note that the ancient Jews did not presume to define or understand this Power at the boundary as an object of investigation. The Greek mind wanted to make God an object of study rather than a source of power and a limit of knowledge. The Jews saw this mythologically expressed reality as an object of communion, of worship, and of devoted service. The fact that it was on the boundary as well as within the steady state precluded its objectification but not its reality.