# CONCLUDING DIALOGUE: CHALLENGING THE PAST, GRASPING THE FUTURE

*by Antje Jackelén and Philip Hefner*

*Abstract*. A dialogue between the outgoing and incoming directors of the Zygon Center for Religion and Science took place as part of the inaugural symposium. In their conversation they speak of the past and present challenges and goals of the Center, outline what is foremost in their minds, and offer glimpses into what they see as the Center's priorities for future work.

*Keywords:* continuous reform; dialogue; *diapraxis*; feminism; hermeneutics; postmodernism; science and religion; yoking; ZCRS.

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## CHALLENGING THE PAST

[Antje Jackelén] When I here try to challenge the past, I do it in a way that may provoke disagreement and alternative views. My purpose is to look to the past as a means of grasping the future, of finding the best possible answers to the question of where we want to go.

I am not going to anticipate the panel to whom we have given the task of actually suggesting an agenda for the future. I leave the precise work to them and present a rather rough outline instead.

When the dialogue between religion and science got some fresh starts during the last century, they often originated with questions pertaining to biology. Basically, the dialogue was about a constructive apprehension of

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the theory of evolution. The outcome of these efforts has taken two contradictory directions. On one hand, the evolutionary perspective is taken for granted in many respects and applied in many different areas, including epistemology, psychology, and religion. Occasionally it seems so well integrated that critique is called for: the process of making evolution a commonplace concept runs the risk of ending up with watered-down ideas that equate evolution with a general notion of development. In that sense, evolutionary theory has come to be almost too successful. On the other hand, we still see too much energy invested in promoting creationism and design theories. A quick look beyond the United States and beyond Christianity suggests that these questions, as important as they may seem in certain areas and circles in this country, are far from being central issues in other parts of the world. Maybe this outlook helps us to avoid wasting energy on issues that do not have any future. Science has moved on, and Christian theology has moved on, too. The issue of "God at the edges of the universe" today experiences a very healthy competition from questions about "God in the messy middle of life in the world" (Rita Nakashima Brock).

In many places, step two of the new dialogue between religion and science came with a focus on physics and religion. In the wake of an attempt to understand interpretations of the theories of relativity and quantum physics, questions about time, cosmology, and God's action in the world appeared at the forefront. This was a phase of the dialogue that interested philosophers, physicists, and theologians alike. This type of dialogue often came to be flawed in terms of mutuality. Rather than an encounter of equals, it seemed to be a learning experience in physics for religious scholars. Its positive outcome, however, was a significant consolidation of the dialogue between religion and science as a respectable field. This period of the dialogue also gave us systematizations of the history of the interplay between scientific and religious worldviews and provided us with a number of typologies that have proved useful, especially from a pedagogical point of view. It would not surprise me if future scholars assessed this phase as a time that produced vital research traditions in the area of religion and science but also as a period that operated pretty far off from common human concerns.

Looking at more recent developments, it seems that the focus has shifted back to biology. The reasons are obvious. The Human Genome Project, biotechnology, bioethics, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), stem cell research, genetic engineering, cloning—in this part of the world, nobody, even with the most modest attention to the media, can have escaped these topics. Whatever media did when using these words, they conveyed the message: it is about *bios*, biology, about knowledge of life. And you don't mess around with life arbitrarily. If it was the nuclear bomb that first made us ask questions about the responsibility of scientists for the use of

their discoveries, it was progress in biology that seems to make this a concern of real public interest. So, while the cry for ethics is very understandable and heartening, the ways we have developed to handle ethical questions are not always equally encouraging. Yet, there is more about biology than the aspects that make it into the headlines of public media. Neuroscience and evolutionary psychology are examples of other areas from which we can expect a lot of challenging issues to discuss.

Thus far, dialogue between religion and science often looked as if it were about bringing religion up to date with science. Science, not religion or theology, seemed to set the agenda. However, these things are subject to change, in the general public as well as in the dialogue partners themselves. I remember two very different experiences from the beginning and the end of my ministry in the Church of Sweden. In the early 1980s I often encountered people who said, "Why believe in God? Science measures and weighs it all, that's reality—I only believe in what I can see and put my hands on." And I found myself saying, "Don't be so sure. There is so much more to life than you can lay your hands on." In the mid-1990s, there was another song to be sung. People often said things like "You know, I don't care what the experts say; truth is what I feel is right for me, truth is what makes me feel good, no matter whether it is blue stones or a horoscope." Much to my surprise, I found myself replying something very different from what I used to say in the early 80s: "Don't believe everything. There is much more rationality to life than you think."

At this point, the clash of what C. P. Snow famously called the two cultures—the cultures of the sciences and the humanities—is no longer our main problem. Cultural rifts are no longer just a matter of scientific knowledge opposed to faith. The challenge we are facing is people's escape from the rationalities of both faith and knowledge into self-inflicted irrationality. This kind of irrationality, if it takes hold of a sufficient number of people in a society, is a threat not to either science *or* religion but to both of them. If this assessment is correct, we are in need of a new enlightenment, once strikingly well defined as a person's emergence from his or her self-incurred immaturity. In this sense, the Enlightenment motto "*Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your own understanding!" is as valid as ever, especially if we can extend it beyond the interests of the individual to include the needs of communities.

Phil, your assessment may be very different from mine. I assume that the profile and history of ZCRS, seen against the background of this roughly painted picture, will form a vibrant contrast?

[Philip Hefner] I am struck by your comments on the dialogue between religion and science. I am reminded that the "dialogue" has never been at the core of the Center's vision and activity. This may be a distinctive feature of ZCRS. The two excerpts from our Mission Statement that appear in the Symposium Program bear this out:

We are dedicated to relating religious traditions and the best of scientific knowledge in order to gain insight into the origins, nature, and destiny of humans and their environment, and to realize the common goal of a world where love, justice, and ecologically responsible styles of living prevail.

The purpose of the Center is to bring together scientists, theologians, and other scholars to discuss and carry out research on basic questions and issues of human concern that include:

Understanding the world and our place in it
Relating religious traditions to this understanding
Joint reflection to contribute to welfare of the human community
Dialogue and cooperation among world's religions
International discussion of these themes

The Center has always had an eye on the world situation and how humans can live in that situation viably and wholesomely. The "yoking" of science and religion is considered necessary for this task. Although the aims of ZCRS as expressed in these statements appeal to academics and involve academic programs, they have not fit into the regular activities of the academic peer group, nor have we sought to do so. This is clear from the profile of participants in our programs. They include academics from many disciplines, scientists in nonacademic settings, clergy, other professionals (doctors, lawyers, social workers, school teachers), and persons who clearly qualify as amateurs in relating religion and science.

This Mission Statement is part of a tradition that was promoted by our cofounder, Ralph Burhoe. His work is rooted in the American Academy of Arts & Sciences after World War II. The leaders of the Academy at that time were scientists who believed strongly that the sciences before and during that war had failed in their responsibility to society. They had not properly educated the public about science, they had not shown an adequate concern for ethical issues, and they had not dealt with meaning-of-life questions. Burhoe and his colleagues, who included the great historian of religion Erwin Goodenough, insisted that such responsibilities could not be dealt with adequately except through a yoking of science with religious traditions. All of the organizations that Burhoe had a hand in founding had basically the same mission statement: IRAS, the *Zygon* journal, CASIRAS, and ZCRS. The statement that appears in each issue of *Zygon* may be the clearest expression of this perspective.

The Academy group worked with a comprehensive view of the history of Western civilization. They were convinced that Western civilization was in crisis because of the rupture between the traditions of knowledge, which they identified with science, and the traditions of wisdom and moral reflection, which they identified with religion and humanistic philosophies. Let me read from the *Zygon* Mission Statement:

We provide a forum for exploring ways to unite what in modern times has been disconnected—values from knowledge, goodness from truth, religion from science. Traditional religions, which have transmitted wisdom about what is of es-

sential value and ultimate meaning as a guide for human living, were expressed in terms of the best understandings of their times about human nature, society, and the world. Religious expression in our time, however, has not drawn similarly on modern science, which has superseded the ancient forms of understanding.

The image of yoking is introduced as the reuniting of knowledge, truth, and science with values, goodness, and religion. The idea of dialogue can be very pale indeed when measured by the vision of yoking.

Consistent with your comments, Antje, the Center has attempted to go beyond dialogue. The traditional thrust of ZCRS points in another direction. In other words, both your comments and the history of the Center may well raise the questions, Is dialogue an adequate concept for relating religion and science, or do we need to go beyond dialogue into a more socially responsible direction? Does the past of ZCRS point to an alternative to dialogue? By providing this alternative, ZCRS and its tradition have in fact been a challenging factor on the terrain of religion and science.

Both science and religion aim at a larger constructive outcome than dialogue. They both seek a public impact. The American Academy scientists recognized this in the late 1940s and 50s. The purposes of science and technology have always been expressed in terms of benefiting human life and the world in which we live—even when they have actually not been beneficial. We may consider the corporate motto "better things for better living" to be naive or manipulative, but it states the sincere motivation of many scientists through the centuries. Religion and theology also seek a public outreach. In the United States this has been difficult, since both religion and theology are encouraged by our constitution to define themselves as private expressions of private feelings. We may be at a turning point in American history just now when the public significance of religious traditions of wisdom and morality is being recognized—along with the public significance of religious prejudice and bigotry.

All of this points to the fact that much more than dialogue is required in the interactions between science and religion.

### What Is on Our Minds Right Now?

[A.J.] I would like to pick up two thoughts from you that seem to me important for the future and elaborate them.

One: At the beginning of the Zygon enterprise there was an insight that things can go wrong and have gone wrong, especially in terms of failed responsibility to public interests. I affirm this perspective in that I think that the dialogue should never be *a l'art pour l'art exercise*, an academic exercise in the pejorative sense of the word—highly theoretical, highly exclusive, intellectual amusement for a few with no or little relevance for the rest of the world. Instead, it needs to be a continuous exercise in the best sense of the word *academic*; that means collegial and intellectual responsibility toward the academic world, challenging and supporting religious

communities in their search for a better understanding of life and world in the light of the best knowledge available, and pursuing all of this in critical solidarity with society.

Although interdisciplinarity seems to be increasing in academia, compartmentalization remains a problem. Apart from structural and financial obstacles, true interdisciplinarity also needs to overcome the natural resistance of scholars to expose their ignorance in fields other than their own. When it is hardly possible to keep up with the most important journals in your own field, how dare you get involved with others? It is hard to walk that extra mile. Encouragement from academic institutions and religious communities is often badly missed, both by scientists and by theologians. I meet theologians dealing with religion-and-science who are frustrated with the disinterest and introversion of their church bodies. I meet scientists in the midst of their careers who have a strong sense of vocation about their scientific work and a desire to bring their expertise to a forum that at its best can contribute to a more wholesome future for humans and the whole of creation, yet who have not found such a forum. I regret that our educational system is such that especially many scientists feel that they have to wait until they approach retirement before they can explore their interest in religion-and-science without fear of reprisal.

This leads me to the second thought I want to pick up from what you said. And this is a provoking question, namely, Should it be dialogue at all? Is the concept of dialogue the right one? Should we abandon it at a time when it is finally seeming to become popular in many areas?

*Zygon* of course means more than talk. It means *yoke*. I must admit that my very first reaction to that metaphor was not wholly positive. A yoke is a thing you use to subdue two powerful animals, traditionally oxen, and make them go your way. That does not look like freedom of exploration at all. However, *yoke* also has other connotations: a yoke is a means to make two wills look toward the same goal—a goal that you, Phil, have described as birthing the future that is most wholesome for the nature that has birthed us. In other words, the yoking helps to make those stubborn oxen pull in the same direction so that eventually a harvest can be gathered.

A more tender association is the relation between *zygon* and *zygote*, which means "the union of genetic heritage from sperm and egg, a union that is vital in higher species for the continuation of advancement of life," as the statement of perspective for the journal *Zygon* has it.

All of this suggests that conversation or dialogue alone are not enough. In this case, it is not through the word alone, *dia-logos*. What we need to aim at is *dia-praxis*—developing a common praxis of linking the best understandings of our time about human nature, society, and the world with the best of wisdom nourished and represented by our religious traditions. I think that this view of diapraxis answers and transcends the question of why it is worth dealing at all with science-and-religion. A switch from a

policy-oriented toward a more problem-oriented approach becomes as good as self-explanatory here.

How does this fit with what is on your mind?

[P.H.] You have added another idea to the ZCRS treasury of ideas—*dia-praxis*, common action linking religion and the sciences in response to the issues that challenge us.

The sciences that pertain to the human being and human ways of living are central to praxis, and it is to these sciences that ZCRS and its forerunners have given a great deal of attention over the years. As early as the 1960s, we were thinking through the kinds of scientific methods and research that became the fields of sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, neuroscience, and the cognitive sciences. This was prescient, because, as you mention, these sciences today are at the center of both practical moral challenges and theoretical understandings that are churning violently in our society today. They touch our society as a whole and every person in it, and they present special difficulties to religious traditions. The practical ethical challenges are obvious, and you have underscored their importance, so I will not elaborate on them. These are the stuff of daily headlines, even in a time of war. It seems clear that only *dia-praxis*, a "yoked" response, is viable today, one that both scientific and religious persons can affirm and present as public positions.

I underscore here theoretical issues that need to be explored. The map of the religious consciousness, even of our inmost belief, is being redrawn by sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, neuroscience, and the cognitive sciences. This is so because these sciences are redrawing pictures of what a human being is and what human life and behavior are about. This redrawing results in staggeringly difficult issues for philosophical, religious, and moral reflection. Where are we now? We are in the position where we dare not postpone giving our attention to the agenda presented by these sciences. Because they will require the reformulating of our religious doctrine and preaching, they promise to shake theologians and religious believers to their roots. But this shaking will also be life-giving and liberating. I sketch two of the issues that I consider most critical.

First, to what extent are we governed by natural selection in our moral, religious, and spiritual lives? If these sciences have established anything at all, it is that even in our most precious inner beliefs and actions we engage in adaptive behavior that is finally either selected for or against—that is what natural selection is about. Adaptation and selection are rich and complex, much more so than we generally understand by the cliche "survival of the fittest." The processes are not always Darwinian, but nevertheless, they are adaptation and selection. As a Christian theologian, I believe that this is the way God has created the world—God has woven the creation on the web of adaptation and selection. We are very far from

understanding the significance of this aspect of God's creation and also far from integrating this truth into our systems of belief.

Second, along with adaptation and selection, we must recognize naturalistic, causal explanations of religion, morality, and spirituality. In the audience today are several persons associated with ZCRS whose work exemplifies the ongoing attempt to take these explanations seriously. Charles Smith's doctoral dissertation explores how the person and message of Jesus Christ has been carried by cultural evolution. Mladen Turk's dissertation analyzes cognitive and socially and ecologically adaptive understandings of religion. The Metanexus Science and Spiritual Transformation project, headed up by Sol Katz, researches spirituality from the perspective of several of the sciences I have mentioned. James Moore is incorporating evolutionary understandings of religion in the ZCRS Interfaith Project, which has focused on the concrete issues of HIV/AIDS, and will take its discussions to a next level at Barcelona in the 2004 Parliament of the World's Religions. Carol Albright relates the natural processes of complexification to moral and spiritual development. Ursula Goodenough probes the transcending character of nature itself in the concept of emergence.

Some think that this attention to the sciences is to be feared, that it reduces religion and faith to molecules, genes, and neurons. On the contrary, it throws light on how God has created our world and on what the actual purpose of faith and religion might be in the divine purview. These sciences can free religion, faith, morality, and spirituality to be richer, more constructive, and, from a believer's perspective, more faithful. We have much more to fear if we ignore or reject these scientific perspectives. They must be embraced and integrated into our traditional faith and theology.

In these comments I have already pointed my eyes toward the future. Let me conclude my part of this dialogue with a final reflection on the future that may help to explain the stance I have taken thus far.

### Grasping the Future

[P.H.] I want to elaborate what I think underlies all that we do in the Center and that calls out for attention. I approach it from two perspectives.

1. For those of us who begin with God, the challenge is to recognize that science is revelation—revelation of what God has done, what God is doing now, and what God intends.

2. For those of us who begin with science, the challenge is to recognize that in and of itself science touches on the great realities of our lives, the fundamental questions of what it means to be human, and the basic issues that we must act on as we enter the future.

These two perspectives come together in an urgent common understanding: that science is serious and that science is one way that we access

the great and ultimate realities of human life today. Science is exciting, yes! It is beautiful in its reach and in its theoretical constructions. It is effective, particularly in its alliances with technology, in enabling us to do the work that we have set ourselves to do. But beyond these—its excitement, its beauty, and its effectiveness—science reaches for the deepest facts of life and creates an agenda for human action. This is in and of itself a religious engagement.

Religion is about the deepest facts of life and the important tasks of human action. Science is intrinsically involved in this sort of religious engagement. Even if scientists never leave their workplace, never enter a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple, their engagement with the facts of life and action brings them into the territory we associate with religion.

In some ways, scientists, political leaders, policy makers, and ordinary citizens seem to have grasped this dimension of depth in science more clearly than religious communities and their leaders and thinkers have. The human genome effort, sparked by the discovery of DNA fifty years ago, the multiple projects to chart the depths of the universe through astronomy and cosmology, the integration of computers into nearly every aspect of our lives and of genetics into everyday medical practice and of ecological science into our relations with the natural environment, as well as the widespread attention to ethical guidelines for these domains—these witness to the seriousness with which our society takes science and the agenda it creates. The United States Congress, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, medical schools, and business corporations together are pouring billions of dollars and millions of person-hours into the effort to take the measure of science and the human agenda it engenders.

But where are the religious communities and their leaders and thinkers? There are efforts, but in contrast to the billions of dollars and millions of hours that I have just mentioned, we might say that the religious communities are investing thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours. The religious communities, for the most part, do not recognize the religious dimension of science and its agenda. They do not recognize that science gives us knowledge of God as reliably as revealed scriptures do and that God's meaning for our lives is embedded in the agenda that science sets for our action.

Consequently, if our society and if the scientists in our midst are to become aware of the deep, religious seriousness of their work, they must make the discovery on their own, without the help of religion.

Science is knowledge of the ways God works—in the past and today. Religions must not only recognize this but also understand what this insight calls for—the renovation and reformulation of belief and worship. Religion finds meaning in its old, rich symbols and beliefs, and this is good. But we who are members of religious communities must come to the point

where we recognize that exploring the old and reinterpreting it is not all that we have to do. We also must engage in what the reformers of the sixteenth century called "continuous reform," putting aside that which is an obstacle to faith today and accepting the new scientific understandings as the framework for restating our faith and reconstructing our worship.

Recognizing the essentially religious character of science and reformulating our faith in the context of our current understandings of the world—these two convictions underlie my work in the field of religion-and-science, and they have marked much of the work we have done here at the Center.

The future is new, the past is prelude. With all its flaws, we join another notable Swede, Dag Hammarskjöld, and say "Amen" to what has been. And then we turn to the future and utter our "Yes" to it. We are bold and eager to enter in where the future leads.

[A.J.] Phil, you pointed to the need of taking seriously the specifics of the situation in which we work. And you criticized religious communities for not taking seriously enough the revelatory character of science, including the facts, possibilities, and problems the sciences put before us.

If we are to be intentional about our willingness to engage contemporary thought, I think we need to add three other topics that are very much part of our current situation: feminism, hermeneutics, and postmodernism. And as you criticized religious thinkers for not paying enough attention to science, I want to admonish especially scientific communities and their leaders and thinkers for not giving nearly as much attention as needed to these realities of our world.

It is fair to say, however, that during recent years both science and science-and-religion have taken some notice of feminist research. Scholars have, for example, analyzed the consequences of the interplay of masculine and feminine gender typologies in religion and science. In the early seventeenth-century world of Francis Bacon, science was presented as the saint who gathers her followers in monasterylike noble communities, whereas nature was the wild woman that needs to be forced into submission. Historical examples as well as current scientific conceptualizations indicate that beliefs in the inferiority of woman still form part of our inherited scientific, religious, and philosophical framework.

Feminist scholarship has raised issues of ethics and politics that are basically human issues, equally involving women, men, children, and the nature we all relate to; it also has addressed issues of exclusion and inclusion of women and their work, and of minorities and their cultures; and, demonstrating how gender categories inform and bias both research agendas and the interpretation of data, it analyzes and suggests different ways of doing science. I want to stress that I am not talking about feminism because I am a woman. Feminist scholarship is carried out by and relevant to both women and men. It is and needs to be part of the world we are living

in, in the same way as hermeneutics and postmodernism are part of our context.

*Hermeneutics* is usually defined as the theory and practice of understanding. What started out as reflection about how we understand and interpret texts has developed into knowledge about the nature of understanding itself. Therefore, its place is not only in the humanities but wherever we claim to understand something. It disperses naivete about the crystal clarity of facts, and it provides us with methods that allow us to handle the process of understanding and interpreting in rational, intelligible ways. Hermeneutics reflects on the nature and limits of the language or languages we use. This reflection sharpens our awareness of the ideological potential in scientific and religious concepts. It raises consciousness about the dynamics of interdisciplinarity and alerts us to the significance of the socioeconomic situatedness of our intellectual endeavors. Three examples of how hermeneutics is relevant to science are the discussions about different interpretations of quantum physics, the debates initiated by Thomas Kuhn's use of the concept of *paradigm*, and Bruno Latour's analysis of laboratories as places where the future reservoirs of political power are in the making.

Many of us grew into a religion-and-science dialogue that assumed without further ado that the questions we raised were of global interest and that we were able to make assumptions that are valid for all people. Hermeneutical sensibility unmasks such an attitude as an anachronistic illusion, which is a euphemism for imperialism or colonialism.

Of the three challenges I have mentioned, postmodernism faces the strongest resistance from the science community. And not without reason. If it were to lead us into total relativism and bring about a culture of disrespect for every single truth claim, it would indeed be a danger. But even as such a danger it still needs to be taken seriously.

However, I think that there is a lot to be gained from a constructive engagement with postmodern thought. Postmodernism questions at least two myths of modernity, the myth of progress and the myth of secularization. It is not true that every development is progress, and it is not true that where science goes in, religion goes out. Criticizing these myths of modernity does not make research impossible. It does not make it easier, either. Rather, it makes it more complicated—but maybe even better. I do not embrace an extreme form of constructivism that suggests that pretty much everything is social construction. But I do think that pretty much everything comes along with construction. I do not deny the value of so-called hard data, but I do think that our representation of data is always embedded in construction, a construction that informs how we talk about science, how we teach science, and how we do science.

In my view, postmodernism in its most helpful form shares the best fruits of modernity, especially of the Enlightenment, while at the same

time avoiding some of modernity's most serious mistakes. Such a postmodernism offers an exciting way between the Scylla of boundless relativism and the Charybdis of rigorous nonambiguity, of totalization and totalitarianism, of reduction to sameness.

Taking seriously these challenges that are before us will help to successfully enact the triangular drama between faith in knowledge, knowledge of faith, and their common responsibility for the world. This will be part of the agenda as ZCRS relates to the academic community of scholars in religion, the humanities, and the sciences, to religious communities, and to society.

These challenges describe what is important to me now and what I bring with me as director of the Zygon Center. But in and by themselves, these challenges do not represent the program of the Center for the next decade or so. Hermeneutics, feminism, and postmodernism will not form the core of the probram. Rather, they will work as catalysts at the core of the program. The catalytic process that they generate challenges compartmentalization in science. It challenges introversion in religious communities. It claims a place on the public agenda for the science-and-religion dialogue and will not give up the conviction that an increase in both scientific and religious literacy will have a healthy impact on societies. It will not accept any theological framework that is unable to cope with religious and cultural diversity. It will not accept any scientific framework that is not self-critical of its own methods and that does not ask questions about who is deciding on, doing, and presenting research for them and from which perspective.

I see the current science-and-religion project that we at ZCRS are working on for the upcoming Parliament of the World's Religions as a very good embodiment of these ambitions.

Cultivating religion-and-science work means cultivating unrest. Let me express what I mean by that in both theological and more biological language. Expressed in the theological language of my Protestant Christian heritage, this notion of cultivating unrest is a faithful expression of what the Reformers called *ecclesia semper reformanda*—a church always in need of reformation, a community always in need of renewal. Thinking in terms of biological imagery, I like to think of science and religion as complex bodies of knowledge. In order to keep well and alive, the muscles of the body need to keep up a certain level of tension, something for which the Greek had the lovely word *eutonos*, good tension. It is this vision that I see as a promise for the future of the Zygon Center as a vibrant voice in and for the academic world, in and for the religious communities we relate to, and in and for the societies we are part of.