

TAKING THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE SERIOUSLY
WITHOUT CATEGORY MISTAKES: A RESPONSE
TO IAN BARBOUR

by Taede A. Smedes

Abstract. In my response to Ian Barbour's criticisms, I first argue for the anthropological dimensions and contextuality of any theology. Next I examine and criticize Barbour's thesis that I am an incompatibilist about divine action. Finally I illustrate the fact that I see genuine opportunities for a dialogue between theologians and scientists without apologetics, category mistakes, or relegating theology to the fringes of science, by pointing to evolutionary explanations of religion.

Keywords: Ian Barbour; Justin Barrett; Paul Bloom; compatibilism; divine action; evolutionary explanations of religion; primary and secondary causality; theology

I want to express my gratitude to Ian Barbour for responding to my article "Beyond Barbour or Back to Basics?" (Smedes 2008). Although it seems that I am critical toward Barbour's view of how the relation between science and religion should develop, I do acknowledge that every scholar in science-and-religion today, including myself, is deeply indebted to Barbour's work. Barbour is the father of the science-and-religion debate as we know it today. But as with any relationship between a father and his child, there comes a time when the child distances him- or herself from the father and may even rebel against him in the struggle for independence. As long as they remain on speaking terms, they honor and strengthen the deep relationship and interdependence that binds them. In this article I respond to some of Barbour's criticisms in an attempt to further this conversation.

Taede A. Smedes is Junior Fellow at the Faculty of Theology of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium. His address is Lodewijk van Deysellaan 51, 2182 VN, Hillegom, the Netherlands; e-mail tasmedes@tasmedes.nl.

[*Zygon*, vol. 43, no. 1 (March 2008)]

© 2008 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0591-2385

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF THEOLOGY

To begin with theology, Barbour claims that I give attention to cultural and ideological assumptions in the scientific enterprise while ignoring the presence of such assumptions in theology. He writes: “Christian theology is not a static deposit of dogmas but an ongoing process of reinterpretation and reevaluation in new contexts, including that of modern science, while trying to remain faithful to the central message of the gospel” (Barbour 2008, 262). I could not agree more with Barbour’s words. Some years ago the Dutch Protestant theologian Harry Kuitert was attacked severely by fellow theologians for his often-quoted slogan that “everything that is said about above comes from below”—in other words, that God-talk is deeply and irreducibly rooted in human language and experience. Theology for Kuitert was a kind of anthropology: Religious and theological utterances say more about the person who utters them than about the Reality they try to depict, since that Reality *as transcendent Reality* defies any attempt to verify or falsify descriptions of it.

Although one could interpret Kuitert’s slogan reductionistically as denying the possibility of revelation, such an interpretation is not entailed by it. Indeed, in my view Kuitert tried to make clear that every theology is a reflection of a context in which theological language and experiences are embedded. Faith is not dropped from above (as Karl Barth would have us believe) but is an all-human enterprise—it is constructed from the bottom up. In our globalized world we see the anthropological dimensions of faith reflected in the adoption of Christian ideas and the translation thereof to specific spatiotemporal contexts in African and Asian theologies. There is an irreducible human component in the construction of every theology to the extent that we cannot distinguish between what is human construction (and even projection) and what are genuine descriptions of the Transcendent. This means that all theologies are deeply related to a specific contextual worldview and may change when worldview changes; theologies can never claim absoluteness.

COMPATIBILISM/INCOMPATIBILISM

Barbour also claims, “It is not surprising that Smedes is a compatibilist, in keeping with his favorable view of linguistic philosophy” (2008, 263). I am avoiding terms like compatibilism and incompatibilism when talking about divine action for good reason. The terminology of (in)compatibilism is rooted in discussions about *human* actions that are extrapolated to discussions about *divine* action. The compatibilism/incompatibilism discussion concerning human free will makes sense, because humans are part of the causal nexus of the universe; but God is not.

As I argue in my article, the extrapolation of the compatibilism/incompatibilism discussion to divine action may result in a category mistake,

where divine action is considered to be on the same level as physical causation, as if God is part of the physical universe just as humans are. This results in the idea that God and creation are in competition with each other, so that, to use Andrew Porter's words, "something in the world has to move over to make room for God to act" (2001, 2). As I explain in my *Chaos, Complexity and God* (Smedes 2004), the idea that God is somehow involuntarily limited by his creation theologically makes no sense. (One can speculate about *kenosis*, God's voluntary self-limitation, but I have problems with the way that, for example, John Polkinghorne and Arthur Peacocke use this notion.)

Accordingly, since God is not part of creation, God's action cannot be understood by standards or criteria pertaining to created beings (Smedes 2004, 214). So, it is theologically sound to consider the logical possibility that God acts *without* having to suspend the laws of nature (interventionism) or through gaps in the causal texture of the universe. Science does not and should not reckon with this logical possibility, contrary to what proponents of intelligent design claim. Methodological naturalism is the methodological collapse of the set of logical and physical possibilities, which in my view is warranted and even necessary for the progress of science (although, as the history testifies, scientists can never claim to know the entire set of physical possibilities). Different forms of scientism, including metaphysical naturalism, extrapolate the methodological reduction into an ontological reduction. Science itself does not entail this reduction, which explains why it is not in conflict with a religious or theological worldview.

I do not see how this is directly related to the distinction between primary and secondary causality, as Barbour maintains (2008, 252), although I can try to give an interpretation of how I would consider this distinction. Sometimes God is described as primary or first cause that makes second causes possible, in the sense that God, say, caused the initial cosmic singularity to become unstable and produce the Big Bang and the entire further history of the universe. God then is the first in a line of causes. It would make God not a cause *among* causes but the *cause of* causes. I find such a view deeply unattractive, because God still is pictured as a cause on the same level as created causes, albeit the first cause.

Moreover, I believe that this view seriously misrepresents the intent of Thomas Aquinas. For Aquinas God as primary cause does not come *before* the created causes but is present *in* them, in the sense that God as primary cause makes secondary causes possible. To quote Brian Davies:

In Aquinas's view . . . there are created things which are in themselves causal. In his opinion, when the bat hits the ball it is indeed the bat which sends the ball flying, though both bat and ball exist and undergo change by virtue of God. . . . It is true, [Aquinas] says, that God must be operative in every creaturely cause. So the actions of creatures are, in a sense, always God's action. (Davies 1992, 163)

Secondary causes are real causes, but it is God who makes them possible.¹ God is the prime cause not in the sense of temporarily first or most important but in the sense of transcending created causes and making them possible in the first place—as a piece of paper makes writing possible without causing it.²

NO ROOM FOR DIALOGUE?

Throughout his response Barbour suggests that I am skeptical of a dialogue between theology and science. He writes, “Smedes himself seems to subscribe to Independence, which also can be termed Separation or Compartmentalization” (Barbour 2008, 266). He describes the efforts of Cornelius Dippel and Johannes de Jong, described in my earlier editorial (Smedes 2007, 597), as sounding “more like fourteen years of monologues than a genuine dialogue” (p. 266). He then describes his own idea of a dialogue by looking at presuppositions, parallels between science and religion, and boundary questions of science and concludes that “I believe Smedes would be quite comfortable with these forms of Dialogue” (p. 267).

Indeed, I expect there to be parallels between religion and science, considering the fact that both are activities done by humans. However, the basic questions that I would raise in this context are: Why should we look for presuppositions of science, boundary questions, and parallels? How would looking at those phenomena yield a dialogue between religion and science, rather than philosophical musings over the role of metaphysics in science and sociological descriptions of how scientists and theologians go about their businesses? What would theologians and scientists have to gain by looking at these aspects? Barbour does not address these questions. Moreover, looking at boundary questions in science suggests that theology can come into play only at the fringes of science. I thus doubt whether Barbour’s examples are enough to start a dialogue between religion and science.

I am not against dialogue. Let me give just one example of what I consider an opportunity for dialogue between theologians and scientists: evolutionary explanations of religion. I am aware of the resistance against evolutionary explanations of religious behavior, especially in the United States. I find such resistance unnecessary because I see real opportunities here for input by both scientists and theologians. Psychologist Paul Bloom (2004; 2007) has cited growing evidence that children intuitively and universally behave in a “religious” manner. Among children there seems to be a commonsense dualism and an attribution of agency and design (2007, 149–50). Bloom points to the publications of Scott Atran, Pascal Boyer, and many others who argue that these religious behaviors may have evolutionary explanations.

Reductionists or atheists like Richard Dawkins (2006) may claim that such studies show that religion is an illusion. I do not think this conclusion follows from the data. Indeed, in a very interesting study psychologist Justin Barrett argues from the same data that it is natural to believe in God—“The design of our minds leads us to believe” (Barrett 2004, 124)—and that atheism goes against the grain: “As odd as it sounds, it isn’t natural to reject all supernatural agents” (p. 108).³ I am not saying that theologians should use arguments like this to defend the rationality of faith (I would strongly argue against such apologetics), but at least theologians could analyze the arguments of Dawkins and others who use evolutionary arguments for defending their atheism as fallacious *non sequiturs*. On the other hand, just as the Big Bang theory resonates with the Christian notion of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation from nothing)—without the claim that the Big Bang confirms *creatio ex nihilo*, which would be a theological category mistake—so the data for the apparent naturalness of religious behavior resonate with theological notions like Calvin’s *sensus divinitatis* (awareness or sense of God), or Jesus’ words that believers should become like children (Matthew 18:3; Mark 10:13–16), or Paul’s words about the recognition of the divine in nature (Romans 1:19–20).

I believe such resonances can stimulate theologians and scientists to engage in an interesting dialogue concerning human nature, the roots of spirituality, and the anthropological dimensions of theology.

NOTES

1. I thus favor a weaker interpretation of divine *concursus* (Smedes 2004, 22), although I am unsure that Aquinas himself would not subscribe to the stronger (and more problematic) interpretation, according to which for a contingent being to act, God must concur in this act, otherwise it cannot come to be. This means that God continuously “monitors” each and every aspect of the universe and that everything that happens, happens with God’s explicit consent. Davies sometimes seems to suggest that Aquinas adheres to the stronger version (for example, Davies 1992, 164, where he quotes the words of Julian of Norwich that “God does everything which is done”).

2. However, the paper, the ink, the writer, the process of writing, and so forth are part of the same reality. This is not so in the case of God, who according to Christian theology transcends created space and time.

3. Note, however, that Barrett commits the naturalistic fallacy.

REFERENCES

- Barbour, Ian G. 2008. “Taking Science Seriously without Scientism: A Response to Taede Smedes.” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 43:259–69.
- Barrett, Justin L. 2004. *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* Lanham, Md.: AltaMira.
- Bloom, Paul. 2004. *Descartes’ Baby: How Child Development Explains What Makes Us Human*. New York: Basic Books.
- . 2007. “Religion Is Natural.” *Developmental Science* 10:147–51.
- Davies, Brian. 1992. *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Dawkins, Richard. 2006. *The God Delusion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Porter, Andrew P. 2001. *By the Waters of Naturalism: Theology Perplexed among the Sciences*. Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock.

- Smedes, Taede A. 2004. *Chaos, Complexity, and God: Divine Action and Scientism*. Leuven, Belgium: Peeters.
- . 2007. "Religion and Science: Finding the Right Questions." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 42:595–98.
- . 2008. "Beyond Barbour or Back to Basics? The Future of Science-and-Religion and the Quest for Unity." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 43:235–58.