

Theological Resources from the Sciences

The major articles and their commentaries in this issue of *Zygon* were written for a conference on "A Reconsideration of the Relation of Theology to the Sciences." Called to inaugurate the Committee on Theology and the Sciences of Meadville Theological School of Lombard College, the conferees met January 18–19, 1965, at the Center for Continuing Education of the University of Chicago.

The conference prospectus set the context for the papers and reflects the orientation of *Zygon's* editors. We are therefore citing the relevant sections:

There is irony in the fact that the epoch of greatest scientific advances in human history—in scope as well as sophistication—should be the epoch of minimum theological utilization of scientific concepts and perspectives. Perhaps the most striking quality of the scientific enterprise has been the evolution of methods which require and generate great intellectual freedom yet which lead to surprisingly fruitful consensus in interpretations and results. From this alone, religion could learn. Despite the sharper restrictions of their intellectual freedom by institutionalism, theologians seem to multiply their diversities and disagreements. In an age where many of the sciences are learning to handle the complex, the unique, the individual, we can no longer view these as a special province of the theologians or an excuse for theological diversity.

By "theology," we mean those critical, intellectual attempts to understand and reform the beliefs and practices of a given religious community. The hypotheses of our Committee on Theology and the Sciences can be simply stated. No religion can remain vital unless its beliefs and practices speak to men's major concerns, and speak to them with credibility. The contemporary sciences provide a rich lode of reliable knowledge about man's nature, destiny, and cosmic setting. Theologies which take this knowledge seriously might vitalize their religions and find themselves moving toward greater consensus. The function of the Committee on Theology and the Sciences is to assess the religious

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relevance of this increasingly interlinked network of interpretations of reality, open to appropriate testing by all inquirers.

Religions in their formative periods have always drawn upon the contemporary world views or "sciences" of their cultures. Religious or moral values are not easily cultivated when they violate a people's convictions about what is real or true. Much of the recent warfare between science and religion occurred when some theologians were unable to replace those parts of their systems that had become untenable in the light of new knowledge (cf. Copernicus, Darwin). Some of the warfare, however, has reflected a laudable unwillingness of other theologians to surrender important human values to the premature claims made in the name of science (cf. Kant, Schleiermacher). This history can partly illuminate our task.

Today's knowledge explosion and religious crisis may require more of theologians than a bit-by-bit replacement of not-so-accurate by more-accurate propositions. The time seems ripe to examine the possibility of erecting a newer, better structure—more responsive to human capacities, more stimulating to our potentialities, more harmonious with our minds, and more likely to endure in these functions. There are many signs that this can be done, although no one is entitled to claim the correctness of a design until it has been developed and tested. Meadville's liberal heritage makes natural her adoption of a program in this direction. Further, the high frequency of scientists within the churches related to the school at once brings urgency and a wealth of almost untapped resource to the task.

We will test again the vision that began to flourish in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment—a vision that saw continuity between the sciences and mankind's best hopes and values. In its contemporary forms, this tradition is basically naturalistic, holding that essentially the same kinds of reasoning—questioning, image-making, and testing—must be applied to all assertions; that presently the sciences best embody such methods; and that whatever man can learn about "Reality" may be best discovered in this manner. That many thoughtful men of science as well as of religion have abandoned this tradition is obvious. Some have viewed the sciences as cold and dehumanizing and have, in despair, sought refuge in various anti-intellectualisms. Yet others have turned to party or creed or tradition for certainty against the new world. The vision we seek to test may prove inadequate, or even wrong, but we shall never know unless we sharpen it and expose it to the most rigorous examination possible.

Nothing could be more relevant to the world community now emerging—societies brought into mutual touch through technology, into unified knowledge through the sciences, and into a growing distrust of violence and a fresh search for rational persuasions and solutions. Insofar as we achieve any success in transforming theologies and revitalizing religions with the information available in the modern sciences, our allies will be many. If scientific credibility can help to transform man's religions, a critical approach to values may become possible—and the rich, emotional, and aesthetic resources of the various religions may join to serve all mankind.

Accordingly, the Meadville Committee on Theology and the Sciences has been established to provide a more systematic and intense effort to integrate man's major religious concerns with the contemporary scientific world views. Among the preliminary explorations over the past fifteen years leading to

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the establishment of this committee were those of the Committee on Science and Values of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science, the Unitarian Universalist Association's Commission on Theology and the Frontiers of Learning, and a three-year program of Colloquies on Religion and Science at Meadville.

This initial conference, arranged by the Meadville Committee on Theology and the Sciences for January, 1965, will examine three major areas of the sciences—physical, biological and psychosocial—for their potentiality to refine or reform basic human beliefs and practices that traditionally have been called religious. Each of these three areas will be introduced by a major paper, and discussed by a critical panel.

Session 1. Theological resources from the physical sciences: an extension of the validity and range of man's ways of knowing by adding to intuition and reason a systematic validation in experience. Is the path to knowing pioneered in the physical sciences useful for application to the vital or sacred as well as to the secular or mundane experiences of man? Can the rational and universal system of scientific concepts, which increasingly integrates the chaotic phenomena of private experience and common history, be useful in understanding the source, values, direction, and meaning of human life?

Session 2. Theological resources from the biological sciences: an extension of man's perspectives on his origins, his history, and his destiny. What are the new stories of creation and their meaning for human feelings and ultimate concerns? What may be the implications of such scientific doctrines as entropy and natural selection? To what extent are human values, the patterns for right behavior, encoded in the chemical structures of man's being?

Session 3. Theological resources from the psychosocial sciences: an extension of our understanding of the nature and vital function of religion in human feeling and behavior. To what extent have religions been the core institutions of human cultures, generating and transmitting basic value orientations of man toward the world, toward his fellow men, and toward himself? How have religious behaviors and symbols generated and validated human meaning, duty, and hope? How have they helped to resolve apparent conflicts between the individual and his society? Or conflicts between man and the trans-human powers which bring destruction and death as well as bounty and life? Where are these functions most effectively occurring in the contemporary world? How do religions reform or evolve? What kind of religion would best serve the new one-world of science and technology?

In addition to these three sessions, an academic convocation was held to inaugurate the Committee on Theology and the Sciences, presently comprising Professors Burhoe (chairman), Hayward, and Tapp. The convocation address by Donald S. Harrington is included in this issue. Also included is the statement of Malcolm R. Sutherland, Jr., on the meaning of this new collaboration of science and religion for the education of ministers.

THE EDITORS