

THE THICKNESS OF EXPERIENCE, RELIGION, AND THE VARIETIES OF SCIENCE

by Don Browning

Philip Hefner has placed a very provocative editorial before the readers of *Zygon* ("Broad Experience? Great Audience?" March 2007). From almost every angle of vision, particularly when viewed from the perspective of the success of *Zygon* itself, the science-and-religion discussion is strong and vital. Yet, as Hefner points out, it could have a wider impact and grab the hearts and minds of the general public even more profoundly.

I agree with him that the key to a deeper dialogue is locating it on a broad base of contemporary experience and engaging a larger audience of both academics and nonacademics. Both of these are important, but the first point may be the more profound. In order to engage a wider audience, the science-and-religion discussion must address a more inclusive range of human experience. People must recognize the vital challenges of their lived experience in the conversation and tensions between science and religion. Recent proposals by both Hefner and guest editorialists have been suggestive for broadening the experiential base of the science-religion dialogue. Anchoring it in the signals of the sacred in contemporary culture, or in the context of practical moral issues, or in understanding the role of myth in both science and religion, are all good suggestions.

I want to investigate the potential fruitfulness of situating this conversation within the context of practical moral reflection. This was my proposal in my December 2005 guest editorial in celebration of the fortieth anniversary of *Zygon*. There I proposed understanding moral concerns as broadly interpretive issues requiring something like Paul Ricoeur's critical hermeneutics to adequately address them. By critical hermeneutics (or hermeneutic realism) I mean first locating the issue at hand within the "effective history" (to use a phrase of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Ricoeur) that has shaped our dominant practices and thinking about the issue and then using the "distanciating" tools of science to clarify and refine a variety of

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implicit empirical assumptions that tradition has carried but that may also need to be critiqued. This view says that we must confront our challenges in living by interpreting the classics of our religious and cultural traditions first and then, second, turn to the clarifying contributions of science.

To illustrate: I contend that, when understood properly, practical moral reflection (practical reason or wisdom) is multidimensional and requires clarification by religion, culture, and science at several levels. In my view, every practical moral issue of any genuine substance necessarily opens up several dimensions of experience and requires reflection on all of these levels. Both science and religion can throw light, in different ways, on each of these dimensions.

More precisely, I have claimed in my writings over the last three decades that there are five dimensions to practical moral thinking. This is true whether the issue is one of economic justice, poverty, health and human welfare, sexuality, family, AIDS-HIV, war, or terrorism. I hold that when one analyzes carefully the moral thinking that goes into coping with these issues, one will always find (1) practices under crisis that contain assumptions and sometimes reasoned judgments about (2) the kinds of human needs and desire struggling, and often competing, to be realized, (3) implicit or explicit principles used to mediate between competing needs within each of us and between us and others, (4) some surrounding narrative, myth, and deep metaphors that give meaning to the practices in question, and (5) some analysis of the social and cultural contexts of the issue at stake and the constraints they place on which goods can be realized. I believe that a careful analysis of any religious tradition as it struggles with the concrete problems of life in specific historical contexts will exhibit assumptions and judgments at all of these levels or dimensions. Coping with such issues is an interpretive task, and the subjects to be interpreted are the inherited religious and cultural classics that have shaped our moral sensibilities and best practices pertaining to the crisis at hand.

But we must admit that our religious traditions are not univocal. They are themselves conversations, and the voices in them often conflict. They conflict over how to interpret our true human needs and the various goods they pursue, which principles should mediate our conflicts of needs and goods, which narrative, myth, or story (or which version) should define the broader meaning of our pursuit of the goods of life, and how to understand the contexts that bear on the issues confronting us. All of these matters are in tension even within a single religious tradition. Many of these issues can be refined, stabilized, and weighted in one direction or another with appeals to science. But they cannot be settled definitively by science. Nor do the interpretive frameworks that give them meaning originate with science.

We should not use science foundationally. We should not presume that we can forget religious and cultural traditions, start afresh with science,

and then gradually build up again our ethics, laws, and worldviews. Traditions are simply too rich, too multidimensional, and too complicated and nuanced to be either forgotten or replaced by science. When it comes to matters that really count—our ethical, political, familial, and religious life—science is always bound to play second fiddle. Its contributions are refinements, fine-tunings, and stabilizations of what our religious and cultural traditions have already thought or imagined. This is why the science-religion discussion must stay close to lived experience, understand how it has been shaped massively by the effective history of the past even as it copes with present challenges, and then time and again search and reinterpret the traditions that have shaped us for both the wisdom they convey and the refinements they require.

Here are some of the ways science can inform, in the sense of refine, the massive but unstable wisdom of tradition. I organize this list around the five dimensions of practical moral life mentioned above.

Traditions bring us tested practices that help the faithful achieve the goods of life and also handle their loss. Some of these practices, however, were developed in different social contexts and require adjustments for present contexts. The social sciences—psychology, sociology, anthropology—often can help detect these strains between past practices and present human needs and contexts and help adjust, not necessarily reject, the important practices of the past. Religious traditions often have very wise assumptions about needs and tendencies that are important for human flourishing—needs for food, bodily well-being, attachment, sociability, continuity, knowledge, and spiritual maturity for coping with change, disappointment, loss, or death. But they sometimes have conflicts about the empirical conditions needed for their actualization; for example, timetables of human development and which needs must be addressed first and which later. The developmental psychologies, neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, and cognitive science can help refine our assumptions about such matters. Science can even refine our understanding about principles of moral obligation. Regardless of the criticisms advanced against the completeness of Lawrence Kohlberg's stage-developmental theory of moral thinking, it is difficult to deny that he threw a great deal of light on at least one aspect of moral judgment, its schedule of development, and some of the conditions required to foster it.

Science can even cast light on the great narratives, myths, and deep metaphors (generally held to be religious or quasireligious) about the meaning and purpose of life that frame needs, moral principles, contexts, and concrete practices. Social psychology can analyze how we use them, for good and for ill. Scientific cosmologies can test the consistency of our deep metaphors—whether theistic, mechanistic, organic, or images of nothingness—with other fields of knowledge and our moral experience.

I think that this vision of the relation of science and religion is consistent with Hefner's suggestion that this great conversation should be placed within a wide and very basic range of human experience—one that takes both the traditions of the past and the challenges of the present at the same time with respect *and* critique.