

SAVING EXPERIENCE IN AN AGE OF SCIENCE

by *Karl E. Peters*

In his March 2007 *Zygon* editorial Philip Hefner challenges us to reflect on the experience that underlies our work in religion and science and the audience for which we do that work. He calls us to consider the breadth of the experience and the greatness of the audience. In responding to this challenge I begin with the name of one of the organizations that is responsible for *Zygon*, the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science (IRAS).¹ I note the prepositions in the name, which reveal that the focus is *on* religion, and this focus takes place *in* an age of science, or, we might say, in the scientifically informed cultural context in which we now live.

What does the focus *on* religion tell us about the experience and the audience? If we look at what religions do, we can say that the experiences may be the experiences of life's problems, and also experiences of the sacred in relation to which people respond to life's problems. Historian of religion John Fenton describes a primary task of religion as follows: "religion offers sacred satisfaction of fundamental human needs" (Fenton et al. 1993, 4). Using this description, Fenton and his colleagues are able to review the variety of the world's religious traditions with a general model that asks: What fundamental human needs are being addressed, and what is the understanding of the sacred in relation to which the needs are being satisfied? With this model they bring to the fore a variety of experienced needs: physical needs such as hunger and thirst in times of drought, social needs such as the anomie resulting from the disruption or decay of society or the feelings of oppression associated with injustice, and psychological needs experienced as anxiety, depression, guilt, and meaninglessness.

In the present context of a scientific-technological culture, some basic needs may take on new forms. For example, how do religions respond to biological procreative needs in the context of new reproductive technologies? How is the need for meaning and purpose shaped by the fact that we

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[*Zygon*, vol. 42, no. 4 (December 2007)]

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have become technological creatures? In all such experiences, ancient and contemporary, we might say that religions address challenges to human well-being. Religions respond to threats that diminish or destroy human well-being, threats that often are experienced internally by individuals as suffering. This is part of the experience with which religion deals, and the audience of those who respond to such experiences is everyone. The experience is broad, and the audience is truly great. Some expand the experience of suffering to all sentient beings and the diminishment of well-being to the malfunctioning of ecosystems and planet Earth itself.

Another feature of religious experience is that of the sacred. For many this is the experience of something more than human. For some it is the experience of something more than the world. Such experiences of “the more” may be understood in a variety of ways. One way I understand the sacred in relation to basic human needs is expressed by Henry Nelson Wieman, who writes that the primary religious question is “about the nature and value of human existence, how it can be saved from its self-destructive and degenerative propensities, and transformed toward the greatest content of value that human existence can ever embody” (1968, 6). Wieman understands the greatest content of value as involving the continual realization of ever greater good: greater truth, greater beauty, greater love, greater health, and greater community. Individuals cannot achieve this greater good by themselves. Increasing value arises in creative interactions among humans and between humans and the rest of the world. Creative interaction (Wieman uses terms like *creative communication*, *creative interchange*, or *creativity*) is the source of human good. It is God. It is God as the process of creative interactions that saves humans as they cannot save themselves. In being continually “saved” to greater good, humans experience grace.

How can one think about the sacred as saving grace in response to basic human needs in the context of contemporary science? Here I think that we uncover one of the underlying issues as we attempt to interrelate religion and science. The issue is that the sacred, saving “more” (more than individuals and even more than societies) can be understood scientifically as a complex set of natural and social causes. Complex sets of natural and social causes lead to feeding the hungry, healing the sick, liberating the oppressed, and overcoming anomie. When they do this, these complex sets of causes are salvific. Science, with its various methods, can help reveal causes of both suffering and the alleviation of suffering. Where, then, is the sacred? Is the sacred that responds to basic human needs and that alleviates suffering something other than natural and social causes? Is it something more than but inclusive of such causes? Is it the complex sets of causes themselves? Depending on how one understands the sacred in relation to scientifically understood causes, people can experience the sacred differently.

Let me be more specific. One of the causes of human suffering, and that of other creatures, is violent human aggression—abuse, rape, torture, mur-

der, war, genocide, extinction of species, and the plundering of natural resources. If we ask how we can deal with violent aggression, we might follow Melvin Konner, who adapts a scheme developed by the ethologist Niko Tinbergen. Konner uses the scheme to present a variety of scientific work that explores the multiple causes of violent aggression. He writes that “to ask what causes aggression, or indeed any behavior, is really to ask a series of questions corresponding to the various things we mean by the word *cause*” (Konner 2002, 182 ff.). Some causes are environmental; others are within the human organism. Some are immediate, and others are more remote. They include triggering events, neural circuits and neural transmitters, hormone levels, routine events that shape patterns of learned behavior, remote events in early life or before birth, events of embryonic development, genes, processes of natural selection, and the phylogenetic history of our species. Konner argues that all of these causes help us understand the origins of the rage in which someone kills a loved one, or the more systemic violence of a warlike society. And with knowledge of causes also come possibilities for stemming violence and overcoming the suffering that results from violent behavior. Further, with the same schema Konner analyzes the causes of human love. So both behavior that diminishes human well-being and behavior that enhances well-being can be understood to result from complex sets of natural and social causes.

The system of causes put forth by Tinbergen and Konner also can help us understand and facilitate behaviors that bring about the variety of human good that Wieman discusses. When I look for the roots of human altruism, for example, all of these kinds of events can come into play. When I seek meaning and purpose for my living, I might also look at how these various causes come together to help me see how my life can flow in harmony with more comprehensive processes that enhance well-being.

So I return to the question: Is the sacred to be found in the multiplicity of causes explored by science that lead to human well being—to peace, justice, and love? Can science then help us explore processes that save humans as they cannot save themselves? Can science help us relate to the grace of God? Many, of course, suggest that the sacred is other than or more than natural causes. Still, if one understands this “other than” or “more than” as creating and working through natural causes, the scientific understanding of the “working of the sacred” can again help bring us closer in relation to God.

Let’s return to Hefner’s challenge: How broad is the experience and how great is the audience in our work in religion and science? If we think of the task of religion as finding ways of responding to basic human needs in relation to the activity of the sacred, and if science can help us understand both the causes of suffering and the “more than” human that works to alleviate suffering, I think the experience is indeed very broad and the

audience very great. However, they are also very focused—focused on whatever it is that diminishes and enhances human well-being, the well-being of other species, and that of the planet that is our home.

NOTES

1. In 1966 IRAS and the Center for Advanced Study in Theology and the Sciences (CASTS), which is now the Center for Advanced Study in Religion and Science (CASIRAS), established the journal. IRAS and CASIRAS continue to undergird *Zygon* through a Joint Publication Board with representatives from each organization.

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