

## WHITHER THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE?

by *Gregory R. Peterson*

Over the past year, I have had a few conversations about whether the field of theology and science is stagnating. When the field first became established some forty years ago, marked by the founding of *Zygon* and the publication of Ian Barbour's *Issues in Science and Religion*, both in 1966, many of the issues being confronted were new and relatively unexplored. In particular, the advances in both physics and cosmology in the first half of the twentieth century provided fertile ground for rethinking traditional categories and oppositions and provided fresh opportunities for reconciling religious wisdom with scientific discovery. This trend continued in the late 1970s and 1980s as the impact of neo-Darwinism, sociobiology, and the creation science controversy came to be felt. The discipline has been fueled more recently by the ongoing discoveries in genetics and neuroscience in the 1990s. In the process, positions have been elaborated and staked out, even become standardized, especially with regard to the earlier material in physics and cosmology. And while there is certainly some strong consensus on what the options are—in cosmology one can endorse a many-worlds view or some version of the anthropic principle; one can relate mind and body by being a reductionist or property dualist or emergentist—there is much less consensus on which options are to be preferred. Perhaps, it has been suggested to me, the whole thing has crested and exhausted itself. Having explored the options but unable to come to agreement, there is no further point to be made. It is time to move on.

I largely disagree with this perspective, but not entirely, for it reveals an important point. Although there has been diversity from the start (compare, for instance, the approaches of Barbour and Ralph Wendell Burhoe), theology-and-science has been very clearly a definite kind of project, even paradigm, with standard texts as points of reference and standard issues to be explored. At the same time, certain questions have been either left unexplored or not explored thoroughly enough. I would suggest that among

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these questions are ones concerning the foundations of theology itself as an enterprise and the continued intellectual viability of theology as a dialogue partner that is worthy of consideration. Although these questions have been explored in the past, it is time to do so again with greater depth and rigor.

In thinking through this issue, I propose two questions that can and should be addressed. Although these may not seem to have much to do with theology-and-science per se, I have increasingly come to believe that they are important for the long-term integrity of the discipline: (1) Does theology belong in the university? and (2) Is a secular theology possible?

1. Does theology belong in the university? Harvard's recent debate over whether to include a course on "Faith and Reason" in its core undergraduate curriculum reveals the basic issue. The motive for introducing the course was obvious enough. Religion remains a major moral, social, and political force in the world, as well as an important part of many students' lives, so it might be important to have a course that explicitly addresses the intellectual issues surrounding religious belief. Opponents felt otherwise. Steven Pinker, writing in the *Harvard Crimson* (2006), argued that to do so is a profound mistake because it puts faith and religion on the same par as reason. Writing from outside the Harvard community after the negative verdict was announced, Lawrence Krauss (2007) pushed the same point. Fundamental to both articles is the argument that faith is by definition irrational belief, and, since the university is by contrast concerned with rational inquiry, faith has no place in the university. Theology, a form of inquiry presumably based on faith, goes out the window, too.

The reasoning of Pinker and Krauss is certainly flawed, but their views reflect what is now an entrenched opinion, that theology has no place in the university, an opinion embodied in the institutional structure of universities across the United States. The case is most obvious in U.S. public universities, where nary a theology program will be found, the closest analogues being the rare philosophy program that includes philosophy of religion and, more commonly, the religious studies department, often struggling to survive and doing so, in part, by being very clear that whatever religious studies is it is not theology. In the United States, much of this has to do with the legal separation of church and state, or at least perceptions thereof. To study theology is presumably to endorse a specific religious tradition, which in turn supports a religious institution, which violates U.S. constitutional law.

Although these legal issues do not vex private universities, my impression is that the situation is often not much different. Certainly, prominent universities such as Harvard and the University of Chicago do have theology faculty and programs, but these typically are shunted off into "divinity schools," which often are understood by the larger university community as professionally oriented and therefore not part of the university proper.

Even in Europe and Canada, which lack the legal strictures on church and state present in the United States, colleagues inform me of similar issues. Theology, lacking intellectual standing, is seen as at best irrelevant to the task of the university and so is progressively pushed to the side or eliminated altogether. Indeed, if it is mentioned at all, it is sometimes as a sort of insult: To call someone's argument or position (in physics, for instance) theological is precisely to accuse someone of spinning wheels without any rational, and particularly empirical, justification.

These institutional issues may seem a far remove from theology-and-science as a field, but I would suggest otherwise. Theology-and-science is by its very nature an interdisciplinary field, and in order to have theologians who are well informed about science and scientists (and other scholars) who are well informed about theology, the presence of theology is required in the university. Furthermore, the basic premise of the field is that theology, contrary to the claims of Pinker and Krauss, is a worthy dialogue partner with the natural sciences, and, if so, theology does belong in the university and is even desperately needed there. At the very least, the presence of theology in the university is an important symbol of the success of theology-and-science, but it is likely more than that; the presence of theology in the university is a condition for the long-term viability of theology-and-science altogether.

2. Is a secular theology possible? The issue of the presence of theology in the university presents this second question. By *secular* I do not mean "opposed to religion," which is how the term is often connoted, but rather secular in the sense of public, without being tied to a particular institution or a body of private truth claims inaccessible to outsiders. Historically, natural theology (consisting mainly of proofs for the existence of God as well as some basic divine attributes) has been understood as public in character, presumably demonstrable by philosophical argumentation, but the bulk of theological exploration is understood as private, tied to both community and revealed scripture. Far from a perception imposed from the outside, theologians are often quite explicit about this. Christian theologians often speak of themselves as theologians of the church, reflecting on the claims of the tradition and scripture. As such, tradition, community, and scripture are, with some important caveats, taken for granted, and although the employment of reason and encounter with the world will require care in how ideas are developed, no further justification of the particularity of theological truth claims need be given.

It is the privacy of these claims that in particular make the presence of theology in the university problematic, where all claims are, at least in principle, subject to scrutiny. To the extent that Pinker and Krauss have a point, this would seem to be it. Why should theologians get a free pass on the very rich truth claims embodied in tradition, community, and scripture while other scholars do not? If theology is brought into the university,

which theology should be brought in? Christian? Muslim? Sikh? Or, in the interest of fairness, do all perspectives need to be somehow represented?

Postmodern approaches offer one way out of this dilemma by pointing out that all inquiry is based on tradition and that even the Enlightenment claims that embody the university ideal of neutral inquiry are the result of particular historical development and tradition, one that has its own flaws. On this argument, theology is no different from other forms of intellectual inquiry, and certainly theologians can point to traditions of inquiry in the humanities and social sciences that would seem analogous in their development.

Such an argument may get theology into the door of the university but not likely much beyond it. Appeal to tradition is not enough to establish a presence simply because there is the further question of why a tradition should be taken seriously. A stronger approach might be to emphasize the unique domain of inquiry that theology covers. While theology literally is "talk about God," it is not unusual to speak of the task of theology more broadly as encompassing questions of ultimate concern. Theology asks questions not fully addressed in other disciplines: Why am I here? Where do I come from? Where am I going? From the standpoint of ultimacy, theology also issues critique of society, of culture, and of the values embodied in the very thought structures of a given epoch. These issues have also historically been addressed by philosophers, but contemporary philosophy has largely given up the task and, to the extent that it does address these questions, it begins to sound very much like theology.

The university needs a department of ultimate concern, and in order for theology to be present in the university it must be in some sense public. This does not necessarily mean that confessional and historic religious traditions and wisdom need to be abandoned but rather that, in the context of the university, they must be grounded. A university theology need not be a watered-down "theology in general" or a sort of tepid deism. But it does need to be clear about why it should be taken seriously as well as provide some criteria for assessing what counts as good theology and bad theology. Doing so would necessarily bring theology into dialogue with the sciences and other disciplines of the university. Indeed, it may well be argued, establishing the presence of theology in the university, in the universe of learning and inquiry that leads to action, is what the field of theology-and-science is all about.

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