

Editorial

SCIENCE AND THE BIG QUESTIONS

Science is inseparable from the really big questions of human existence—at least in the general discussion carried on in personal conversation, classroom, and the media. It is sometimes argued that it is not appropriate to address science in the framework of these large human questions. Science, so the thinking goes, deals with discrete questions about natural processes; it is the epitome of human rationality; it is an intrusion to lay big questions on science, because such questions are more appropriate to religion and metaphysics. To the contrary, argues an opposing view, the results of scientific research and the worldviews that follow from that research raise perennial issues so forcefully and poignantly that withholding questions is unnatural and even inhuman. These questions seem to be inherent to science, and they are so important for so many that it is futile to try to suppress them. In the big questions, science, religion, and metaphysics meet each other.

The big questions are all about human destiny—the question that has preoccupied us for millennia, perhaps as far back in time as the history of the human species itself. Issues of human destiny are the stuff of the great myths, of philosophy, and of literature, as well as the primary focus of the religious traditions. The *Gilgamesh*, perhaps the oldest surviving narrative we know, dating from the early years of the third millennium before the Common Era, centers on the hero's question, "What is my life about? Why must I and my closest friends die?" The answer comes back to him: "Because that's the way it is for humans, inexorably. Be glad for what you have and enjoy the life that has been granted you" (Mitchell 2004).

Classicist Simon Goldhill (2004) has summarized the great struggle of the ancient Greek tragedians and philosophers as engagement with the basic questions: "Who do you think you are?" "What do you think should happen?" "Where do you think you come from?" Goldhill believes that we still wrestle with these issues. The nineteenth-century artist Paul Gauguin seemed to echo this assessment when he titled a monumental painting with these questions: "Where do we come from?" "What are we?" "Where are we going?" He considered this to be his greatest work.

These perennial questions are posed for us today by the sciences, and they are urgent for many people. The cosmological and evolutionary sciences raise the questions of where we come from and where we are going in more complex and more serious form than that posed in Darwin's time by Thomas Huxley when he quipped that we are descended from apes. Cosmologists have on occasion said that we are pawns in a meaningless process that is headed toward cold-storage death, and they have also said on other occasions that the universe is fine-tuned for human life, as if we are the result of a cosmic teleology. "Who do you think you are?" is posed by all of the sciences that focus on human nature. Current work in the cognitive sciences, for example, probes in depth the working of our minds, including our propensity to be religious and believe in God and supernatural realities. Sociobiology and evolutionary psychology have devoted much study to determine whether we are inherently more altruistic or more self-seeking. The question of our future trajectory is dealt with more speculatively, except, perhaps, by the environmental sciences in their assessment of the relatively short-term future of planet Earth.

It is important to recognize both that our basic questions are perennial, as old as our earliest stories and myths, and that those questions emerge from our most current rational efforts to understand ourselves and our world through scientific means. If we overlook the perennial character of our questions, we forfeit perspective; if we fail to recognize the contemporary scientific context of the questions, our reflections and responses cannot be meaningful for the lives we actually live today.

Each of the fifteen articles in this issue of *Zygon* engages the big questions of human existence. The articles are prefaced by five guest editorials that follow up on issues posed by the editor's March commentary, which under the title "Broad Experience? Great Audience?" raised questions about the future agenda for the religion-science conversation in general for this journal in particular (see www.zygonjournal.org/editorial_index.html). The guest writers are Helmut Reich (physics, psychology), Joan Koss-Chioino (psychology, anthropology), Wesley Wildman (theology), Ann Pederson (theology), and Donald Braxton (religious studies). This discussion will continue in subsequent issues.

The articles are presented in four sections. In the first of two Thinkpieces, John Carvalho IV (medical researcher) surveys the roles of biologists in the context of Third World health issues, proposing that "statesman" be added to the profile. Matt Rossano (psychology) suggests that the current standoff between the "devout" and the "skeptic" calls for a compromise by identifying a set of religious ideas that they can hold in common. He thus gives renewed attention to the proposals made by public health researcher Bjorn Grinde in the June 2005 issue of *Zygon*.

Loyal Rue's 2006 book, *Religion Is Not About God*, takes on two major issues: how to understand religion in light of current scientific study and

what is required if religion is to play its role in meeting the urgent global challenges that face us today. Religious studies scholars Donald Braxton and David Klemm join philosopher William Rottschaefer and cognitive scientist Leslie Marsh in a symposium on Rue's book, to which the author replies. [Note: See the announcement on the next page concerning an online discussion of this symposium.]

In the third section, three historical probes are presented in detail. C. Mackenzie Brown analyzes nineteenth-century Hindu responses to Darwin (a second installment of this study will appear in the September 2007 issue); Owen Anderson studies the importance of the geologist Charles Lyell's concept of uniformitarianism for the work of Charles Darwin and for the engagement of religion and science in general; and Stephen McKnight offers a significant reinterpretation of the influential seventeenth-century thinker Francis Bacon.

The final section presents four articles. Gloria Schaab (theology) interprets Arthur Peacocke's thinking about the place of humans in creation and makes a constructive proposal that midwifery be explored as a relevant model, particularly for ecological ethics. In their articles, theologians Nicole Hoggard Creegan and David Grumett explore the issues that arise when evolution is given a theological interpretation. Creegan focuses on the discernibility and indiscernibility of God in evolution, while Grumett elaborates Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionary natural theology. Michael Rhodes (theology) offers a complex, rich reflection on "the sense of the beautiful" in both historical and contemporary perspectives, drawing upon scientific, philosophical, and theological resources.

A review article by physicist/psychologist Helmut Reich concludes this issue; he reflects on the recent book edited by Joan Koss-Chioino and Philip Hefner, *Spiritual Transformation and Healing* (2006).

Christopher Southgate's poem "Knowing" is a fitting coda to this issue. His is an elegant and eloquent expression of the big questions meeting us incarnated in scientific understanding.

—Philip Hefner

REFERENCES

- Goldhill, Simon. 2004. *Love, Sex, and Tragedy: How the Ancient World Shapes Our Lives*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Koss-Chioino, Joan D., and Philip Hefner, eds. 2006. *Spiritual Transformation and Healing: Anthropological, Theological, Neuroscientific, and Clinical Perspectives*. Lanham, Md.: AltaMira.
- Mitchell, Stephen. 2004. *Gilgamesh: A New English Version*. New York: Free Press.

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Join us in discussing Loyal Rue's *Religion Is Not About God*

With this issue, we initiate online discussion of selected articles. The first discussion centers on the Loyal Rue book symposium described above. *Zygon* readers have an opportunity to share their responses to this symposium by going to our Web site and registering for an online discussion. Michael Cavanaugh (sometime *Zygon* author and immediate past president of our cosponsor IRAS) will moderate this discussion. Each of the symposium contributors will be on hand to defend, extend, or modify what they say here. Our hope is that a vibrant discussion will lead to future online conversations in which readers and authors share perspectives stimulated by selected articles, with the goal of capturing the power of the Internet to extend the journal's presence in the broader science-religion dialogue.

150 articles on the cognitive sciences

Forty years of digitized back issues constitutes a vast library of resources. The cognitive sciences are a case in point. In most of our forty years we have published offerings in this area—150 articles in all, 7 percent of our total, beginning in 1966 with Hudson Hoaglund's "The Brain and Crises in Human Values." Our Web page features a survey of these articles by Internet editor David Glover, with a comprehensive bibliography of the articles. Glover's survey is an addition to our efforts to make the journal Web site a useful supplementary resource to the forty years of back issues.

Call for Articles:

Agenda for Religion-and-Science

We are seeking articles on the theme of the March 2007 editorial and the guest editorials that appear in this June issue. If you have a proposal along these lines, contact the editor at *pnhefner@sbcglobal.net* or *zygon@lstc.edu*.