

EXPERIENCING WONDER AND SEEKING WISDOM

by *Celia Deane-Drummond*

Those engaged in academic science-and-religion debates often have recourse to engage in theoretical questions and narrow specific concerns in the interests of clarity and academic respectability. Philip Hefner throws down the gauntlet in his *Zygon* editorial of March 2007: What if such studies are somehow missing the point? That is, what if they are bypassing the breadth of experience that sustains the conversation at the popular level or, equally important, ignoring the wider, larger audience that is gaining interest in such topics?

I suggest that we need to be bold enough to consider breadth and, in particular, practices that serve to establish a common language for those in the science community and the religious community. A good place to start is the language of wonder (Deane-Drummond 2006). Of course, this has had its own history of interpretation, going out of favor in intellectual circles in the post-Enlightenment period, but scientists today are becoming more inclined to admit to experiences of wonder being a core part of what motivates them to do science. Even Richard Dawkins, that *bête noir* of the religious community, admits to wonder through science. Indeed, he claims that wonder through science is rooted in something concrete—namely, scientific evidence—and so surpasses those experiences arising out of religious faith or poetry (Dawkins 1998).

Of course, to suppose that so-called objective truth claims, themselves subject to human interpretation and revision, are superior to other forms of truth, including religious truths, demonstrates not so much insight but hubris. We need not dwell on this aspect here; the point is that finding something wonderful through science is a very common human experience. In fact, the wonder in science may be one reason why science still holds sway in the imagination of ordinary people. Even general discussion of such areas as cosmology, quantum physics, biodiversity, and animal behavior opens up a sense of amazement in those who learn and listen as well

Celia Deane-Drummond is Professor of Theology and the Biosciences in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Chester, Parkgate Road, Chester, CH1 4BJ, United Kingdom; e-mail c.deane-drummond@chester.ac.uk. She is founder and director of the Centre for Religion and the Biosciences.

[*Zygon*, vol. 42, no. 3 (September 2007)]

© 2007 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0591-2385

as those engaged in the research. Dawkins is correct in the sense that this seems more concrete, more readily available for public view, than more ethereal discussions of God-talk that may or may not connect with ordinary experience. I suggest that by this admission Dawkins is pointing to the kind of operative spirituality that Bronislaw Szerszynski (2005) finds in other aspects of common experience of the natural world (discussed in detail in the December 2006 issue of *Zygon*). One of the myths of science may be the wonder that it generates.

The theological question, of course, is how far such myths can take us. How far can wonder in science point to the transcendent in a way that is acceptable in theological terms? A religious-studies scholar has no problem with the *content* of such wonder; it is simply an experience that seems to resonate with the transcendent. Contemporary philosopher Jerome Miller (1992) views wonder as necessary for the kind of openness to reality that is needed in order to gain understanding. Hence, it does not just stay with the discovery or experience but opens out to something new and important that needs further inquiry. If Dawkins had taken wonder to this limit, it is doubtful that he would have described it in the way he has, namely, within the confines of logical scientific reasoning and argument. A theologian would want to fill out the content of this wonder in terms that make sense as theology. For Christian theologians, as Nicholas Lash points out (2004), God cannot be described as a being encountered in a manner similar to an encounter with the natural world. This is where, perhaps, the co-inherence between science and theology shows its limits, for the natural world reflects an *image* of the Creator, not the being of the Creator as such, even if both religious experience and experience of science speak of that in terms of wonder. Those inclined to more pantheist theology would dispute this. But the point is that as the conversation goes further the limits of the analogy of wonder as experience begin to show. I suggest that it is where these limits appear that useful dialogue can take place. The meeting ground has already been established, the common experience acknowledged. From this comes the opportunity to tease out differences that inform the dialogue and enrich each discussion.

Wisdom, like wonder, is a motif that points to both breadth of experience and a broad audience. Most people, if you asked them on the street, would have some idea of what wisdom is. Of course, like wonder, wisdom resists clear definition, but as rooted in the poetic literature of the Bible it speaks of a form of reasoning that points to impressions and insights rather than dogmatic rules or formulations. Scholars of the Hebrew Bible are more inclined to take this form of literature seriously today, after some years of marginalization. One of the reasons for its having been brushed aside was that it did not seem distinctive enough, much of the wisdom literature echoing that of other cultures and contexts. In the present context, such a common grounding is an advantage, for it means that it can

resonate with a broader audience than would be the case if it were more narrowly defined and described. Philosophy in the classic tradition means love of wisdom, but the tradition of Socrates that focused on its relevance for life experiences has gradually been eroded so that philosophy is more often than not a simple description of what we do not know. The specialization and fragmentation of science marks its gaining of knowledge but loss of wisdom. Attempts to work together in a more interdisciplinary way are still in their infancy. One of the roles of science and religion must surely be to pioneer this attempt to see things from different perspectives in a holistic way and encourage others to do so as well. Science may also try to probe what wisdom is through psychological, neurological, or evolutionary analysis. This may fill out our understanding of wisdom, but it cannot replace the search for an overall interrelated picture that is the essence of what wisdom attempts. For religious-studies approaches, wisdom is another myth that appears in different religious guises and traditions, perhaps even in the shape of the goddess Isis. For Christian theologians, wisdom serves a deeper purpose than this. We arrive at the same point as with the discussion of wonder, namely, finding co-inherence but then distinctive elements, for the Wisdom of God for a theologian cannot be expressed as simply that emerging from human experience of wisdom in daily life.

What unites both wonder and wisdom? I suggest that both are characterized by paying attention, which is a crucial ingredient of prayer in a number of different religious traditions. From the perspective of faith, the kind of attention paid to the natural world in leading to the experience of wonder will be analogous to the kind of attention paid to God in prayerful reflection. Wisdom is, however, a second-order reflective activity; that is, wisdom comes through more reflection on experiences, including the experience of wonder. Both, no doubt, will lead to a similar degree of activity in the neural networks of human brains. But this similarity need not imply identity, except insofar as physiological processes in the brain are indistinguishable.

Wisdom has another important dimension that it seems to me that wonder lacks, namely, the ethical and moral. Practical wisdom, or prudence, is concerned with how we live our lives and the application of science and technology to specific practices. Such practices may include medical or genetic interventions, environmental decision making, strategies to address climate change, and so on. This list deliberately implies that such practices are not just individual but also communal and social. Prudence, understood in the classic tradition, also has a public dimension. I suggest, in other words, that not only is consideration of moral behavior important for science and religion but also that those working in this field, where they are in a position to do so, have a public duty to consider becoming engaged in policy making.

REFERENCES

- Dawkins, Richard. 1998. *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder*. London: Penguin.
- Deane-Drummond, Celia. 2006. *Wonder and Wisdom: Conversations in Science, Spirituality and Theology*. London: Darton Longman and Todd, and Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press U.S.A.
- Hefner, Philip. 2007. "Broad Experience? Great Audience?" *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 41:3-6.
- Lash, Nicholas. 2004. *Holiness, Speech and Silence: Reflections on the Question of God*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate.
- Miller, Jerome A. 1992. *In the Throe of Wonder: Intimations of the Sacred in a Postmodern World*. Albany: State Univ. of New York Press.
- Szszynski, Bronislaw. 2005. *Nature, Technology and the Sacred*. Oxford: Blackwell.