

KARL PETERS: THEOLOGY AS A CONFESSING DISCIPLINE

by Ann Milliken Pederson

Abstract. Karl Peters's book *Dancing with the Sacred* brings together his insights from evolutionary biology and ecology, world religions, and process thought into an integrated autobiographical reflection on his thoughts, teaching, and life. The book simultaneously engages readers in their own reflections about religion and science and reminds them that their reflections are freighted with moral responsibility. For Peters, self-understanding correlates with understanding the world. The celebration of diversity coincides with the universal concerns that all face living together on this planet. Our future depends on how we live in the present tense.

Keywords: Enlightenment; medicine; moral responsibility; spiritual transformation.

Karl Peters's book *Dancing with the Sacred: Evolution, Ecology, and God* (2002) invites a response written in first person. Having known Peters through the last couple of decades as a prominent figure in the religion-and-science discussion, I was personally quite moved by reading his book and having an opportunity to respond to it. While we come at the discussion between religion and science from different starting points, we arrive at many of the same conclusions and raise many of the same questions. This book brings together his insights from evolutionary biology and ecology, world religions, and process thought into an integrated autobiographical reflection on his thoughts, teaching, and life. The aphorism that the personal is political rings true, because Peters's book simultaneously engages readers in their own reflections about religion and science and reminds them that their reflections are freighted with moral responsibility.

Ann Milliken Pederson is Professor of Religion at Augustana College, 2001 S. Summit, Sioux Falls, SD 57197 and also Adjunct Associate Professor in the Section of Ethics and Humanities at the University of South Dakota School of Medicine.

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Peters's methodology in both content and style reminds me of an approach to writing and speaking that I learned about while I was on sabbatical at the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research in Collegeville, Minnesota. Based on an understanding of theology as a "confessing discipline," this methodological approach to writing and speaking requires a first-person approach—that is, writing from one's faith commitments, not as an expert about them. Peters explains his worldviews and expresses his knowledge of religion and science within the context of his life story. This narrative style draws the reader into the discourse in a different way than traditional academic writing does. The text develops into a conversation, a dialogue between author and reader. Following in the similar footsteps of Ursula Goodenough's *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (1998), Peters's text and others like it should encourage other scholars to venture into this same kind of discourse. If Peters is right that the very viability of life on this planet is at stake, we cannot afford to carry on a conversation about religion and science that matters only to a few in the academy.

Peters offers the reader a worldview that is both realistic about the pain and suffering in the world and hopeful about the future. He sorts through his personal beliefs, commitments, and responsibilities. In doing so, he arrives at his central existential question: "What might it mean to live with hope and to work toward the greater well-being of ourselves and the planet in the midst of suffering, loss, and perishing?" (Peters 2002, viii) The religion-and-science discussion is transformed when authors like Peters take the risk of showing how their beliefs are integrated into the way they live. The community of scholars is held accountable for its scholarship; what is written should make a difference to others. His methodological approach reminds me of the Whiteheadian airplane ride in which one takes off from the ground of experience, moves into the thin air of speculation, then returns again to the ground of experience. Peters does not offer yet another intellectual fabrication but puts forth an image of a dance that allows the reader to be a partner in his ongoing reflections.

When I first read *Dancing with the Sacred*, I immediately tried to figure out what classes it would fit into for teaching undergraduates about religion and science. Having taught interdisciplinary courses in religion and science for almost fifteen years, I can attest to how difficult it is to find texts that beginning students can understand and that are both faithful to religious traditions and responsible to the science that is explored. Peters's book integrates what I think science-and-religion dialogue has sometimes sundered: epistemology and ethics. He claims that we are responsible for what we know and how we know it. This has obvious pedagogical implications. Our senior capstone courses center on the question "How then shall we live?" When students read this text, they will see one way to answer that question. Peters explains: "First, I try to see how the sacred can be understood as the creative activity of nature, human history, and

individual life. Second, I explore how we might understand ourselves in a way that motivates us to live more in harmony with the rest of life on planet Earth. Third, I try to see how we might live meaningfully in a world in which suffering and death are extremely intertwined with life” (2002, viii). For Peters, self-understanding correlates with understanding the world. The celebration of diversity coincides with the universal concerns that all face living together on this planet. Our future depends on how we live in the present tense. For students in undergraduate courses struggling with how they live in this world, this text is most appropriate.

I also am a participant and observer in another arena of teaching and scholarship. My joint appointment at the University of South Dakota School of Medicine offers me a different way into the religion-and-science dialogue. In conversations with other faculty members that range from curriculum development for residents to pedagogical concerns about teaching bioethics, we often lack a common worldview. Peters’s book provides a provocative framework to help shape and direct those in the education of medical students and other health-care professionals. His three guiding concerns expressed at the beginning of the book shape this framework:

In my thinking, living, and teaching, I have come to hold three guiding concerns that lie at the heart of the book. First, what does it mean to try to understand myself and my world with knowledge from the contemporary sciences? Second, how can I begin to think and live culturally in a pluralistic world in a way that makes positive use of the variety of the ways other people think and live? Third, how can I find the will to respond to the growing awareness that the way I and others are thinking and living is increasingly degrading the rest of our natural world, thereby putting our planet and ourselves in peril? (p. 7)

These three common but also very challenging questions might address many of the curricular issues in medical education. From the perspective of the patients to that of those providing the care, integrating existential, spiritual, and ethical questions with knowledge gained from the contemporary medical sciences is not an easy task. The vision in *Dancing with the Sacred* should be read by anyone working in the medical or health-care professions who wrestle with decisions about life and death.

The worldview informing much of the practice and pedagogy of medical science still has one foot in the door of the mechanistic, deterministic, dualistic philosophy of the Enlightenment. Practicing medicine as a moral enterprise is freighted with ambiguity and difficult dilemmas. I still witness conversations in which physicians speak about teaching from a perspective of value-free objectivity, indicating that neither their beliefs nor the patient’s will affect the diagnosis and treatment. The education of medical students is beginning to change, but the worldview of those practicing is not. Physicians, nurses, and other health-care providers practice in a system that values making money in short periods of time. Peters not only challenges the worldview that supports this kind of education and practice but also offers a constructive alternative. He takes the insights of

evolutionary biology and ecology as background to construct a philosophical framework that moves beyond the binary categories of Enlightenment philosophy and challenges the by-products of capitalistic consumerism. I'd like to reflect on how Peters's insights could offer both challenges to and insights into the education and practice of health-care professionals, particularly physicians.

How one views the natural world shapes how one understands the meaning of being human in a scientific and technological age. Peters indicts the modern view of nature as one that reinforces human domination and manipulation of nature. Humans view themselves as separate from nature and its limitations. In many ways, modern medicine buys into this picture. Death and finitude are problems to be overcome; they are not viewed as limits that humans share with the creatures of the rest of the natural world. According to Peters, the roots of this modern picture of nature are found in the dualistic thinking of Zoroastrianism and in the incorporation of Greek philosophical elements into Christianity. He notes that with the "beginnings of European colonialism and the rise of modern science and technology, there was added to this otherworldly kind of Christianity an emphasis on conquering and taming this world" (p. 103). These dualisms accompanied by their spiritual and moral dimensions prevent humans from understanding themselves as a part of nature, as a part of a system that is constantly changing. Dualistic thinking is usually accompanied in North American culture with a consumerist and individualistic mentality. The combination, Peters fears, is lethal to self, others, and the life of the planet. This dualistic worldview is not just theoretical; it has practical consequences. Consequently, if the practice of medicine is embedded in this worldview, a reexamination of the education and practice of medicine as a moral discipline is imperative for a change to occur. When we recognize and possibly overcome this dualistic thinking, we realize that humans are part of, not separate from, the natural world. This decenters the place of humans within a western Enlightenment worldview. We are kinfolk with the rest of the creation.

Peters's vision of the human being would also be helpful for the construction of such concepts as health and illness. This begins with an understanding of the relationship between self and others. For Peters, the self is social and ecological, born from the matrices of evolution. He calls this the "big self." This vision enlarges a rather reductionistic view of self as simply an autonomous individual. We are constructed through the processes by which we engage in relationships with others, including the natural world. Our big self is reflected in the star dust whose elements shape our makeup. "We are woven with webs of cosmos as well as bios, as well of culture" (p. 72).

What is the meaning of and moral implication of this view of the "big self"? Peters claims that "what matters is not just how long we live but

how well we live in the sense of contributing further to human culture, biological well-being, and the ecosystems of the earth" (p. 72). The moral implications for the discipline of medicine are at least twofold: (1) the context for interpreting crises of meaning around beginnings and endings of life is enlarged, and (2) the concept of creative transformation provided by Peters provides all persons touched by illness and death a way to navigate through life with hope.

Peters's lengthy reflection on death, suffering, and evil, told through his experience of the death of his wife, is an extremely important part of this text. In fact, this section of the book works so well because he is so effective in integrating his life story with his worldview. Stories give us a place to stand within a worldview. Peters moves the reader from the personal self to the cosmic self and back again. We learn that cancer affects not only the person who is sick but also the entire family, that the very cells that create life also cause death. Life and death are woven together amid joy and sorrow. Peters does not try to rationalize his wife's illness or give the reader some pious explanation. He does offer a strategy about how to live *in media res*—of life and death, hope and joy, love and fear.

Peters's anthropological insights, briefly mentioned above, provide a new lens and perspective on how to live with and understand the meaning of death. Death and the limits we face as finite creatures are part of the story and history that we share with all creatures who have emerged from the matrix of evolution. Peters offers a poignant example of this. Working with students in an environmental-ethics class, he asks them to find good ways to recycle their bodies when they die. How we take care of the dead reflects how we take care of the living. We are simply not used to thinking about death in this manner. Peters shows us that life and death are interrelated in an ecological worldview, a system in which we all are linked.

We are limited by certain boundaries within the laws of nature, yet we are also free to adapt to a changing world. Pain, suffering, and death are woven into life; they constitute part of who we are (p. 114). The limits we face as finite creatures might be tragic, but they are not intrinsically evil. Some of us in the theological enterprise or with certain spiritual proclivities might want to find a "solution" to the problem of evil. However, such solutions always create more problems. Peters comments, "Theologically, this means for me that I cannot regard cancer as evil, though it caused suffering and death for me and someone I love. Cancer is simply a manifestation of the very same processes involved in evolution" (p. 114). Peters simply describes "what is" and then finds ways to live in the face of that reality with hope and grace. He does not offer pious answers to the tragic problems that illness and suffering bring.

Like those whose religious impulses require them to deny the reality of death, health-care professionals are sometimes the last ones to come to terms with the finality of death. In the practice of modern medicine, death

often is viewed as something that must be overcome at all costs, both personal and financial. In the affluent culture of the West, we try to find ways to defeat death, to prolong life solely for its own sake, and to deny our place within the natural world. We deny not only our own personal limits but also the limits of what medicine can do. Peters reminds us that we are mortal and finite. We can't cure death or conquer it. But we can comfort those who are afraid, provide relief from suffering, and offer love to those whose immediate journey moves them from life to death.

As those in the medical profession well know, making decisions about life and death are usually not easy. They are fraught with ambiguity and can be extremely painful for those involved. Peters's insights offer a strategy. When we concentrate on life simply for its own sake, we forget that its value is not only intrinsic but also instrumental and finally valuable for how it contributes to transformation of the old to the new. We seek not only to live but also to live well. And this living well has an ethical dimension. The peril of life for this planet is the backdrop for Peters's concerns. Those making ethical decisions would, according to him, have a moral responsibility to look beyond the short-term consequences. The traditional rule-based ethics for medical professionals must be redefined and set within the broader worldview that Peters calls the "big self," a social-ecological-evolutionary self. Epistemology and ethics become partners within the ecological system.

Peters uses the language of transformation to describe the personal crisis he went through when his wife died from cancer. Transformation occurs when one's intellectual and spiritual framework is integrated with their feelings and actions (p. 113). Peters learns to love and be loved in ways he never thought were possible. "I do not wish these experiences on anyone. But I know that when life goes, love can flourish. I know that love is more important than life" (p. 117). Life is not simply a biological process (though it is that); more important, life is about love for self and other.

Spiritual transformation happens when we realize that death is part of life and that from life and death love can grow and flourish. How one lives in the moment, how one faces the future with openness and freedom, and how one loves and can be loved shapes the spiritual life. Spiritual transformation occurs when one lives in the present moment in order to be of service to the neighbor (including all of creation). Peters comments about how we ought to "seek our sacred center—a calm state of being fully awake in the present moment to all that is within and outside ourselves, a state of compassion for all within and outside, and a state of self-leadership that guides us to live more harmoniously with other people, and the rest of the world" (p. 97). As Peters and his wife shared their lives through her death, they were both transformed by their love for each other.

One finds hope and love in the middle of death and suffering. The universe seems to be made in such a way that one cannot separate creation

from destruction, life from death. Death is just as natural as life, sickness as natural as health. What matters is how we respond to these events. Death is tragic, but death also opens up new possibilities for life. Part of the process of spiritual transformation is being open to new opportunities that come from death and finitude. Peters comments: "From the perspective of a naturalistic, evolutionary biology, one can say that at the heart of human life and in the midst of death the power of love can become manifest. Yet there is more. It also seems that love can die, only to be born again, transformed into new, expanding love" (p. 119). Death and life are partners in the dance of the sacred.

For Karl Peters, being open to and moved by love is key to understanding what it means to be spiritually transformed. At the heart of this creative transformation is love for others, self, and the earth/universe. This is love is not some sort of sappy warm feeling about the earth; it is an experience of the risks that accompany transformation, of the power of creative change. Love brings with it both gift and responsibility. When we are changed by the one we love, we respond in new life-giving ways. This book reminds us that beyond life and death is the power of transformative love.

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