

Editorial

In the fabric of this concluding number of the first volume of *Zygon*, two major themes are interwoven: the warp threads are the attempts to describe the nature and function of religion; the woof, the attempts to make sense of the values of human life in the face of the fact of death.

In the first number of this volume, physicist Sanborn C. Brown commended testing religious ideas of good and evil by looking at their outcome in extreme conditions. Certainly death is an extremity of life and its values; and it may be that a prime test or selecting agent in the evolution of religions in human cultures has been the death of those that cannot handle death. Both archeological and psychobiological evidences lead us to conclude that finding a solution to the anxieties caused by man's growing awareness of the paradoxical dilemma between his inherently supreme valuation of life on the one hand and his destiny with death on the other has been a prime function of religions for more than one hundred thousand years.

In our IRAS (Institute on Religion in an Age of Science) conference on Star Island in 1961, anthropologist A. F. C. Wallace told us, in summarizing the essence of the religious process in an estimated one hundred thousand varieties of religion in cultural evolution:

The essential theme of the religious event is . . . the dialectic of disorganization and organization. On the one hand men universally observe the increase of entropy (disorganization) in familiar systems: metals rust and corrode, woods and fabrics rot, people sicken and die, personalities disintegrate, social groups splinter and disband. And on the other hand, men universally experience the contrary process of organization: much energy is spent preventing rust, corrosion, decay, rot, sickness, death, and dissolution, and indeed, at least locally, there may be an absolute gain of organization, a real growth or revitalization. This dialectic, the "struggle" (to use an easy metaphor) between entropy and organization, is what religion is all about. The most diverse creeds unite in the attempt to solve the sphinx-riddle of the relationship between life and death, between organization and disorganization; the ideas of the soul, of gods, of world cycles, of Nirvana, of spiritual salvation and rebirth, of progress—all are formal solutions to this problem, which is indeed felt intimately by all men.

But religion does not offer just any solution: it characteristically offers a solution which assures the believer that life and organization will win, that death and disorganization will lose, in their struggle to become the characteristic condition of self and cosmos. And religion further attempts to elucidate and describe the organization of self and cosmos. Religion then may be said to be a process of maximizing the quantity of organization in the matrix of perceived human experience. Religion maximizes it, perhaps, beyond what rational use of the data of this experience would justify, but it thereby satisfies a primary drive. We must, I think, postulate an organization "instinct": an "instinct" to increase the organization of cognitive perception. Religion and science, from this point of view, would seem to be the more direct expressions of this organizational instinct.

(The full text of this definitive paper by Wallace on "Religious Revitalization, a Function of Religion in Human History and Evolution," was published by IRAS later in 1961, but now it is available only as incorporated in his *Religion, an Anthropological View* [New York: Random House, 1966].)

In our IRAS conference in the summer of 1964 on the theme "What Is Religion," biologist Theodosius Dobzhansky traced the evolution of religion to man's evolving awareness of his mortality, and that talk, "An Essay on Religion, Death, and Evolutionary Adaptation," is printed as our lead article in this issue. He suggests that the biological evolution that gave man the adaptive and life-enhancing possibility of self-awareness also gave him awareness of his death, an awareness whose adaptive value is at best dubious and at worst produces debilitating anxiety. It would seem to have been the function of religion in cultural evolution to find cultural adaptations that provide man with a meaning for life in the face of death.

Because of their particular relevance for this issue, we are reprinting papers published elsewhere by two additional biological scientists, who also have written penetratingly on the problem of death and religious belief from the perspective of their sciences. Robert S. Morison, who was director of Medical and Natural Sciences for the Rockefeller Foundation when he wrote this paper on Darwinism as a foundation for an ethical system, suggests that for the first time religions are now provided with a clear reason why death is essentially a positive value in the creation of better life. Moreover, the same biological theory, he suggests, provides rational grounds for religious affirmations of the value of individual self-sacrifice for the community, and it even provides outlines of the biological as well as cultural grounds for motivation of individuals toward social co-operation. "Conscience . . . may be seen as a product of evolution." James Peter Warbasse, an eminent surgeon now deceased,

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gives us an analysis of life and death in biological terms and then presents scientific grounds for a doctrine of immortality.

"Coping with Death" was the theme of six papers and many discussions by men of science and religion at the IRAS conference on Star Island in the summer of 1966, and two of them are published in this issue of *Zygon*. (We expect others will appear later.) These two portray the response to the problem of death by the Reverend Kenneth L. Patton and Rabbi Jerome R. Malino as contemporary leaders of religious congregations. Patton also gives a poignant picture of the minister who, in an age of science, feels he cannot provide people with the traditional assurances that once may have inoculated their psyches for facing death. Malino also reviews some of the historical background for the Judeo-Christian tradition in its resolutions of the problem of death.

Theologian Henry Nelson Wieman's paper is a major contribution to our understanding of the nature of the religious enterprise, especially for those of us who are seeking its development to meet the religious needs of the new age of the "post-civilization" world. It does not deal with death as such, but his primary concern is our salvation from it. For Wieman the basic question for religious inquiry is: "What operates in human existence to save man from his self-destructive and degenerative propensities and to transform human life toward the fullest content of value that human existence can ever embody?" Wieman writes from the background of a long and influential career in philosophical and theological reconstruction, widely aware of the problems in these fields.

We conclude the first volume of *Zygon* with a paper by mathematician H. B. Phillips, which is intriguing in that it presents, well within the compass of a single page, a bird's-eye view of a scientist's deeply considered and informed outline of the essential nature of religion as creativity ever producing more advanced patterns of life, implicitly through death.

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