

## *Editorials*

### CULTURE IS WHERE IT HAPPENS

In the June 2005 issue of *Zygon*, several authors (William Schweiker, Barbara Strassberg, Lluís Oviedo, and Norbert Samuelson) reminded us that understanding culture is essential if we are to deal adequately with either religion or science or the relations between the two. This is in itself an insight that scientific knowledge imposes on us. Without going into the details, the relevant sciences demonstrate that nothing human takes place apart from culture. We are intrinsically cultural creatures in that our brains have made culture possible and our survival depends on it. The world around us was not created by culture, but all of our understandings and interactions with that world are mediated through our culture. Even though biological heredity plays a role in enabling culture, the specific character of culture as it appears in any individual or society is acquired by imitation, training, and learning in interaction with other human beings. Our biology bestows the capability for language, for example, but it is culture that determines which particular languages we speak.

In the modern era, we have often focused on culture as if the natural world were irrelevant, subsuming nature under culture and human history. Today this modernist rupture of nature and culture is recognized as untenable. For some time now, the challenge has been to understand on the contrary how culture is subsumed within nature and its evolution. Culture does not stand over against nature; it is a phenomenon within nature. We now have a far better sense of how evolution has made culture an intrinsic element of our humanness and continues to shape it. Over our forty years, *Zygon* authors have made this point many times and in different ways.

Religion, science, philosophy, and morality, to mention only a few relevant elements of life, all are cultural realities. They unfold as elements of culture and are inseparable from it. Consequently, it is an error of the first magnitude to reflect on any of these elements as if they could be abstracted from their culture. It is true that we must preserve the integrity of religion as well as of science; we cannot countenance a reductionism that interprets religion, science, and morality as nothing but pawns in the play of nature

and other forces, such as economics, politics, and ethnicity. On the other hand, we cannot extricate any single element from its embeddedness in nature and the rest of culture. Whatever meaning and significance religion, science, and morality have are embodied and conveyed as elements of culture. We can draw a number of important implications from this recognition of cultural entanglement.

First, the cultural matrix in which religion and science are embedded is a dynamic matrix. Religion and theology in particular are often discussed as if they were both monolithic and unchanging. As a result, judgments are made that simply do not take into account the dynamic at work in the last two centuries of religious development and conceptual thinking. Similarly, scientific views often are presented as if there were no diversity of perspective and emphasis among scientists.

Second, culture itself is constituted by a constellation of elements that continually evolve and impact each other. Barbara Strassberg has provided detailed elaboration of this concept of culture. She focuses on five constituent elements: magic, religion, science, technology, and ethics. The point is that while these elements assume different forms and positions relative to one another, none of them ever completely disappears, and they never cease to impact each other and the cultural matrix as a whole. The ideology of the nineteenth century, epitomized by Auguste Comte, is still prominent in much discussion. Comte predicted that scientific thinking would displace both magic and religion; his views surface in a widespread opinion that secularism will drive out magic and religion. Sometimes this position is labeled as *modernist* or as the *secularization hypothesis*. This ideology cannot deal with the present fact that science, magic, and religion are all flourishing in the twenty-first century. The ideology also flies in the face of much social scientific research. Each of these elements has repositioned itself, to be sure, within the cultural matrix, and their reciprocal impacts have taken different directions. Any view that was invested in an unchanging essential nature of religion, science, or magic—not to mention of ethics and technology—has proven itself to be inadequate and unhelpful.

Strassberg's proposal suggests a new model for relating science and religion. Nearly all of the prominent models presently propounded assume views of science and religion that are far too abstract, static, and unresponsive to the actual history of the relations between them. They also fail to take into account that religion and science never encounter each other in the abstract but rather in the context of the cultural and ethical challenges that face society at any given moment. Consider the discussion of conflict between religion and science. Conflict is real, to be sure, but it is the conflict between siblings who share both history and social location. Unless we take this cultural kinship into account, we cannot understand how, for example, fundamentalist societies (generally considered to be "enemies"

of science) encourage, support, and employ thousands of their citizens who choose vocations in science.

Science and religion both have had reason to distrust cultural studies. It has seemed, sometimes rightly so, that cultural studies aim only at “debunking.” At least since 1800, religion frequently has been debunked by cultural analyses. Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud are among the great formative debunkers who dissolved religion into the soup of sociological, psychological, political, and economic processes. More recently, scientists have begun to feel the same kinds of debunking forces.

It is a grave error to reject the cultural studies because of these debunking possibilities, however. For one thing, the debunking is not all wrong. Both religion and science have on occasion become the pawns of society, sometimes with terrible consequences. More important, I would argue, the significance and meaning of religion and science are inseparable from their cultural embodiments. There is no abstract meaning of either science or religion apart from its concrete incarnated existence. The meaning of religion cannot be divorced from the actuality that it has on occasion sacralized certain social forms and intentions that resulted in racism or war. Equally, science has no meaning that can be sundered from the fact that it provides the knowledge of nature that society desires in order to accomplish its aims of the moment, even when those aims are degrading. There is more than this to both religion and science, but that “something more” cannot be elaborated in an abstract purity that denies the cultural embodiments that constitute them.

In another mode, those discussions that set science and religion opposite each other, as irreconcilable realities, fail to take account of the embodied reality that hundreds of thousands of scientists today are devout adherents of the world’s religions. Contrariwise, the argument that there is no *fundamental* incompatibility between religion and science comes up hard against the concrete reality that large numbers of our most brilliant scientists and other members of the intelligentsia take that incompatibility as a basic assumption.

The proposed model for relating religion and science (and other elements of culture) may be termed a *dynamic cultural interactionist model*. This model makes the dialogue between religion and science more complex and more ambiguous; it also requires that history and the social sciences be brought into the discussion in a prominent way. As a result, we may have to settle for fewer grand hypotheses about religion and science, and we will have to live with ambiguity. The payoff, however, is that we will have a truer picture of the interaction between what Alfred North Whitehead called the two most powerful forces of human history. This payoff should be enriching for both science and religion.

This journal will not endorse any particular model for understanding the yoking of religion and science, but its pages will present in the future

more of the culturally informed studies and interpretations of this terrain that *Zygon* has inhabited for forty years. Several of the articles in this issue express at least indirectly how cultural embeddedness shapes their discussions. In a guest editorial, Don Browning, who has recently assumed the co-chairmanship (with Solomon Katz) of the *Zygon* Joint Publication Board, states his own hopes for the journal as it assesses its goals in this anniversary year. In his summons that *Zygon* bring religious tradition and science to bear upon “the emerging worldwide challenges confronting societies on the boundary between biotechnology and tradition, modernity and contemporary expressions of religion,” he echoes this concern that our work be sensitive to the cultural context and accountable to it.

The Fortieth Anniversary Symposium continues. Ursula King (theology) calls for an approach to the religion-science dialogue that moves “away from an adversarial, exclusionary spirit to a more collaborative and communicative framework.” She suggests that we “build an altogether new Athens and Jerusalem.” A contextual approach is urged by Willem Drees (physics, theology) that acknowledges that “religion and science” takes on different meanings in different situations. Cognitive scientist E. Thomas Lawson demonstrates how deeply cognitive science can impact our perspectives on religion and science, particularly in the analysis of folk theory. Fatima Agha Al-Hayani (Islamic law and philosophy) provides a helpful interpretation of past history and future possibilities for the interaction of Islam with science. Alan Padgett (philosophy of religion) urges us to enlarge the religion-science dialogue with more attention to technology and ethics; his article shows why such an enlargement is necessary. Theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg offers a summary view of why he sees “no reason for assuming a fundamental conflict between science and religion.”

In the second section, on science and spirituality, religious studies scholars David Hay and Pawel Socha present their thesis that spirituality is a natural phenomenon, while Ellen Goldberg (comparative religion) analyzes in detail how cognitive science can carry on conversation with hathayoga. A symposium follows on Karl Peters's book *Dancing with the Sacred*. In conversation with philosopher Charley Hardwick and religious studies scholars Ann Pederson and Gregory Peterson, Peters continues to follow what he calls a “narrative, confessional mode of writing.” This symposium demonstrates that such an approach provides rich resources for both practical and theoretical issues.

The work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Paul Tillich, and John Haught takes center stage in the fourth section. Harold Morowitz (biophysics), James Salmon, S.J. (chemistry, theology), and Nicole Schmitz-Moormann (Teilhard studies) take up one of Teilhard's most provocative and controversial ideas, “the two energies,” and explore its scientific and theological implications. Paul Carr (physics) sees a “theology for evolution” in the work of Haught, Tillich, and Teilhard; Michael DeLashmutt compares the

methods of Teilhard and Tillich; James Huchingson throws light on Tillich's and Teilhard's thinking about the distinction between organic and inorganic.

The issue closes with three articles. Matthew Orr (biology) picks up threads of a previous *Zygon* discussion of whether or not "nature is enough." He brings the poetry of Robert Frost to bear on that question and concludes that the answer "is in the eye of the beholder." Biologist Rudolf Brun deals in depth with E. O. Wilson's emphasis on the conflict between transcendentalism and empiricism; Brun argues that the two are not mutually exclusive. Edgar Towne (theology) proves himself a helpful guide through the terrain of panentheism, particularly as that concept is discussed in a recent book of essays on the subject.

I invite the reader not only to delve deeply into the fare presented here but also to write a commentary on the views presented in this editorial—such are always welcome!

—Philip Hefner