

Zygon and the Future of Religion-and-Science

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ON THE ROAD WITH RELIGION-AND-SCIENCE AND THE ROMANCE OF THE PAST

by *Lea F. Schweitz*

Abstract. This essay responds to the question "Where Are We Going? *Zygon* and the Future of Religion-and-Science" and was first presented on 9 May 2009 at a symposium honoring Philip Hefner's editorship of *Zygon*. It offers four suggestions for the future of religion-and-science: Ask big questions; encourage cultural literacy in the public sphere; bring a critical voice to other academic disciplines; and include the history of philosophy.

Keywords: academic discipline; academic field; cultural literacy; Nathaniel Hawthorne; history; history of philosophy; G. W. Leibniz; public intellectual; questions; Romance

My task in this short reflection is to offer a vision for the future of religion-and-science in relationship to *Zygon* from my own particular disciplinary perspectives and interests. For my purposes, I simply assume that what is good for religion-and-science is good for the journal, so my remarks focus on the former explicitly and include the latter by extension. It is a privilege

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to be asked to add my voice to this choir, and I look forward to the songs we will sing.

I ended up in religion-and-science in part because I come from (at least) two generations of questioners. After a day of school, my paternal grandfather did not ask my dad “What did you learn today?” or “Did you stay out of trouble today?” but rather “Did you ask any good questions today?” My dad, in turn, posed this question about questions to both my sister and me. This early training is probably one of the reasons that my work continually aims to be on the trail of good questions, the bigger the better. I therefore concur with the hope, recently named by Taede Smedes, that religion-and-science will pursue foundational disciplinary questions such as “What is religion?” and “What is science?” (Smedes 2007, 597–98). These days the questions that keep me up at night are in philosophical and theological anthropology: Who are we? Who do we want to be? Who should we want to be? What are the limits on who we might be? I find that religion-and-science shares this enchantment with big questions in general and these big questions in particular.

This biographical invocation of the importance of big questions in religion-and-science is meant to evoke two other features that I hope the field will see as integral to its future: ambiguity and contextuality. I do not develop these here, but they are implicit in my vision of religion-and-science, which is intimately grounded in the method and rhetoric of questions.

My early training as a questioner was formative, but it is also important to note that by the time I ended up in religion-and-science it was an emerging field of study, but a field of study nonetheless.¹ My point is that I am a relative newcomer to this game, but by the time I entered the stadium the game was well underway. The strike zone had been more or less agreed upon, there was a dedicated fan base, and some superstars had emerged. In addition to being a third-generation questioner I am a devoted baseball fan, so I’ll stretch this analogy a bit further. The perspective I am inhabiting here is perhaps something like the “third wave” of religion-and-science, and I suggest that religion-and-science is now a game that can be played both at home (that is, within its own academic boundaries) and on the road. In some sense this is obvious in that religion-and-science has at times been on the road in religious studies, in theology, and in the sciences, but I have something else in mind.

One sense in which we might take religion-and-science on the road can be seen in my recent experiences at the American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting and the Ecumenical Roundtable on science, technology, and religion. The participants at these meetings are a lively mix of academics, professionals, and interested community members. In both of these venues, I argued that increasing cultural literacy is one of the things that religion-and-science can offer society. Here religion-and-science is on the road where “the road” is in some meaningful sense

constituted by “the public.” This concurs with Hefner’s descriptions of religion-and-science’s public intellectual voice (2009). It also includes the normative hope that religion-and-science will not let the disciplinary or institutional concretization of the field permit its concerns to remain within its own boundaries. Religion-and-science should matter to lives lived, not only to the life of the mind. Religion-and-science has value in the public square because when it is done well it fosters cultural literacy and civic discourse, although not necessarily consensus. Ann Milliken Pederson (2007) has articulated something similar in her call for those in religion-and-science to be modest witnesses and scholars. This is religion-and-science on the road, beyond the university.

For the remainder of this essay, I consider religion-and-science on the road in another sense, namely in relation to my own academic disciplinary perspective as a historical philosopher/historian of philosophy.

Every year, early modern scholars gather in the Midwest for a weekend to share ideas and papers on topics of mutual interest in the history of philosophy. This year one of the papers I had the privilege of hearing took up a hotly contested feature of G. W. Leibniz’s metaphysics. Leibniz was an early modern philosopher who coined the word *theodicy*, invented (or coinvented) calculus, was a dedicated civil servant, and in some circles is best known as the author of the *Monadology*. This paper is part of a lively current debate in Leibniz scholarship about whether Leibniz was a realist or an idealist: Did Leibniz think that bodies and the material world have a metaphysical status of their own, or did he think reality is fundamentally mindlike? (This may not seem like the kind of thing that people should get worked up about, but, to put it mildly, it is.)

One of the papers at this year’s seminar offered the lovely conciliatory proposal that Leibniz was both idealist and realist (McDonough 2009). A key feature of this paper was that it called for contributions from religion and science. The conciliatory proposal was explained through an analogy to the sciences and was motivated by religious considerations. In brief, it suggested that the relation between Leibniz’s realism and idealism is analogous to the relations between biology and chemistry or between chemistry and physics. It claimed that Leibniz held onto both realism and idealism because both were needed to provide the necessary foundations for Leibniz’s ecumenical commitments.

These two claims raised questions for me, and they were raised because of my involvement in religion-and-science: Which biology? Which chemistry? And, what analogous relation is being drawn? Furthermore, what is the ecumenical vision at work here? It seems to come down to a “please play nice” kind of tolerance, and surely the ecclesiology needed here is more complex than that. Finally, what relation could this ecclesiology share with the relations between the sciences?

I find this proposal quite promising, but, more important, this example shows another way in which I am envisioning taking religion-and-science on the road. The field is at a place to contribute to other academic fields in addition to religious studies, theology, and the disciplines of the sciences. In history of philosophy, religion-and-science raises a different kind of critical voice that brings the mirror of contemporary practices to historical contexts to illuminate the historical contexts—not in anachronistic ways but in ways that help the historian of philosophy question further and interrogate the nature of the claims under investigation. Thanks to Hefner's dedication to the publication of high-quality scholarship in *Zygon* and thanks to the work of many of the folks who came together to celebrate his tenure, religion-and-science has deliverables for other fields of inquiry. The field of religion-and-science is a gem, and I'd like us to show it off a bit more to those in other academic disciplines who don't yet know what they're missing—and may even be reluctant to have religion-and-science in their midst.

What about traffic running in the other direction? Why should the historical philosopher/historian of philosophy have a place in religion-and-science? It depends on what one thinks such a person does. One form such a thinker may take is as a philosopher with an ever-watchful eye to the historical context, meaning, shape, and transfer of ideas in all their wondrous variety and embodiments.

Lately, Nathaniel Hawthorne has been one of my guides in thinking about this scholarly practice. I quite like his description of *The House of the Seven Gables* as a work of Romance; it shares much with the practice of history of philosophy. He writes:

When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material . . . as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and . . . it sins unpardonably, so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart. . . . [The writer] will be wise, no doubt . . . to mingle the Marvellous rather as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor, than as any portion of the actual substance of the dish offered to the Public. . . . The point of view in which this Tale comes under the Romantic definition, lies in the attempt to connect a by-gone time with the very Present that is flitting away from us. (Hawthorne 1967, 1–2)

Here, Hawthorne claims that the writer of a work of Romance may claim a certain latitude in terms of the subject matter because the Romance is a work of art, but not just anything goes. Writers of Romance should stay close to the truths of the human heart and should mingle with “the Marvellous” only to add “slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor” to the work. In these aspects the historical philosopher/historian of philosophy shares much with the scholar of religion-and-science. They share an aesthetic sensibility, are beholden to the truths of human heart, and find a curious ambiguity in mingling with the Marvelous. But, the key to the work of

Romance for Hawthorne lies in its attempt to connect a bygone time with the very Present that is flitting away from us. This is essentially what it is for a work to be a work of Romance, and this, I take it, is the contribution of the historical philosopher/historian of philosophy to religion-and-science.

The historical philosopher is at her or his best when she or he helps us look simultaneously ahead of us, behind us, and around us. It adds a depth to the present and brings a feast of portable images, metaphors, concepts, and arguments that enrich the practice of religion-and-science and help it to understand the terms it uses in its practice. Happily, religion-and-science has long shown historical sensibilities. The vision I offer here recognizes that when religion-and-science looks around and looks ahead it will take religion seriously and take science seriously. In addition, I hope that when we in religion-and-science look around and ahead we include historical philosophers/historians of philosophy because they should not let us forget the Romance of the past.²

NOTES

A version of this article was presented at the symposium “Where Are We Going? *Zygon* and the Future of Religion-and-Science,” 8–9 May 2009, in Chicago.

1. One might go so far as to say that religion-and-science constitutes its own academic discipline. For my part, I am deeply ambivalent about claiming this status, and it requires a much longer discussion. Evidence would include named chairs, books published, courses taught, and journals like *Zygon*, but there are costs and benefits to such an ascription.

2. The rhetoric may suggest a certain naivete (or worse) about the horrors of the past. Romance here is not a blind nostalgia but aims to connect the past—the good and the bad—to the present in ways that speak to people now.

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