

## THE CHALLENGE OF THE FUTURE TO THE SCIENCE-RELIGION DIALOGUE

by *Don Browning*

*Abstract.* *Zygon* and the Center for Advanced Study in Religion and Science have exhibited two foci: the theoretical, concerned with questions of cosmology and human nature, and the practical, concerned with issues of morality and ritual. These foci overlap, but in recent years interest in the practical has increased. This has implications for science-religion dialogue: rather than simply discussing theoretically points of identity, similarity, and difference between science and religion, focus on the practical leads to examining how each functions in its own way to inform moral life. Increased interest in the practical is commendable, but theoretical concerns should not be excluded.

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The science and religion discussion, as it has developed under the sponsorship of *Zygon* and CASIRAS, has had two broad foci. These discussions have attempted to be theoretical in the strict sense of that word; but they have also aspired to be practical and, indeed, practical in the rather strict sense of that word. Although to some it might seem that these discussions have attempted to be all things to all people, in reality they have assumed this dual focus out of a deeply held conviction. This is the belief that, if the dialogue between science and religion is to be meaningful, it must be a source of orienting modern societies to the demands of practical living. The question that I want to pose is this: Should the science-religion dialogue sponsored by *Zygon* and CASIRAS continue to have this dual focus? If so, how can these two impulses be held together? How far should we go in the direction of the theoretical or in the direction of the practical?

The theoretical thrust of the articles in *Zygon* has been, on the whole, of two kinds. Articles have dealt either with questions of cosmology or

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[*Zygon*, vol. 22 (anniversary issue and twenty-year index).]

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with questions of human nature. Questions of cosmology were particularly important in the earlier days of *Zygon*. Such questions as the image of the world in contemporary physics and astronomy and the metaphysical implications of the laws of thermodynamics were exceptionally visible; they are still visible, but I think to a lesser degree. Theoretical questions about human nature were also very visible, but in recent years, with the increased interest about the nature in human nature, this thrust has been intensified.

It always has been assumed by *Zygon* and CASIRAS that theoretical knowledge about cosmology and human nature can inform questions of human value and practice. This assumption, I believe, is basically correct. But since the mid or late seventies our discussions have been increasingly sophisticated about the kinds of judgments necessary to bridge the distance between theoretical knowledge and questions of values and practice. Since that time there have appeared a variety of special issues or seminal articles on the relation of *is* to *ought*, science to ethics, or sociobiology to morality. These discussions also have been theoretical. But they have been theoretical questions which have specifically dealt with the relation of theoretical knowledge about cosmology or human nature to the norms of practical human action.

I want to commend *Zygon* and the discussions which surround it for this more sophisticated turn toward the practical, but I also want to signal some cautions about this turn. Before that, however, let me show even further evidence for the turn in *Zygon* to the practical as the focus for relating science and religion. Not only have our discussions centered on the theory of the relation of theoretical knowledge to practical judgments, but of late we have actually addressed concrete social issues such as peace, aggression, and ritual. And with each of these turns toward the practical, our discussions have become increasingly sophisticated about how one can relate hard knowledge from the sciences to questions of human values.

I would like to argue for a continuation of the balance we have achieved in recent years. We should continue our distinctively theoretical probes. But we should pursue with even more vigor the various ways that science, religion, and ethics can find their proper relation to one another through the category of the practical. Let me list some of the advantages of this approach.

First, when the category of the practical is the meeting ground for the science-religion dialogue, the question becomes less whether science and religion are alike or different. The question centers more around the logic of how they relate to one another in informing the practical. The question becomes less a matter of whether the cosmological implications of science and the cosmological implications of reli-

gion agree with one another. The issue becomes more of how any cosmology, scientific or religious, relates to our practical judgments in whatever field of moral experience we are attempting to address. Or again, the question becomes less whether the image of human nature associated with science, or a particular science, agrees with the image of the human to be found in the New Testament, Paul, Augustine, or Luther. The issue becomes rather, what does any view of human nature actually provide for our attempt to clarify the norms of practice? Hence, the concern becomes less a matter of finding points of identity between science and religion but of finding the appropriate position in relation to one another in informing the goals of human action. The science-religion dialogue will become less the task of showing that they are really saying the same thing and, for this reason, confirm each other. It will become more a matter of demonstrating that the world of practical action requires them both and that they can peacefully occupy different rooms in the same cooperative living arrangement.

Second, even in this view of the science-religion conversation, there will be points of contact and comparison between the cosmology of science and the view of the world in a particular religion. But the point of contact will be less about how science and religion have the same cosmologies or the same views of human nature. Now the concern will be to show how they complete and fill out one another. For instance, with regard to the question of human nature, various sciences such as psychology, biology, or sociobiology may be able to help theological anthropology clarify the dimensions of nature in the image of human nature that it possesses. Or, with reference to the question of cosmology, the question is less what are the points of similarity, identity, or difference between inherited religious cosmologies and the cosmological implications of certain modern scientific disciplines. Rather, the question will be more, do the scientific cosmologies supplement our religious views of the universe and how do these different views of the world support or undercut what we commonly consider to be a moral view of life?

In summary, when the practical becomes the center of the religion and science dialogue, then the question becomes how religion and science position themselves to inform the moral rather than how they are in various ways identical, similar, and different. In fact, it will be assumed that religion and science are basically different forms of human life which fulfill different functions but that the logic of their different contributions to the practical can be charted and clarified.

Nonetheless, even though giving more centrality to practical questions does change somewhat the nature of the science-religion conver-

sation, the older interest in comparative questions of a basically theoretical kind should still find a place in our conversations. Although the ways science and religion differ from each other are clearer today, at least to some of us, than might have once been the case, the languages and functions of the two forms of human life do overlap. Science does, sooner or later, have cosmological implications; and, insofar as this is the case, the cosmologies of science and the cosmologies of religion will have some common borders. Hence, it is justifiable to pursue in a theoretical mode what the similarities and differences are. The same is true for questions pertaining to human nature. It is my conviction that *Zygon* and CASIRAS can best serve the science and religion discussion by continuing to feature a genuine interest in how they meet one another in the clarification of the practical. But it is also clear that to give more emphasis to the practical they cannot and should not exclude the genuine interest in how science and religion come together to clarify the two great questions of our time: What kind of world do we inhabit, and what kinds of creatures are we?