

THEOLOGY AT THE FOREFRONT OF DISCOVERY?

by *James W. Haag*

The task set before me is to address whether the religion-and-science dialogue is in need of “reassessment” in light of “today’s experience and sensibilities.” In short, yes. However, this quick response is attributable to any field of research that aspires to be relevant. It says something positive about the field that the task is not *whether* religion and science should be related but *how* this relation should be measured.

As a young theologian who has observed the religion-and-science discussion for approximately ten years, I want to mention an issue that I believe will continue to demand attention from my generation of scholars. How committed should theologians be to “new” or “rogue” scientific discoveries? For some, attaching one’s theology to “unestablished” science comes with potential devastation. After all, what happens when the science is altered or rejected? While potentially risky, it is a risk that is not only worth taking but essential. A word of admission: I am aware that many of the diverse readers of *Zygon* do not consider themselves theologians. While congenial with these scholars, as a Lutheran theologian I will speak from my context and anticipate that our objectives will coincide.

Theologians and religious scholars need to occupy a position of prominence in the track of new scientific research and discoveries. Too often, the theological community and the wider public are reacting to vital issues at the same time. This means that many people interpret a given situation without insightful theological contributions. For theology to continually lag behind should not be the norm. The vast number of books published in religion-and-science exhibit a familiar model—redundant reviews of the existing state of affairs and, somewhere in the last chapter, a warning against hasty action. Unfortunately, ideological fundamentalists of all stripes will be ready and willing to provide the answers to important dilemmas. If theologians are left reflecting on issues that others have decided, the outcome will be nothing less than theologically impotent. The “reassessment”

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that I suggest moves theologians from the sidelines of belated reaction to the playing field of engaged construction.

We are all too aware of the potential pitfalls associated with relating religion and science. The precarious misinterpretation of such scientific terms as *theory* or *hypothesis* or religious terms such as *faith* and even *god* still plague the wider conversation. Many write on the nature of “truth claims” and our inherent inability to be self-critical. The ambiguity of knowledge offers a shared space for theologians and scientists to dialogue. However, the varied and elusive nature of this relationship makes any static methodology insufficient. Moving with the inherent flow of knowledge, in both science and religion, is a necessary strategy for all to employ. There is a danger of getting swept up in the rush of ideas, and, although confusion and exhaustion are part of the process, I believe tribulations may drastically decrease by our positioning ourselves at the front of the pack.

There is something both stimulating and frightening about positioning oneself at the forefront of new discovery. Let me be clear, this is not a proposal for theologians to enter the laboratory and offer extemporaneous comments while peering over the shoulder of scientists. Rather, these disciplines overlap precisely in the process of creating meaning, and this is a plea for theologians to inhabit that space. Not only will theologians be able to inform interpretations of the most cutting-edge research, but they will be knowledgeable about potential developments. That is, having a progressive approach that considers possible scenarios should be favored over a defensive approach that is merely trying to keep up. If theologians take seriously the Reformation notion *semper reformanda* (always reforming), the potential risks can be taken in stride.

Certainly, scientists may be hesitant about this idea, and one should maintain realistic expectations. The sight of a theologian may cause some scientists to run or others to bolt the doors. The current ethos in the United States clears a special place of supremacy for the scientist to reside. It has not always been this way, of course. Only a few hundred years ago, scientists were forced to alter or conceal their viewpoints lest they cross religious authorities. Neither environment is ideal. However, our current environment is one where science dominates, and the loudest religious voice is of an extreme nature. This regrettable scenario is evidenced by recent books—written by scientists—that portray religion in monolithic terms. In a basic way, we cannot blame the scientists for being weary. However, the religion-and-science community, exemplified in the readership of *Zygon*, offers a rigorous perspective, informed by science, philosophy, and theology. The task is certainly not to “convert” scientists but to offer meticulous insights on the nature of humans and the cosmos.

A situation like this demands that both religious and scientific scholars embrace certain themes while also rethinking or possibly rejecting others. If the goal is the improved knowledge of our selves and the world, a genu-

ine openness to the interconnected nature of reality is necessary. In order for this to work, candidness must be expressed by all participants. Practically speaking, this means that all ideas, no matter how central, must be challengeable. In this process, a dialogue ensues in which scholars debate the nature of a specific idea—reformulating and molding views in light of differing perspectives. This is obviously the nature of knowledge development in general; my point is to thrust theologians into these creative conversations.

Shifts in perspectives and viewpoints will inevitably need to be made. A theologian, for example, may need to change his ideas about the divine. A scientist may need to reassess her notions of reduction. It is no longer feasible for scholars to follow eliminative approaches, be they reductionistic or inflationistic. The methodology, I propose, is ultimately based on the steady transformation and continuous interconnection of ideas.

An impetus for advocating such a progressive approach is the likelihood that future generations of religion-and-science scholars will face inestimable challenges. The Large Hadron Collider—to be completed this year near Geneva, Switzerland—will likely reshape the way we think about our cosmos. The inevitable surge coming in the debate regarding the world's climate and the human role as instigator or liberator will impact scholars of all religions and sciences. A coming jolt in theological defiance is likely with the possibility that in the next several decades we will have an explanation for how electric-chemical brain processes are responsible for our experiences. Continued strides in xenotransplant research will challenge our understandings of what it means to be human—a province particularly germane to theological and ethical reflection.

For many, this may be stating the obvious. *Zygon*, for many years, has been a beacon for scholars engaged in just what I suggest. However, continued persistence is the path toward an authentic relationship between religion and science and, therefore, more accurate knowledge. The April 7, 2007, issue of *Newsweek* pits admitted atheist Sam Harris against evangelical Christian Rick Warren on “The God Debate.” This type of dichotomous dispute continues to challenge those in the religion-and-science field. My hope is to see repercussions of this tactic ripple through populations greater than the religion-and-science community. The scholars affiliated with *Zygon*, having positive and rigorous ideas for this interaction, need to have a continued and stronger voice in the wider community. I am confident that if theologians engage new science with an attitude of humility, settling for pseudo answers will end, precisely because there will be a shift in attitude from defensiveness to assertiveness.