

Editorial

Science and religion share the conviction that the world is intelligible, susceptible to being logically understood, but they delineate this under different paradigms. In the cleanest cases we can say that science operates with the presumption that there are causes to things, religion with the presumption that there are meanings to things.

—Holmes Rolston III

I will never forget the lesson about the relations between science and religion that one of my best friends taught me when he died. A man in his seventies, he had been terminally ill with cancer for almost eighteen months. Because he was scientifically trained as a physician, when he first was diagnosed with cancer, he tried to understand the causes of his illness. As he put it, he wanted to know “how his murderer worked.” And he did know; in fact he lectured to our church exactly how, understood in light of the most recent scientific findings, his cancer was killing him.

And then he died. Immediately after I learned about his death, I tried to put it into perspective; I wanted to make some sense of it. But the sense I was trying to make was not the scientific sense of how he died, of what caused his death. That knowledge was indeed interesting, but in another way it was not helpful in consoling me. No, I wasn’t seeking the scientific knowledge of causes; I was seeking to know the meaning of my friend’s death in such a way that I could respond appropriately to it.

As soon as I realized I was seeking meaning and not causes, I began to review in my mind the religious resources at my disposal. Quickly I found one that was satisfying—both in terms of traditional religions and in a way consistent with modern evolutionary theory. My friend’s death had meaning in that it was a part of a universal pattern of death and rebirth. And when I focused on how rebirth was occurring, I realized that the death of my friend opened up new—even if at first sorrowful and painful—opportunities for those of us who were his family and friends. Death forced us into having to live our lives in new ways, apart from the physical presence of my friend but, interestingly, with his presence in our minds even more vivid than when he was alive.

As the years have gone by he does not occupy the forefront of my memory as much as immediately after his death. But those of us close

to him have realized some opportunities of living new patterns of life without his presence. This is consistent with the way the universe seems to work.

The death of my friend a few years ago calls to mind an earlier discussion among some of the leaders of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science about the general relations between science and religion. We were attempting to respond to the concern expressed by many that it always seemed to be the scientists who were instructing the religion scholars with their new scientific hypotheses and knowledge. Some wondered whether or not religion had any knowledge to offer to the scientists.

According to my memory, it was Philip Hefner who proposed a helpful way to respond to this problem. He argued that the relations between science and religion were asymmetrical. The main task of the sciences was to formulate new knowledge about the universe, our planet and its life, human beings, and human society and culture. Science could even give us knowledge about how religion functions in the lives of individuals and society. In return, the task of religion was not to provide knowledge—at least in the scientific sense of that word. Instead the task of religion was to provide meaning, moral direction, morale or hope, and motivation for a society and its members. In other words, religions might be considered as societal guidance systems, offering insight as to the use of scientifically gained knowledge in ways consistent with the core values of the society, and their visions of human purpose and destiny.

Once one understands this asymmetry, then one can formulate the task of *zygon*, of yoking together as a team science and religion. One way to express this task is as follows: On the one hand, it is seeking to formulate responses to the religious questions of human meaning, purpose, and moral direction using historically tested philosophical and religious wisdom but reforming that wisdom so that it can be expressed in a manner that is consistent with contemporary scientific knowledge. On the other hand, the task is to offer for societies on our planet today religious wisdom reformed in the light of scientific knowledge, in order to provide effective guidance for human endeavors, including the use of scientific technology. For the foreseeable future, it is to be expected that different cultures, drawing on different religious traditions, will respond to scientific knowledge with a variety of reformulations of their traditions. It also is to be expected that, because new scientific knowledge is always emerging and because new knowledge is also being gained concerning past traditions, the task of yoking scientific knowledge with religious meaning and moral direction will be ongoing.

This issue of *Zygon* explores the task of relating religion and science in some ways that are new for our journal. It explores the links between cosmological theory in contemporary physics and the soteriological cosmologies of the East, primarily of Hinduism and Buddhism. These cosmologies are called soteriological because they attempt to provide an understanding of the universe in relation to answers to questions of human meaning and purpose—to questions of “salvation.”

Most of the papers in this issue are from the Thirty-fifth Annual Summer Conference of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science. Titled “Cosmology and the Meaning of Human Existence: Options from Contemporary Physics and Eastern Religions,” the conference originated in the mind of Lawrence Fagg, research professor of physics at the Catholic University of America and holder of a Masters degree in religious studies from Georgetown University. Fagg’s long-term interest in the relations between contemporary physics and Eastern religions provided the impetus for IRAS’s breaking new ground with the conference theme: “the relation of contemporary physical and Eastern religious cosmologies to ultimate human concerns regarding our role in the cosmos and the meaning of our existence.”

The opening paper by religion scholar John Bowker reminds the members of IRAS and those attending the conference that the task of religion is different from the task of science. While the latter seeks the most accurate and refined knowledge about the cosmos, religions have used a variety of cosmologies—variety even in one tradition—to give meaning of the life-ways of societies in relation to the larger universe. Next, astronomer Sten Odenwald outlines the most recent developments from physics regarding the origins of the universe and the fundamental nature of matter, space, and time. Near the end of his essay he reflects on the limits of contemporary science in addressing questions of ultimate origins in a way that can be appreciated by non scientists; yet he also expresses the wonder that can be impressed upon one who understands the universe scientifically.

The next two papers by Hindu philosopher Anindita Balslev and Buddhist religious studies scholar Leslie Kawamura provide some basic features of these two religious systems as offering soteriological wisdom; one tradition embraces cosmological questions in so doing, while the other, in its earliest form, eschews such questions as being less edifying than understanding human psychology and the human condition. In terms of relating religion and science, one might ask which sciences are the most helpful to fulfilling the task of religion. Religions seem to respond in a variety of ways.

Finally, two papers, one by Robert Clifton and Marilyn Regehr and one by Kevin Sharpe, critically analyze the scientific, philosophical, and religious thinking of Fritjof Capra and David Bohm—two scientists who more than any other scholars have catalyzed interest in Eastern religions in relation to modern science. And the papers themselves present some interesting differences regarding how religious thinkers might respond to the problem of change—namely changes in scientific knowledge itself.

Underlying all the papers is the general question of how one relates religion and science. Above I have suggested a way in which the relation is asymmetrical. However, it is not clear to me that this relationship is expressed in all the papers. Together they provide some fruitful resources for thinking not only about Eastern religion and Western physics but also about the general relations between science and religion.

Yet, even if there may be some disagreement about the relation being asymmetrical, I am convinced that this idea possesses some insight. For I will never forget the lesson I learned through the death of my friend. Science provided the latest knowledge that helped me understand how that death occurred, and with that knowledge we human beings can work to change some of the causes of death and to alleviate some of the suffering the road to death brings. However, religious understanding, while not helping me understand the causes, still provided me with meaning and purpose. Religious understanding gave me guidance as to the meaning of death and as to how I could appropriately respond to the physical loss of my friend. It reminded me to seek the new opportunities for living provided in the death and rebirth transformations taking place—even today—in my life.

Karl E. Peters