

# *Editorial*

## GOING PUBLIC

Nearly ten years ago, in an address to the American Psychological Association, I argued that religion-and-science is more than a specialized field of thinking; it is part of a larger human search for meaning. I wrote, “When I speak of the search for meaning, I am referring to the effort by men and women to reinstate some sort of congruence between their overarching images of reality, embodying the bases for values and moral behavior, and contemporary knowledge, preeminently scientific knowledge” (Hefner 1996, 309). Furthermore, those of us who are active in this field are accountable to the larger human exploration of meaning.

Many of the articles we publish touch on this larger accountability; it is a clear thread of concern in the issue we here present to you. Holmes Rolston, III (theology, philosophy) speaks of this larger accountability in his focus on the question, How do we rise from the *facts* of natural history, earth’s biodiversity, to what *ought to be*, human caring for a valuable creation? Steven Reiss (psychology) roots religion-and-science in the basic drives of the human psyche. Under the rubric of reductionism, Frank Budenholzer (chemistry, theology) and Donald Wacome (philosophy) struggle with how we can appreciate the fact that we are material creatures and still affirm our human distinctiveness.

The symposium “Questions that Shape Our Future,” papers from which constitute the second major section of this issue (and which are dealt with in separate introductory articles), touched on a challenging array of basic human questions: What is required for the survival of our species (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi)? Where will we find moral guidance (Willem Drees)? How can we come to know God (Arthur Peacocke)? How can religion and science explore the “twilight zone” of knowledges that lie outside their conventional disciplines (Vitor Westhelle)? And there are more such questions in the pieces by Ian Barbour, Grace Wolf-Chase, V. V. Raman, Antje Jackelén, and Philip Hefner.

Papers from a Symposium on HIV and the Science-and-Religion Dialogue form the third portion of this issue. They focus directly on the human engagement with disease—hence its theme, “Toward a Theology of Disease.” In his preface, James Moore introduces the participants in

this symposium: Barbara Strassberg, Mary Hunt, Gayle Woloschak, Philip Hefner, and Joseph Edelheit.

It is not always easy for intellectuals, persons who focus on ideas and live for ideas—particularly those who work within academic disciplines, organized in academic institutions—to give priority to what I call the “larger human quest.” It is even more difficult to acknowledge that we are *accountable* to that quest. Perhaps this accountability is the purchase of the currently fashionable term *public intellectual*. On one hand, thinkers who are devoted to religion-and-science are intrinsically public intellectuals. On the other hand, the very term *public* seems to imply that one must step outside the daily involvement with ideas in order to enter the public realm. University presidents and department chairs have been known to challenge those who “go public,” as if they are shortchanging their institutional communities. More to the point, however, is our recognition that, even when it is carried out within the confines of disciplinary and institutional specializations, religion-and-science is a public discourse with a public accountability.

Two critical issues emerge from this view of religion-and-science. The place of action is a troublesome one. Theory’s relation to practice is the issue. Can we reflect on the value of nature without engaging in caring action for the earth? Can we reflect on the survival of our species without acting in behalf of survival? Is reflection on disease empty words apart from healing action? Our finest universities frequently argue that their greatest contribution to society is to focus exclusively on knowledge and ideas, with no regard for behavioral consequences; too quick a move to practice actually distorts the long-term significance and social value of the ideas. This argument can be stated in very persuasive terms. Of course, its cogency rests in the point that the larger accountability can often be served best by refraining from immediate attention to the practical consequences of our thinking. This argument is, obviously, vigorously contested by many theorists and also often by those who fund them. Others argue that the so-called professional schools are the most suitable location for socially accountable knowledge—law, medicine, social work, religious ministry, and the like.

It is no surprise that we are still uncertain as to whether religion-and-science should be located in universities or professional schools, or in both. The very fact that we wrestle with such issues may be the clearest demonstration that our thinking in religion-and-science is a public enterprise.

The second critical issue is the long-term significance of religion-and-science. Does our work in this field have any real, lasting significance apart from its public character? The problems we work with—reconciling sacred texts with Big Bang cosmology, developing concepts of emergence and top-down causality, or elaborating ideas of design in nature—are so intriguing that they can become ends in themselves. Precisely so, and as a

result we can forget that developing our concepts is only the first task; there remains the equally pressing responsibility to deal with the question “What difference do our intriguing ideas make?” This question dare not be subordinated and left out of consideration. The founders of this journal placed this question at the top of their agenda (see the “statement of perspective” in the back matter of this issue): this journal is dedicated to the thesis that religion-and-science can speak of “meaning that provides valid and effective guidance for enhancing human life.” Such a mission for the journal or for religion-and-science in general invites the public into laboratory and study. With that invitation comes vigorous discussion and debate, even conflict—because when they are public, the ideas *matter*. That they matter is an indication they are significant.

We conclude this issue with a tribute to Malcolm Sutherland, who died in November 2003. He is one of the journal’s founders, without whose vision and hard work *Zygon* would not exist. He served as co-chair of our Joint Publication Board for all of our thirty-eight years of publication. Malcolm was a quintessential public thinker, whose spirit energizes us to this day.

—Philip Hefner

#### REFERENCE

Hefner, Philip. 1996. “Science-and-Religion and the Search for Meaning.” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 31 (June): 307–21.