ARE SCIENCE AND HUMANISM SUITED TO ENTER THE ANCIENT QUEST OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY? A RESPONSE TO LLUÍS OVIEDO

by Vítor Westhelle

Abstract. This response reverses the title of Lluís Oviedo's essay (2006) while retaining the structure. In the pendulum swing between science and humanism, theology finds its uniqueness not in refuting either but in subverting them: subverting the scientific quest for certainty without denying its pursuit, and subverting the humanist quest for the unique dignity of the human by reducing it to the most despoiled creature, yet finding in it the presence of the divine. Theological pursuit is about reason and its limits, about brokenness and glory in it. Yet the engagement is unavoidable, for without the scientific pursuit of certainty, incompleteness could never be established; without the humanist search for the uniqueness of the human, its admixed and impure character would not be recognized. The concept of hybridity tries to convey that and is presented in three instantiations: the conflation of the human with machine (cyborg), of humans and other animals (oncomouse), and of the human and the divine. Following these ontological cases of hybridity, at the epistemological level theology becomes hybrid "science" in search of the *mythos* in the midst of *logos*, and conversely it is hybrid humanism, for it locates God in the greatest depravity of mammalian existence.

Keywords: created co-creator; cyborg; Donna Haraway; Philip Hefner; humanism; hybridity; *logos*, *mythos*, oncomouse; Lluís Oviedo; science; theology.

Discourse is not life: its time is not your time; in it, you will not be reconciled to death; you may have killed God beneath the weight of all you have said; but don't imagine that, with all that you are saying, you will make a man that will live longer than he. —*Foucault 1972, 211*

Vítor Westhelle is Professor of Systematic Theology at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1100 East 55th Street, Chicago, IL 60615-5199.

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What science? What humanism? Since the Enlightenment with its manifold expressions—the British with empirical realism reigning over the sciences, the French with its political defiance of autarchies, and the German with its skeptical attitude toward anything that reason could not corroborate—the debate between science and humanism, as Lluís Oviedo describes in his article (2006), has indeed been the topic of profound and distressing discussion. And in the spectrum of allegiance, theology has oscillated as far as it could to either side and not rarely, as the recent "radical orthodoxy" movement has magnified, evaded the discussion altogether, or so it claimed.

Ironically the debate has been the result of the most successful scientific advances in evolutionary biology since the middle of the nineteenth century that implanted in our minds the notion of a chain of being, an ecological pyramid that moves from the abiotic to the biotic and culminates in the animal kingdom of which humans are the crown. At least for late modernity it was the most advanced biological science that created in us the image of the human as the apex of all that nature finally aimed at. Humans have been seen as the end of the evolutionary process—in the sense of *telos*, culmination. But there is a sarcasm in all of this, because this is also what has been denounced as the end of the human—in the sense of *eschaton*, termination, or, as some recent philosophers have phrased it, the death or end of the human (Derrida 1982, 109ff.).

Theologically the question about human uniqueness is not so new as in the modern debate that Oviedo addresses. It can be traced back to an old debate that Oviedo's article hints at in a single paragraph on the split between Christian theologians and philosophers regarding the existence of the soul. It seems to me that the question is concerned not so much with authenticity as with our inheritance. In other words, it is less about what we are and more about what led us to become the humans that have been able to name our own distinctiveness as such. This is the merit of Professor Oviedo's essay, to name the fact that the debate is about human distinctiveness—whether one calls it soul, the image of God, or any other way of phrasing it.

The early church debated whether souls were transmitted from generation to generation, giving the soul an ontological origin, or whether they were implanted at a certain point in the gestation of the fetus as a special divine dispensation. The first position was called traducianism, the second creationism (which has nothing to do with the contemporary fundamentalist use of the term). So the question is not whether there is something called soul but whether what we call soul is an endowed characteristic of the species or a special dispensation of God on one type of mammal. Hence the question is really about God and God's relation to the whole of creation, to express it in radical theological language. While traducianism flirts with the idea of a *deus ex machina*, creationism overrates what is at

stake about humans. Like a change of paradigm in the sciences, or as in a change of perspective produced in a Renaissance painting, the challenge is to think otherwise as to our understanding of the human condition.

I want to suggest an inversion of the lead question in Oviedo's article. The question would then be whether science and secular humanism are really able to address the human condition in its depth, which in plain theological language we call sinfulness. The reality and awareness of it is what makes us not superior but at the very least unique. This is what engenders in us a craving for our niches in the midst of a world Christians have called creation. However, this way of phrasing it gives it a rather pessimistic tone. My claim is that what makes humans human is simultaneously their most depraved condition among all creatures and the fact that the Christian faith states that it is as a human, and a condemned criminal who was executed by the legal authorities, that God rejoins all of God's creation, a point that many in the apophatic tradition in theology have insisted on and that now seems to run its own independent course, but not necessarily in opposition to what science aims at and humanism strives for.

While reversing the normal conception of humans being la crème de la crème in the evolutionary order, this simultaneously also asserts that humans—"mere" humans, as Athanasius phrased it in the early years of the fourth century—have been the locus of the very embodiment of God. Oscillating between science and humanism, theology finds its uniqueness not in refuting either but in subverting them—subverting the scientific quest for certainty without denying its pursuit and subverting the humanist quest of the unique dignity of the human by reducing it to the lowest yet finding in it the presence of God. As far as science is concerned, theology is interested in its uncertainties and its incompleteness. As for humanism, theology is keen in looking into where its anthropology loses a sense of a pristine identity of what makes the human. The theological engagement with science is ever more demanding with the need to find where its quest for certainty falters, where the *mythos* is at work, while being overwritten by *logos*. Humanists' quest for human uniqueness challenges theology to expose its impurity and pollution while revealing in it the indwelling of the divine. It is about reason and its limits, about brokenness and glory in it. But the engagement is unavoidable, for without the pursuit of certainty, incompleteness could never be established; without the search for the uniqueness of the human, its admixed and impure character would not be recognized.

What might convey my argument is the concept of hybridity. Theology is a hybrid "science," insofar as it searches for the myth in the midst of reason, and it is hybrid humanism, for it locates God in the greatest depravity of mammalian existence. The word *hybridity* has migrated from its original use in genetics to ethnocultural studies, and it is not new. Latin

antiquity used it to describe not only an offspring of different animal species but also children begotten by a Roman man and a foreign woman or by a freeman and a slave. In theology only recently has it become a significant issue of discussion. In fact, since the great syncretism of the first five centuries of Christian endurance until the twentieth century, Christianity, at least in the West, only solidified its own sameness. In *The Christian Faith* (*Glaubenslehre*), the monumental document that opens the door to the history of modern Protestant theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher gives the most telling account of Western Christian doctrinal purity. For him, "new heresies no longer arise, now that the church recruits itself out of its own resources; and the influence of alien faiths on the frontier and in the mission-field of the Church must be reckoned at zero." And then the great Berliner adds condescendingly, "there may long remain in the piety of the new converts a great deal which has crept in from their religious affections of former times, and which, if it came to clear consciousness and were expressed as doctrine, would be recognized as heretical" (Schleiermacher 1960, 96).

The Reformation and a cascade of other ecclesial schisms were hardly more than caste affairs, an inside group-selection. H. Richard Niebuhr's chastising of denominationalism notwithstanding, that it ensued from multiple schisms in the Western church, is not really a major theological issue in itself. It is hardly more significant than a symptom of a malady at the very core of Christianity itself. This symptom evades the embarrassing hybrid impurity that is central to Christianity.[1] To use an expression coined by Jacques Derrida (1995), this evasion is an archival malady (*mal d'archive*): the feverish recruitment of the past to justify the present. It is the search for a genealogy to establish a lineage. No better example can be given than Matthias Flacius Illyricus, who in the name of true Lutheranism (gnesio-Lutheranism) published the Magdeburg Centuria, a collection of volumes that covered all the centuries of Christian history up to the Reformation, which attempted to show that Lutheranism was the true expression of the non-adulterated and unbroken Christian faith throughout the ages. However, archives conceal surprises. We might find dead ends rendering a genealogy irretrievable or discover that the search for a pristine spring finds only a polluted puddle.

Origins can be very embarrassing. And the embarrassment results not only from debasement but also from impurity. They fail to justify the present, so we conceal them. In Jewish theology, much more than Genesis 3 (which Augustine inscribed as the master narrative for the human condition for Western Christianity), it was Genesis 6 that accounts for human wickedness due to the intermingling of the sons of God with the daughters of humanity, who bore children to them. It is worth noticing that this narrative is the actual template for the account of Mary's pregnancy in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke in the New Testament. In these accounts

Jesus is not the Pauline second Adam, the eternal logos made flesh of John, or the anointed Galilean man of Mark but the offspring of the second instance we hear in the Jewish-Christian tradition of divinities impregnating women. Nietzsche called the death of God "Christianity's stroke of genius," and Ernst Käsemann once remarked that if there was a historical proof of Christianity, it was that no one would have thought about grounding a religion in the shameful crucifixion of its founder. These are remarkable comments from very different ideological sources, but Mary's bearing of God (*theotokos*) is against this background of impurity as disturbing as it is puzzling and amazing.

Hybridity is an attempt to simultaneously affirm union and not surrender difference. Building on the foundations of the insights that have come out of cultural, anthropological, and theological reappropriations of *mestizaje* (miscegenation) and of syncretism, concerns have been raised and theoretical efforts developed to address issues that have not yet been addressed explicitly either by the *mestizaje* or by the syncretistic approach. In addition to the ethnic miscegenation that *mestizaje* tackled and the cultural and religious intermingling that syncretism was able to address, theories of hybridity encompass other dimensions. The blurring of the line that divides the natural from the artificial is one of them. What follows offers an insightful example of this particular dimension that concerns theology's engagement with humanism.

Donna Haraway, a historian of science at the University of California at Santa Cruz, trained as a molecular biologist and self-proclaimed theologian, wrote an article in 1985 known as the Cyborg Manifesto. Cyborgs are organisms that have physiological and mental processes aided or controlled by mechanical and/or electronic devices. What was already common in science fiction, at least since Frankenstein, she turned into a strong philosophical claim, namely, that humans as well as other organisms have been so conditioned and shaped by technology and artificial apparatuses that it is impossible and utterly idealistic to speak of human nature apart from technical, artificial, and cybernetic devices that are part and parcel of our existence and survival.

> It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine. . . . Insofar as we know ourselves, . . . we find ourselves to be cyborgs, hybrids, mosaics, chimeras. Biological organisms have become biotic systems. . . . There is no fundamental ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic. (Haraway 1991, 177f.)

Cybernetic devices operate both indirectly and directly. Indirectly and externally they work through cultural and environmental means from which we cannot dissociate ourselves, like the tools we depend on, electrical gadgets, transportation, and cyberspace communication (the Amish community has a Web page!). Internally and directly they operate in a strict biological sense: drugs, surgeries, implants, prostheses, artificial organs,

pacemakers, joint replacements, prophylactics, in vitro fertilization, and cloning. We are cyborgs, Haraway claims; we have crossed the boundary, transgressed and blurred the line that divides a presumed pristine nature from technology, the natural from the artificial. By overcoming this basic anthropological binarism other binary structures crumble, as in gender differentiation, for instance. We are cyborgs and have been so for a long time, only now it has reached such proportions that we can name it.

A theological argument for this cyborgian form of hybridization is developed in the work of Philip Hefner and his associates at the Zygon Center for Religion and Science in Chicago. The theological significance of this work is to reclaim and "update" for contemporary theology the notion of the *imago dei* in the tradition that can be traced back to Irenaeus's (second century C.E.) understanding of the human in the process of growing up to full maturity. The capability to grow up in God's providence is what *imago dei* ultimately means, even if our maturity, our likeness (*similitudo*) to God, has been originally lost. From this particular tradition of interpreting *imago dei*, Hefner claims that human beings are "created co-creators" (Hefner 1984, 325–28; 1993). And this capability of co-creating is the endowment of God's *imago* to humanity. This would account for the emergence of the cyborg. Hence the cyborg is the intended prospective image of God. It is not just the product of human ingenuity but is rather our own self-generation, or *autopoiesis*. The *imago* is de-essentialized, it is not some*thing* we have inherited (our rational capacity, physical appearance, moral disposition, or psychological uniqueness) but the capability of life self-generating itself in the process of transgressing boundaries between the humans and machine, and also between humans and other creatures.

In spite of this positive anthropology, there is not a necessary evolution toward an increasing goodness and perfection. As Haraway put it, "a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines." But, she continues, from another "perspective, a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, about the final abstraction embodied in a Star Wars apocalypse waged in the name of defense . . . in a masculinist orgy of war [and she wrote this long before the Iraq War]. . . . [The point] is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities" (Haraway 1991, 176). "Dangerous possibilities," she names it elsewhere.

There is indeed always the demonic, or the "many-headed monsters," as Haraway names it. The demonic, in the line of Paul Tillich's interpretation of demonry, is the good turned upon itself (it echoes Luther's *incurvatus in se ipsum*) (Tillich 1936, 77 ff.). But it is also the case that technology, in this perspective, is not essentially demonized. The point is to recognize in the cyborgs the magnification of the options between promise and disaster. Such interpretation of the *imago dei* lends a theological grounding for

this mode of hybridization in which the divide between the natural and the artificial is transgressed without romanticizing pristine nature or demonizing technology.

Another dimension of hybridity questions the divide between humans and other animals. More and more of their interconnectedness is coming to the forefront, as the genome project has shown by revealing the little difference in the genetic mapping of humans in comparison to some other creatures, who are not only amazingly similar to us but often hold the key to our survival. Many humans are recipients of organs or tissue of other mammals such as pigs. But what we are talking about here in the theological interface between science and humanism is our connection with mice.

If the cyborg transgresses the line between the natural and the artificial, the Onco Mouse questions the presumed divide between humans and nonhuman nature, and in a very radical way. (The very word *oncomouse* is already an orthographic hybrid that mixes together the Greek prefix *onko*, which means mass or tumor, and the old English word *mus*, which comes possibly from the Latin *mus*, meaning rat or mouse.) The Onco Mouse is the name given to laboratory mice that undergo transgenic operations and are infected with an activated oncogene that will produce cancerogenesis in order to be used in experiments in the attempt to find treatment for different sorts of human cancer. The Onco Mouse has become a symbol for human immersion in the rest of nature to the point that a rodent that we trap and kill in our homes may hold the key to the survival of many humans if not eventually the species. As a symbol it just heightens the growing awareness not only of our interdependence with the rest of nature but our utter immersion and dependence on it. Nature carries our genes; it is us. Nature provides not only for our maintenance (as in food, water, and shelter) but even more for our survival and regeneration insofar as we are *in* it, in the strongest, even genetic sense of it.

I have already suggested the theological implications of what the Onco Mouse symbolizes. Consider what in the fourth century Athanasius attested to by reverting to the way we now conceive the chain of being that sets the humans at the top of natural evolution. In his work "On the Incarnation" he says in one of the most celebrated texts of the early church: "Now, if they ask, Why then did He not appear by means of other and nobler parts of creation, and use some nobler instruments, as the sun, or stars, or fire, or air, instead of a man merely? let them know that the Lord came not to make a display, but to heal and teach those who are suffering . . . nothing in creation had gone astray with regard to their notions of God, save man only" (Athanasius 1954, 97).

What this form of hybridity represents is that God's presence in a human goes to such depths of depravity as to encompass the whole of creation, the cosmos, from the galaxies to mice, and even way down to humans, for, as Gregory Nazianzen phrased it, "what is not assumed is not redeemed."

Or, in the words of the fifth-century Christian poet Cajus Caelius Sedulius of Achaia, *carne carnem liberans*: the flesh is liberated through and by the flesh (Luther 1923, 150). *Cum grano salis*: mice save humans.

All of these dimensions of hybridity have profound theological implications. But here I want to lift up a further dimension that not only has implications for theology but also is theologically foundational in its very nonfoundational hybridity. I am referring to postcolonial consciousness' criticism of the assumption that a clear dividing line can be drawn between high and low culture, between accepted or hegemonic regimes of truth and those that do not meet the standards of the former, and are thus excluded and marginalized, but have the power of "insurrection" (Foucault 1980, 81), disturbing those régimes. As Homi Bhabha formulated it, "Hybridity is not a *problem* of genealogy or identity between two *different* cultures which can then be resolved as an issue of cultural relativism. Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and strange the basis of its authority" (Bhabha 1994, 114).

Here the distinctiveness of hybridity lies in the crossing and displacing of different cultural, semantic, economic, ethnic, or social spheres. What is crucial for hybridity is the act of transgressing these domains and not the unifying, blending, binary coupling, or assembling of different entities. Any one can be a hybrid, as it does not depend on any essential endowment, be it racial, cultural, ethnic, social, or any other. Hybrids transgress. They are not beholden to any exclusive constituency. However, they do not surrender their own selves in the transgressive roles they play. If they would, they would egress existence as such and be accessible only in the tradition of the memory of the victims, of which we have plenty. They can pretend an identity which is not false but is intentionally and deceptively always something else, has another tincture, *dis-tinct*.

I cannot hold a candle with any example of such a hybrid tactic to the one offered by Luke in the Acts 17 account of Paul's speech at the Areopagus, in Athens, proclaiming to know the unknown god of their worship to be the one who became a man that was killed. That is, the identity of the unknown was revealed only to be in the same act displaced. What Paul did in the "temple" of the most advanced science known at the time was to call for a humanism that affirmed the greatest of the human manifested in an executed criminal.

This last dimension of hybridity, which transgresses the line that divides the high and the low, wisdom and madness, power and weakness (1 Corinthians 1), the outer and the inner (Derrida called it "insideoutness"), offers the most compelling reason for the hybrid character of Christian "identity." That the highest gives itself to the lowest and is with it inseparable is properly called a gift, for it cannot enter an economy of exchange or re-

turn, which is always a negotiation between two values (*do, ut des*). This divine economy is the transgression of all the rules of our economy, even as we try to define divine economy.

Hybridity is a helpful construction that may serve theology in its elusive search of a language to convey that which ultimately cannot be reduced to words. I conclude this response to Oviedo's question with the literary genre that most struggles with this search for language. In his long poem "The Book of Monastic Life," Rainer Maria Rilke approaches the hybrid irresolution between identity and nonidentity with these words:

> YOUR very first word was: Light:
> Thus made was time. Then silent you were
> long.
>
> Your second word became flesh
> and distress
> (darkly we are submerged in his growling)
> and again your face is pondering.
>
> Yet your third
> I want not. (Rilke 1997, 227)

The Word that creates, while science aims at decoding it, the Word that communicates, while humanism celebrates it, entails the premonition of a third that does not come, that the poet does not want, but it is here in our midst as precisely as the silence he fears and desires ("Yet your third I want not"). The third the poet averts, but has in the moment he denies it, is the hybrid *tertium datur* (a third option), yet in the polluted *sub contraria specie* (under its opposite) of the *non daretur* (not given). It is the word that creates, and it is simultaneously the word in the putrefying flesh.

Note

1. This is arguably the case in any religion, but I am concerned here in defining its theological roots in Christianity.

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