

The Agenda for Religion and Science: Guest Editorials

DOES PRIMACY BELONG TO THE HUMAN SCIENCES?

by Fraser N. Watts

The dialogue between theology and science often has focused mainly on the natural sciences. In this brief editorial I argue that the dialogue with the human sciences is potentially richer and has some interesting distinctive features. I make three main points: that the methodology of the human sciences is closer to that of theology, giving rise to a richer and more fruitful interface; that the human sciences interface with a broader range of topics in Christian doctrine, which they help to elucidate; and that the study of religion in the human sciences gives rise to an interesting reflexivity in their dialogue with theology.

THE METHODOLOGIES OF THE NATURAL AND HUMAN SCIENCES

It often is claimed that there are different methodologies in the natural and human sciences. The distinctive methodology of the human sciences, as Peter Winch argued a half century ago in *The Idea of a Social Science* (1958), is that they recognize that human beings are agents and take a first-person approach rather than using the objectifying third-person approach of the natural sciences. As he claimed, they look for reasons, not causes. Others, such as E. O. Wilson in *Consilience* (1998), have argued in the opposite direction, wanting to assimilate the human sciences to biology.

Both have a point. It is correct that the human sciences are sometimes concerned with the reasons that human beings, as agents, have for their actions. However, they also are concerned with causes and can be as objectifying about that as the natural sciences are. Psychology, for example, uses

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both methodologies. In social psychology, especially that practiced in continental Europe, the distinctive methodology of the human sciences predominates; however, in many other areas of psychology, the methodology is characteristic of the natural sciences. Psychology stands at the point of intersection of different methodologies and continually faces the challenge of how to integrate them.

Methodologically, theology also is a hybrid. In its study of scriptural texts, or in church history, or in the psychology of religion, it uses an objectifying methodology similar to that of the natural sciences. In theological thinking, in which the creative order is interpreted in terms of the purposes of God, it becomes more like a human science and understands things in terms of an agent, albeit a supreme and unique agent. One of the potential disjunctions that can occur when relating theology to natural science is that theology uses agency concepts whereas natural science does not. For example, the natural sciences may use objectifying concepts such as law and probability, whereas theological thinking would be more comfortable with agency concepts such as purpose and freedom (Watts in press).

There is less risk of such a clash of perspectives when theology is in conversation with the human sciences, because the hybrid methodology of the human sciences is one with which it is already familiar. This is not to claim that theology is methodologically identical to the human sciences. There are many significant differences. Theology does not make the same use of data and is not oriented in the same way as the human sciences are toward progress and discovery. However, theology has more in common with the methodologies of the human sciences than with those of the natural sciences.

THE INTERSECTION OF THE NATURAL AND HUMAN SCIENCES WITH CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

The human sciences intersect with Christian doctrine at a broader range of points than do the natural sciences. The dialogue between theology and natural science is almost entirely concerned with creation and providence. Many of the traditional loci of Christian doctrine do not intersect with the natural sciences at all. It often is claimed that the whole of Christian doctrine can be handled from the perspective of one particular aspect of it. So, how creation and providence are handled, in dialogue with the natural sciences, can have far-reaching ramifications. However, it remains the case that contact between the natural sciences and much Christian doctrine is indirect.

The human sciences have a particularly important intersection with theological anthropology. The human sciences are intertwined with philosophical assumptions about human nature. Christian theology, through its theological anthropology, deals with human nature, too. Indeed, it would

be possible to defend the view that the interface between theology and the human sciences is funneled entirely through the assumptions each makes about human nature. So, dialogue with the human sciences is likely to have a particularly significant impact on theological anthropology. However, once again, this can have far-reaching implications. How theological anthropology is handled will influence much of the rest of Christian doctrine.

Arguably, the claims about human nature play a central part in many aspects of Christian doctrine, even if these are not made fully explicit or defended as they should be. Claims about human nature are found in doctrines concerning sin and salvation, the Holy Spirit, and church and sacraments. In much current writing in systematic theology one can detect a curious double-think about human nature. On the one hand, it often is claimed that the starting point is with God and God's self-revelation. On the other hand, claims about human nature actually play a central role, although one that is not explicitly recognized.

Theological anthropology has long been a sort of Cinderella subject within Christian doctrine. The literature is limited, and much of it is a rather tired restatement of earlier positions. However, there are signs of an interesting revival of theological anthropology in dialogue with the human sciences (see Gregersen, Drees, and Görman 2002; Soulen and Woodhead 2006). One of the benefits to theology of engaging more closely with the human sciences is that it would enrich theological anthropology. Another, perhaps more significant, advantage is that interchange between theology and the human sciences can help to elucidate the personal significance of religious beliefs. Harry Williams, one of the pioneers of the interface between theology and psychology in the U.K., put it like this: "In my view, strict academic scholarship has already given to theological thinking all that for the time being it has to give. . . . Our present task is of a different kind. . . . We must discover and try to tell how God's redemption of us has made itself known to the most secret places of our being" (Williams 1965, 138). The dialogue between theology and the human sciences can help with that important task.

THE STUDY OF RELIGION IN THE HUMAN SCIENCES

There is a kind of reflexivity in the intersection between the human sciences and theology. The human sciences include the study of religion. If we make the distinction between theology (the rational reflection of the faith traditions) and religious studies (the study of religion from the standpoint of disciplines such as history, sociology, and psychology), the human sciences are involved with both. They have a dialogue with theology, and they also study religion.

Religious practices are particularly likely to attract theological interpretation, which raises interesting issues about the relationship between the perspectives of theology and the human sciences. For example, can conversion be both the work of the Holy Spirit and a search for personal identity? Can religious experience be both an experience of God and a social construction, or the result of a neural aberration? It is widely assumed that the two perspectives are incompatible and that a choice has to be made between them. However, I submit that there is no justification for that assumption. There is no theological reason to assume that God does not work through psychosocial processes. Equally, there is no reason for the human sciences to claim that they represent the sole explanation of religious phenomena.

A particularly interesting aspect of the study of religion in the human sciences is that it potentially includes the study of theological thinking itself. There has been much hype about so-called neurotheology (although it usually is just the study of the role of the brain in religion and has nothing to do with theology proper). I suggest that cognitive science has a much more interesting perspective on theological thinking that could be the basis of a very fruitful dialogue between theology and the human sciences, a dialogue that so far is scarcely begun.

John Bowker's interesting book *The Sacred Neuron* (2005; the title is misleading because it is more about cognitive science than neuroscience) indicates some of the possibilities. In my own *Theology and Psychology* I drew attention to the distinction between the two different meaning systems in Interacting Cognitive Subsystems (ICS) (Watts 2002; Teasdale and Barnard 1993). Religious meanings characteristically arise in the more intuitive and holistic "implicational" subsystem, whereas theology operates at the level of the more explicit "propositional" subsystem. That leaves theology always talking in a different cognitive code from the one in which religious meanings are primarily apprehended. ICS provides a framework from which to clarify the relationship between theology and religion. There is a sense that theology and experiential religion are talking past each other; the human sciences can help us to understand why that might occur and what can be done about it.

CONCLUSION

For these reasons and more, I claim that the dialogue between theology and the human sciences is distinctive and potentially very rich. Methodologically, the human sciences are a more natural bedfellow for theology, so a rich dialogue is possible without either science or theology getting distorted in the process. In addition, the human sciences interface with a broad range of topics in theology and can elucidate if, how, and why apparently dry theological claims can move people. Finally, the human sci-

ences help us to understand not only what is going on in religion generally but in particular what kind of cognition is being employed in theology and how this relates to religious experience. All of this presents a rich and exciting agenda for the future.

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