

NEEDED: MODEST WITNESSES AND SCHOLARS

by *Ann Milliken Pederson*

The engagement between religion and science is vulnerable to the same problems as the cultures it embodies have. Keith Ward in his recent book *God: A Guide for the Perplexed* mourns the loss of imagination and experience of transcendence in Western culture and particularly in the practice of religion. “Why is this?” he asks. “I think it is partly because people have come to take the traditional images of God too literally. In an age where science is the queen of the academy, it is widely thought that the literal, the comfortable, and weighable real, is the true, and the only form of truth” (Ward 2005, 2). I could not have more accurately diagnosed our cultural illness whose symptoms are manifest in the literal, the comfortable, the weighable, and the marketable. We have reduced our vision of “the more” to the less. Whether in the recent works of Richard Dawkins or other scientists whose only form of truth seems to be a kind of literalism or reductionism, or in the voices of scientific creationists, subtlety, nuance, and the imaginative are hard to find. Blogs, editorials, and media sound bytes are replete with religiously warring factions of those who say a lot and listen little.

While those of us currently involved in the academic engagement of religion and science like to think we are beyond such factions, my fear is that we are as much a part of our cultural milieu as are the voices in local newspaper editorials. With a pinched and narrow worldview comes a pinched and narrow dialogue. The future of the engagement between religion and science must be just the opposite—the dialogue must always be receptive to that which stretches, expands, and challenges. That, however, is not an easy task, for such stretching and expanding requires that we first listen carefully and then respond with depth and insight, and such listening and responding requires expanding our repertoire beyond the voices of the academy.

Although much has been accomplished in the academic arena of religion and science, the range of voices is limited, as Philip Hefner notes in

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his March 2007 editorial. Biology labs in senior high schools or Bible studies in college dormitories often are the places where the conversations can matter the most. For many in our culture, the issues raised by science and religion are spiritual ones. Indeed, one could just keep track of the editorials in local, regional, and national newspapers to see what folks are concerned about. I am not advocating that the carefully disciplined practices of scholarship in the academy be abandoned. On the contrary, rigorous scholarship implies that one must read one's audience as broadly as possible. Disciplined scholars (including myself and other readers of *Zygon*) are morally bound to and responsible for what they say and write. If we are to widen the audience and engage a broader public, we must realize that we are the public and that our own voice is always moderated and amplified by those around us. This seems self-evident. But when we really look at what we want to accomplish in this dialogue between religion and science we need to look not only to the academy but also, and I believe more importantly, to the public square where voices are exchanged about issues that are profoundly essential. We also must search for those voices that are never heard or never seem to matter. They are vital to the well-being of our lives as a human race and to the survival of our planet as a habitable place. Fundamentally, such issues are at the spiritual heart of what it means to be human.

Those of us involved in the engagement between religion and science can expand the dialogue in several ways. We can (1) become "modest witnesses" about how we live together on this planet in moral, spiritual, and practical ways and (2) become even more critically self-aware as scholars whose words and works always need to be accountable to this arena of life that involves not only human beings but also countless forms of non-human life.

I find the works of Donna Haraway and Ward to be useful conversation partners to develop these notions of being modest witnesses and modest scholars. Modesty is not a popular word in a culture that flaunts its arrogance across the globe. And yet, a good dose of down-to-earthiness might be just the antidote to the "ivory tower" protection that many use as an excuse to not ground this dialogue. Haraway explains her concept of being a modest witness: "Witnessing is seeing; attesting; standing publicly accountable for, and psychically vulnerable to, one's visions and representations. Witnessing is a collective limited practice that depends on the constructed and never finished credibility of those who do it, all of whom are mortal, fallible, and fraught with the consequences of unconscious and disowned desires and fears." Those involved in the religion-science dialogue need to acknowledge that the engagement is constructed from practices, from encounters between those who are mortal and fallible and who have "unconscious and disowned desires and fears" (Haraway 1993, 267). This seems painfully obvious, but I find that much of what happens in the

dialogue between religion and science is just the opposite in people's minds: "religion" and "science" are seen as abstractions occurring apart from the lives of those who practice their disciplines. When we actually own up to what we believe and study, we might take responsibility for it in different ways. Paying attention to details, to histories, to local myths and stories requires an openness and a willingness to listen. Listening and paying attention may in fact be the first requirements to being a modest witness. Being accountable to and for our own worldviews and presuppositions means, first of all, being aware of them. Again, this seems painfully obvious. And yet, it must not be so, because the academic engagement between religion and science still seems limited in depth, width, and breadth.

As we attend to becoming modest witnesses, we also become modest scholars. What it means to be a modest scholar is summarized marvelously by Ward:

What we can realistically hope for is to avoid the crudest misunderstandings of the beliefs of the others, and to see the uncertainties and unclearities of our own beliefs. We might also hope to obtain more clarity about the beliefs to which we are most fundamentally committed. While any reflective human belief must be to some extent exploratory and provisional, there will nevertheless be some beliefs we cannot renounce without renouncing our own integrity. To discover what these are, and to formulate them more sensitively and judiciously, is one goal of philosophical reflection. (Ward 2005, 241)

This should be our task and responsibility as scholars.

Currently, I receive daily e-mails about legislation pending in South Dakota about beginnings and endings of life. The legislative bills are bogged down with political and religious wars. As I speak with physicians and other health-care workers who have attended legislative sessions, I realize that health-care bills get bogged down often because of legislators' ignorance and arrogance. This combination is lethal in the legislature and surely as well for those of us in the academy. Ignorance and arrogance when combined create cultural chaos and fear. We are living in a culture marked by such fears and chaos, and when faced with our own ignorance we flaunt our opinions with arrogance.

Being a modest witness and scholar invites us to practice just the opposite—to listen to others, to attend to our limits, to acknowledge our fears. When all become modest witnesses, the religion-science dialogue changes and expands to include a wider audience. Then what is painfully obvious can be transformed into that which is creatively engaging.

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