

Editorial

THE CHALLENGE OF SELF-CONCEIVING: BRIDGING MYTH AND SCIENCE

A recent discussion by philosopher Owen Flanagan has been replaying in my mind for some months now. It deals with the tension between basic images that inform how we think about ourselves—how we self-conceive. Two ideal types of images offer themselves to us for self-conceiving, both embodied in traditions of reflection that have emerged in the history of our conscious thought: (1) prescientific images that have emerged in our millennia-long history of engaging the world around us and our own basic human nature and (2) images based on modern scientific thinking. I am convinced that working through this tension is a central issue in the engagement of religion and science. The prescientific images (Flanagan calls them the “original” images) are carried preeminently by religious traditions, and they come to us in myth, art, epic, fables, poetry, music, and practices of morality and spirituality.

Two strategies stand out as current responses to this issue. On the one side are most secular thinkers and certain religious “progressives,” who believe that the forms in which the original images are conveyed are obsolete, fanciful, or simply wrong, because they are factually in error; it is said that they rest on a faulty empirical base. These images have been superseded by scientific understanding, so the argument goes, and our unwillingness to relinquish them is a root cause of the tension between religion and science. The task is to jettison what needs to be scrapped, correct the premodern faulty empirical judgments, and provide alternative images that can be described in naturalistic terms. This strategy, as one might expect, is offensive to those who cannot or will not give up traditional images and practices. On the other side are the traditional thinkers who interpret scientific images so that they can be absorbed into the traditional forms. The evolutionary history of the cosmos and of life on planet Earth—often considered to be a blind process, without larger purpose—is, for example, interpreted as the work of a God conceived as Artist or Composer or Lord

of the Dance—full of paradoxes and surprises. Or, the same nonteleological processes of evolutionary history are held to be processes of emergence by which evolution enters a phase of self-generation or autopoiesis, whereby a persuading God lures into existence the human species. Such attempts, however satisfying in religious communities, are, as we might expect, considered by secular thinkers to be a kind of fudging that finds no support in scientific thinking.

Neither of these strategies is likely to endure as a satisfactory way to handle the tension between scientific and classical options for our self-conceiving. The challenge is not so much how to correct the premodern faulty empirical foundation or how to set the premodern facts straight as it is to understand how to access this earlier wisdom and how to integrate it with our modern, scientific knowledge. Because this premodern wisdom assumes the form of myth, fable, art, music, and the like, the salient issue is how to interpret these forms. How can we take our place in this long history of well-winnowed wisdom that our species has accumulated through the millennia? As Flanagan puts it, what is required if we are to see that the original and the scientific forms of self-conceiving “need not be perceived or experienced as inconsistent”? (Flanagan 2007, 6)

I have dealt with aspects of these questions in editorials that appeared in December 2007 and September 2008. In the latter, I made the distinction between the idea of science as a realm of pure ideas and embodied science, that is, science embedded in its sociocultural context. At the level of pure theoretical ideas, dissonance between prescientific and scientific thinking is more prominent, especially when classical myth is interpreted literally. Literal interpretation is, of course, entirely inadequate as a methodology for approaching myth, fable, art, and the like. The fields of literary criticism, art history, and the history of religions must be consulted when we interpret myth; those fields must be allowed to inform our interpretive methodology.

Embodied science takes on a face that is quite different from theoretical science—the face of power and control over nature, as Francis Bacon insisted at the dawning of modern science in the seventeenth century. Scientific work as it is actually practiced is funded by government and commercial interests that expect concrete results that will allow technological application for changing and/or improving the world. At its most fundamental, scientific research is a matter of our sociocultural survival; this accounts not only for the control and funding of science by powerful social institutions but also for the essential place that science holds in our society today. As an essential instrument of survival and changing the world, science leads us into engagement with the deepest realities of human experience. We experience science-as-enabler-of-changing-the-world in the practice of medicine, in developing military capability, in manipulating the natural environment, and in other such basic human activities. This expe-

rience ushers us into the realm where we must make decisions that are genuinely ambiguous, which interweave benefit and degradation, good and evil, confidence and fear. This is the realm in which we know failure as well as success, a realm in which unintended consequences frequently carry our decisions in directions that we do not foresee and that bring their own immense problems. In each of these areas, we come face-to-face with a level of experience with which our traditions of myth, art, and other forms of prescientific wisdom are well acquainted. These older traditions are fully engaged with ambiguity, finitude, and tragedy.

At this level of experience, we discover that we are contemporaries with the myth of ancient Mesopotamia and Greece and the ancient scriptures of the world's religions. In this moment, we know the force and wisdom of the prescientific struggle that myth represents, even as we recognize the irrelevance of any literal conflict between myth and scientific fact. Rather than a competition between the premodern and the scientific images of self-conceiving, we come to know an experiential symbiosis in our struggle to negotiate the demands of being human in our own time. Here we have an item for the agenda of religion-and-science: constructive work toward fashioning this symbiosis of modern science and premodern myth—in the service of our understanding who we are in the cosmos that science has opened up for us.

This final issue of our forty-third year brings together several attempts to deal with issues that require some bridging of premodern myth and modern science—not always as the authors' explicit intention, but latent in their efforts. A great deal of Marc Bekoff's research over the years has focused on animal behavior. Heading up this issue is his Thinkpiece, "Increasing Our Compassion Footprint: The Animals' Manifesto." The first full article continues our emphasis on medical science and ethics as Fatima Agha Al-Hayani (Islamic jurisprudence) interprets Muslim thinking on stem-cells and cloning.

The following four papers deal with the interface between neuroscience and classic religious myth and practices. Psychologists Daniel Levine and Leonid Perlovsky present a detailed study of certain features of human neurocognitive behavior, in which they uncover a balancing of "knowledge expansion and heuristic simplification," which they employ in an interpretation of the biblical myth of the Fall. Theologians Roland Karo and Meelis Friedenthal bring neurophenomenological concepts to bear on the New Testament myth of self-emptying (*kenosis*). Andrea Hollingsworth (theology) focuses on the field of interpersonal neurobiology to throw light on empathy and a "spirituality of compassion." The last article in this area is the work of Brick Johnstone and Bret Glass, both psychologists, who develop a neuropsychological model that relates spiritual experiences to their research on persons with traumatic brain injuries.

The final section in this issue is a collection of seven articles from the annual meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, earlier this year, which gave attention to Pentecostal perspectives on theology and science. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first such publication of its type, and it will be of lasting significance for charting the range of reflection on religion and science, particularly among groups that are not always associated with the field. Theologian Amos Yong is guest editor of this section, and he has provided an introduction to these articles. We are grateful to Yong for making it possible for *Zygon* to publish these pieces.

We conclude the issue with Charles Smith's poem "Solstice," and two reviews: Jame Schaefer on John Hart's ecological ethics and Jennifer Baldwin on Brent Waters's discussion of technology in the postmodern world.

—Philip Hefner

REFERENCE

- Flanagan, Owen. 2007. *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

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Pentecostal Voices in Religion and Science

Voices from Pentecostal Christianity have not been prominent in the religion-and-science discussion. In this issue, *Zygon* publishes six articles from the annual meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies (SPS) jointly held with the Wesleyan Theological Society at Duke University Divinity School, 13–15 March 2008. The conference theme was “Sighs, Signs, and Significance: Pentecostal and Wesleyan Explorations of Creation and Science.”

Professor Amos Yong (Regent University School of Divinity, Virginia Beach), who edited these papers for the journal, writes that they reflect “an earnest effort on the part of both societies to take up the important questions at the science-and-theology interface.”

Zygon’s Web site reviews these articles from the Christian Pentecostal tradition. Pentecostals are becoming familiar with the dialogue between religion and science. They express both a willingness to learn from the experiences of those who have long practiced the field’s dialogue and a desire that their unique perspectives be heard and respected even as they acknowledge that these views may likely set the teeth on edge of many in the religion-and-science community. As Pentecostals “come of age” in the religion-and-science dialogue *Zygon* wishes to recognize both their desire to contribute “solutions” to our problems and their willingness to know more about the field.

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