Zygon *and the Future of Religion-and-Science*

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BLAZING A NEW TRAIL FOR SCIENCE-AND-RELIGION

by James W. Haag

Abstract. Science-and-religion must be cognizant of the future on several fronts. A challenge that remains central to our endeavor is the issue of diversity—not topical diversity, but participant diversity. As a way of initially addressing this problematic, I suggest a threefold tactic. First, there needs to be a refocus of primary attention toward the realm of public/ethical issues. Second, with this shift comes the need to avoid extreme positions by finding a middle ground. Third, a highly promising path worth pursuing toward this end is paved by the once-again burgeoning theory of emergence.

Keywords: Terrence Deacon; dissonance; diversity; emergence; ethics; Philip Hefner

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While I was writing my dissertation, a colleague of mine compared the writing process to climbing a mountain. That seemed a bit discouraging, because I am not a skilled mountaineer, but uncanny in some ways. Consider this analogy in relation to the field of science-and-religion. Think of the historical trajectories: There are numerous past attempts in each example, both more and less successful. The adventurers' names are legend-

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ary; in mountaineering they include Edmund Hillary, Tenzing Norgay, and Reinhold Messner, and in science-and-religion Ian Barbour, Arthur Peacocke, and Philip Hefner. There *is* a field called science-and-religion because of these figures. There are more similarities: attempts against becoming sidetracked, great effort to avoid climbing alone, and the diligence to bring the right tools for the mountain being faced.

However, there is one glaring difference that causes severe problems: The summit we face is effectively unknown. What *is* the ideal relationship between science and religion? Metaphorically speaking, some of our most skilled climbers have been unable to summit this mountain without hearing shouts that they have reached a false peak. I don't mean to say that past attempts are unimportant, but it could be that the nature of our mountain is inherently indistinct. There may be a cloudy haze that permanently hides our summit causing all expeditions to be asymptotic at best. In light of this possibility, I want to suggest that perhaps our objective needs to be reconsidered.

For any intellectual field to remain relevant, the question of the future must continually be asked. As a multifaceted discipline, science-and-religion must be cognizant of this task on several fronts. However, there is a challenge that remains central to our endeavor—one that I think has not received the attention it deserves. That issue is diversity. I am referring not to topical diversity but to participant diversity. If science-and-religion is going to continue to thrive beyond its esoteric borders, this challenge must be met and reconciled. I wonder, for example, why women remain a minority among us. And why are black scholars not typically drawn to the topics we discuss? Why do we rarely find Hindu scholars engaging in the current dialogue? To put it bluntly, why is our mountain so lonely? There certainly is no overarching answer to these questions, but I want to argue that one likely possibility involves our sphere of concentration. We may not be asking the questions that concern the daily realities of all people.

As a way of initially addressing this problematic, I suggest a threefold tactic. First, we need to refocus primary attention toward the realm of public/ethical issues. This is the realm of overlap between all academic disciplines—what one might call the *pragmatic overlap*. Second, with this shift comes the need to avoid extreme positions by finding a middle ground, a place where we can appreciate dissonance. Third, a highly promising path worth pursuing toward this end is paved by the once-again burgeoning theory of emergence. Let me very briefly address these three themes.

First, we need a general approach that focuses primarily on the public or ethical sphere. This is not to assert that ethical issues have historically been ignored by science-and-religion scholars, nor is it to say that we must inhabit the public realm exclusively; rather, this proposal reallocates the vast majority of our future attention to these peripheral concerns. The reason I propose this change is rooted in the likelihood that future generations of

scholars will face inestimable moral challenges. As scientists continue to expand knowledge of human biology, inevitable questions will arise relating to such issues as stem-cell research, genetic engineering, and trait enhancement. Research in animal cognition and artificial intelligence as well as the possibility of alien life raise issues for human uniqueness claims and, more generally, our place in the universe. Advances in genetics and neuroscience entail issues of legal responsibility, property, and governmental abuse. Concerns might include gene patenting, the use of brain scans in court proceedings, and privacy of medical information. Exploration of cyborgs and the integration of machine and organism blur the line between reality and science fiction. These and others cannot be the topics of secluded intellectuals. The lives we lead are thoroughly tied to these questions.

Of acute significance here is an attempt to avoid absolutist claims made by scientists, religious scholars, and others. Faced with these daunting moral challenges, a reliance on authoritarian or fundamentalist perspectives will draw a great deal of popular attention. The science-and-religion community needs to be a responsible voice that speaks to the practicality of these issues and not merely their ephemeral truth. This public realm is most poignant for the science-and-religion discussion because, I believe, it is the path toward greater diversity among us. Simply put, this *is* the realm of concern for all people, and a robust and healthy future for science-and-religion occurs in this sphere of knowledge.

Second, if our attention swings to this public realm, it is essential that we pack the appropriate tools. Because the place of pragmatic overlap is vastly complex, one tool we need to keep sharp is our acceptance of dissonant information. Attempts to force a match between science and religion simply because we believe it ought to work is nearsighted in its ignorance of obvious incompatibilities that must be taken seriously. All too often, this is the atmosphere of conflict analogies as evidenced in the evolution/creation controversies—a severe representation of the antithesis of progressive interchange. If the goal is improved knowledge of ourselves and the world, genuine openness to the interconnected nature of reality is necessary. Hefner occasionally has used the notion of irony, a use quite similar to the dissonance I have in mind. However, this is not a sphere of reality on footing with the public, academic, and religious. Instead, I think something like irony or dissonance occupies the space between and within these other loci. This is not something we are striving to transcend. The transcendence of dissonance is consonance, and this is what I believe gets us into the very trouble we need to evade. Transcendence is not the goal; acceptance is. We need to stop trying to summit this mountain!

This is where I see Hefner's efforts as a crucial signpost of how to proceed. Is there any notion in science-and-religion as dissonant as the created co-creator? As a vibrant and complex theory of human being, the created co-creator exemplifies the discord between being both conditioned and

free. The most telling description may be embodied in Hefner's embrace of Paul Tillich's notion of polarities; the image "depicts the independence of the poles, even their position as antipodes, while at the same time embracing their fundamental relatedness" (Hefner 1993, 37). As "created," we find ourselves situated in a world that constrains and enables the specific type of freedom we possess. As "co-creators," we experience moments when our possible representations, decisions, and actions are deconstrained and therefore efficacious. To my mind, no better description of the dissonant reality of human being is available than the created co-creator.

Embracing differing streams of knowledge means learning to accept the reality of ambiguous information. The consequences of failing here are dire. In fact, intolerance of dissonant information may be the root cause of many of the grimmest and most appalling actions in human history.

Third, in order to avoid the typical stumbling blocks we need to be sure that our map is trustworthy. I am more and more persuaded that an encouraging strategy is offered by emergence theory. The evolutionary paradigm exhibits the genuine contextuality of the human within this cosmos. Borrowing Stuart Kauffman's apt phrase, humans are truly "at home in the universe" (1996). As Hefner has noted, the topic of emergence draws considerable attention from a variety of thinkers because it is embedded in a common experience we all share. From chemical reactions to organism organization to human social behaviors, a common logic appears to be imbedded in these phenomena. The path forward is not simply about noting these instances of emergence or theorizing about their existence; we must construct the dynamical story that accounts for persistence.

On this front, I view the dynamic approach developed by Terrence Deacon as the most meticulous and sophisticated available. Without laboring on the technical language, Deacon's approach moves from physical processes to self-amplifying formal features to high-level processes such as evolution and life. (For a more detailed assessment of Deacon's work, see Haag 2008, 69–82.) Admittedly, nothing in emergence theory guarantees guard against potential errors of judgment and action. However, I believe, "An Emergentist view of the world is likely to be most welcoming and conducive to the development of a world-valuing and self-valuing ethic that drives us toward an improvement of cosmic interactions that matter to us" (Deacon 2008). For me, this is relevant to the future of science-and-religion because of the pragmatic overlap that is epitomized in what we express as ethical experience and moral cognition—quite literally described as emergent forms of consciousness. That is, paying attention to the practicalities that affect people's lives, a task that has been central to Hefner's career, leads us into the realm of moral questions and issues.

We must avoid any urges that lead to any uncritical acceptance of scientific *or* religious ideas as the magic bullets of our clarifying efforts. By avoiding these exceedingly myopic views of science and religion, we can locate a

place for genuine dialogue where the task is constructive. At this intersection, science and religion (and other disciplines) are a part of a knowledge-constructing process that engages the subtlety of important questions. It situates the conversation at the center of human needs, desires, and hopes. My claim is that an emergentist viewpoint enhances efforts to avoid both reductionistic and inflationistic endpoints. By residing between the purely mechanical and purely phenomenal, one can embrace a middle ground where pragmatic questions of value can be effectively addressed.

Hefner is noted for saying that we want to get at things as they really are, to take the actual world into account. To be sure, this is what motivates all of us to continue our hike up this mountain. The challenges faced by those who seek the adventure of the science-and-religion mountain are vital and severe. Some explorers make the maps and others follow them. The ambiguity of the task is daunting, but I believe refocusing our sights, learning to appreciate dissonance, and adopting a dynamics of emergence are elements of an initial effort toward getting the topography right.

NOTE

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