

Editorial

HUMAN BEING: QUESTIONING AND BEING QUESTIONED

“What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” (Psalm 8:4) The Hebrew poet asked this question more than 2,500 years ago, and it is as pressing a question today as it was then. What does it mean to be human? What ought humans to be doing? What is their role, or what are they for?

These are not only questions that we ask but that also are asked of us. We are in a sense called into question. In their mute and yet dramatic way, our fellow citizens in the commonwealth of the natural world—plants and animals—ask us the question. We are questioning creatures, and we are creatures who ourselves are always being questioned.

This reflexive nature—questioning and being questioned—arises wherever we see the interplay of science and the basic issues of life. The primary reason the evolutionary sciences are so much discussed in our culture, for example, and so hotly debated in some circles, is that evolution not only provides answers to some of our basic questions, it also puts questions: Who are we? Where do we fit in? The journey of the questioner may be difficult, but it is also a courageous, invigorating venture. Being ourselves called into question is a more threatening challenge.

As we complete thirty-nine years of *Zygon's* publication in this issue, we offer articles that deal with this questioning and being questioned. Geologist George Fisher starts us off by dealing with the question Where do we fit in? He describes our spatial and temporal placement in the cosmos and the mandate that flows from this placement: “Thinking of Earth as sacred is not enough. We must also *feel* its sacredness deep in our souls.”

Fisher closes his piece with the reminder that our action must be consistent with this sense of Earth's sacredness. Thus, we move directly into the Symposium on the Created Co-Creator. The image of the created co-creator is one response, elaborated by Philip Hefner, to our being questioned, to the questions Who are we? and What ought we to be doing with our creativity? Vitor Westhelle (theology) suggests that the strength of the image lies in its gathering together Western philosophical and theological traditions that reflect on human nature; he also lays bare what he considers

to be its major weakness—the inability to describe “situations of being on the edge.” Jerome Stone (theology/philosophy) places Hefner and the concept within “an Anglo-American viewpoint that is within neither the dominant Western nor the postmodern paradigm.” For anthropologist William Irons the scientific element in the created co-creator concept is the proposal that the purpose of human creativity is to fashion a wholesome environment for the planet through altruistic behavior. He assesses the viability of such a proposal, placing his discussion within a nontheist perspective. Manuel Doncel (physics/theology) provides a fundamental theological framework within which the import of the created co-creator concept can be interpreted. Doncel introduces readers to both Christian (*kenosis*) and Jewish (*zimzum*) ideas that speak of a “self-emptying” God who thereby empowers the world to be free.

Ann Pederson (theology) draws upon her work in health-care ethics and her experience with dying persons to suggest the usefulness of the created co-creator image for those fields of concern. Anna Case-Winters (theology) assesses the significance of the created co-creator for interpreting our relationship to nature. Philosopher and theologian Gregory Peterson deals with what Hefner’s concept claims and what it does not claim, its strengths and its weaknesses, particularly with respect to issues of reductionism, biological selfishness, freedom, and environmental ethics. He maps the incompleteness of the concept and the ways in which it should be developed further. Roger Willer (theology, ethics) concentrates chiefly on the adequacy of the idea for Christian thinking and action. He raises critical questions concerning the very term, as well the “insufficient attention” that it gives to issues of responsibility and obligation. He suggests that the “responsibility ethics” of Hans Jonas could be a useful complement to the concept. Two poems by Alan Nordstrom serve as frame for this discussion; they are placed at the beginning and the end of the section, intentionally suggesting yet deeper dimensions of human nature.

The reader who works through this symposium will encounter a host of issues related to human being as questioner and as the creature who is called into question. Marc Bekoff (biology, ecology) and Jan Nystrom (ecology, activism) in effect formulate the questions that other animals pose to us—an issue of human identity that is far from settled. They do so by elaborating the work of Rachel Carson, whose *Silent Spring* in 1962 marked the beginning of an epoch for ecology. Buddhist scholar Brian Brown clarifies the Buddhist principle of “dependent co-origination” as a clue to the fundamental character of human being and its relation to the rest of the world in an ethic of “mindful awareness.”

Nina Azari (neuroscience, theology) and Dieter Birnbacher (philosophy) take note of “points of convergence between psychological, philosophical, and neuroscientific accounts of emotion” in the effort to develop a more adequate understanding of religious experience. The thorny issue

of freedom and determinism in the perspective of neurobiology occupies the attention of psychiatrist and pastor Guus Labooy. Paul Carr (physics) approaches the same issue within the insights of fractal geometry. Physicist V. V. Raman's article goes to the heart of faith and doubt as components of both religion and science. He contributes clarity on the subject by making necessary distinctions.

We conclude this issue with a piece by Phillip Thompson that describes the brief, chance encounter between a Trappist monk, Thomas Merton (who was both mystic and literary figure), and a pioneer of nuclear physics, Leo Szilard (whose biography is subtitled *Science as a Mode of Being*); both of these figures were obsessed with the question of being human. Their encounter was rich with possibilities but aborted before it could bear fruit.

The ancient Hebrew poet could not have foreseen the terrain of our journey today toward understanding who we are and what we ought to be doing. But that poet stated the question that we will never cease exploring and never fully resolve. The articles in this issue testify to both of these aspects—the perennial necessity and the never-ending struggle of the questioning.

—Philip Hefner

Fortieth Anniversary Symposium

In the next issue, we move into our fortieth year, and we mark the anniversary with a year-long symposium. In each of the four issues of 2005 we will publish articles that reflect on the theme "Science, Religion, and Secularity in a Technological Society." In the March issue, the initial statement of the theme is an article by John Caiazza titled "Athens, Jerusalem, and the Arrival of Techno-Secularism." Hava Tirosh Samuelson, John Polkinghorne, Philip Clayton, Harold Morowitz, and Ervin Laszlo provide commentaries.