

Discussion: Rethinking Christian Theology in Light of Science

THE ENLIGHTENMENT WON'T GO AWAY

by Philip Hefner

In the following section, Arthur Peacocke and David Pailin present major statements for reconstructing Christian theology in the face of the challenges posed by the contemporary sciences. Their proposals would seem to carry importance both by virtue of the significance of Christian theology in the engagement between theology and science and also because of the preeminent stature of these two thinkers. At the same time, there are those, including many readers of this journal, for whom these proposals are of only limited importance. Peacocke and Pailin set in motion a discussion, after all, that appears to be an in-house affair, one whose cachet in our culture as a whole continues to decline. These persons may see very little urgency in the question of what future course Christian theology pursues.

More needs to be said about these proposals, however. Even though Peacocke and Pailin are contemporary thinkers, working on the cutting edge of intellectual and cultural developments, their concerns stand in a historical tradition. As commentator Vitor Westhelle suggests, both authors reiterate concerns and proposals that have marked European intellectual history for two centuries or more, and herein lies the clue to the larger significance of the thematic that constitutes the three articles in this section.

By coincidence, the novelist and popular historian A. N. Wilson was writing his most recent book, *God's Funeral*, just as Peacocke and Pailin were writing their essays. Since his book, which appeared in April 1999, recounts the nineteenth- and twentieth-century history of the tradition that informs the articles that follow, Wilson's volume can serve as a sort of companion piece to the theological authors represented here. That our

three authors were unaware of Wilson's book underscores the broad significance of our theme: the continuing challenge of the Enlightenment, driven by modern science, that all of human life should be publicly accountable to the methods and discoveries of reason.

In this introductory reflection, I focus on two salient issues that point to the wider significance of the discussion of Christian theology that occupies our three essayists.

1. The earnestness with which Peacocke and Pailin press their proposals for re-forming Christian theology testifies that Western culture is still wrestling with the Enlightenment. What is the Enlightenment assertion? That traditional worldviews and religions should either be transformed according to the canons of reason or relegated to the dustbin of history. Scientific explanation of the world, including explanation of the Bible, is the engine of tradition's demise. Liberal Protestants have been in the forefront of those who accept the Enlightenment challenge on its own terms. Catholic Modernists also accepted the Enlightenment claims, but they insisted that traditional religion, when understood in its mythic and symbolic depth, could walk as a companion on the path of reason.

Both rationalism and religion have continued to flourish in these past two centuries. Contemporary rationalism is a direct descendent of the Enlightenment, and it expresses itself preeminently in the contemporary sciences. The religion that thrives today is neither Liberal Protestantism nor Catholic Modernism; it is more conservative, and it belongs more to the masses than to the elite (both Liberal Protestantism and Catholic Modernism are elitist movements). Even though Enlightenment science has maintained itself vigorously, to the point of assuming a quasi-sacred status in our culture, it has neither eliminated nor reformulated traditional religion. A comparable judgment can be rendered on traditional religion: it is alive and well, but it has not been able to vanquish its rationalist foes.

Enlightenment science finds traditional religion to be simply obscurantist and unviable—Peacocke and Pailin make this point with undeniable force. They stand in the Liberal Protestant tradition (although Peacocke's respect for traditional liturgy and art is a Catholic Modernist trait; he himself prefers the label "liberal Anglican"). The third essayist, Vitor Westhelle, observes, however, that one can accept scientific knowledge and methods and still insist that there is more to religion than reason can comprehend. The rationalist view of religion strikes many persons as too thin; humankind would be better served to abandon religion altogether than to accept the Liberal Protestant reformulation. For all its obscurantism, so this argument goes, traditional religion opens up a realm of "deeper life" (the Modernists' term) than reason can deliver. Or, as Westhelle puts it, religion speaks of another world, a world of which science has no inkling.

For the Enlightenment mind, talk about another world or deeper living is simply empty rhetoric (recall Richard Dawkins's comment, "Theology

isn't *about* anything"), while for the traditional religious believer, the Enlightenment's reformulations dilute the richness of reality with insensitive naturalistic reductionism.

When we put the three articles in this section together in this perspective, we see that what might appear to be a parochial in-house discussion is actually a struggle of such proportions that it touches all of modern Western history and culture. The Enlightenment won't go away, and the same can be said of traditional religion.

2. Is this struggle that exercises Peacocke, Pailin, and Westhelle simply a conditioned cultural event in Euro-American culture, or is it relevant to the wider global community? It has been said that only Western civilization has experienced both a Reformation and an Enlightenment. This assertion often carries a value judgment: Western culture is deemed more progressive and more conflicted by reason and critical spirit; other cultures are fated either to remain in a more primitive state or to reenact the struggle with Enlightenment reason in their own ways. No culture can tolerate absolutism, whether religious or secular, and rank as truly civilized and humane.

This way of thinking is repugnant to us for its cultural arrogance. It strikes us as itself an archaic, naive view, because we see the terror to which so-called civilized Western culture can fall prey, and we also appreciate the values of other cultures. Does this render invalid the Western struggle with the Enlightenment? Can people live authentically today even if they repudiate reason and the scientific embodiment of reason? Can traditional religion coexist side by side in a relatively noninteractive manner with scientific thinking and technological accomplishment? Can a religion that has not itself undergone some kind of critical reformation be viable today?

Wilson concludes his historical analysis with the judgment that we have really not made much progress in resolving our modern cultural dilemma; we continue to be caught on its two well-recognized horns: (a) the claim that unless it embodies reason and accepts its cleansing deliverances, religion is obscurantist and therefore nothing more than an archaic relic that thrives only because it serves humankind's sentimental wishes for fulfillment; and (b) the insistence that the religion that is acceptable to the Enlightenment is one-dimensional; obscurantist or not, traditional religion carries with it a deeper sense of living and thinking that humans, finally, cannot do without.

Is Wilson correct in this sober judgment? If so, it would suggest that the three essayists appearing at the outset of this centennial year, two hundred years after David Hume and Immanuel Kant, do not offer solutions to our cultural dilemma so much as they reiterate its contours. Or are these authors pointing us to a way beyond the impasse? We have in these essays three theologians, one of them also a scientist, reflecting on the reformulation of theology. Is that itself a promising step?

When we pose the issues in this manner, the historic agenda of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* is illuminated in clear terms (note that this journal and its sponsoring organizations have since their inception been driven by a coalition of Enlightenment scientists and Liberal Protestants, although, to be sure, others have been significant, as well): it is a wager, a faith, if you will, that this cultural dilemma can be resolved most wholesomely not by obliterating either the Enlightenment or traditional religion but rather through intense efforts at “yoking” (zygon). Discussing the issues together, not in isolation, will itself serve as a method for discovering ways out of our cultural impasse; this is the “zygon” proposal. It is not a proposal of a specific ideological position but rather of a process and methodology that does in fact, in the rough-and-tumble of the culture wars, become an identifiable position. Yoking is a path whose outcome is by no means certain, and one of which many serious persons are skeptical. Two centuries’ experience of Western history give no assurance that this effort at yoking can work. But it is this editor’s judgment that we will stay the course—that is our niche.