

Zygon and the Future of Religion-and-Science

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NEW DIRECTIONS, NEW COLLABORATIONS

by Ann Pederson

Abstract. In a world where all of life is on the edge of extinction and destruction by humankind, those who practice religion-and-science within a mutual dialogue bear the responsibility of doing so with this edge of life in mind. To speak of religion-and-science as a field of inquiry is to acknowledge the ethical responsibilities it entails. If one task of *Zygon* is to reformulate religion in light of the future dialogue of religion-and-science, we need to think about *what kind* of hope for the future is needed. Clearly, we are not simply called to repeat the past or comment on what has already been done by other academics. To help accomplish these goals and to reflect on the mission and future of *Zygon*, I appeal to the metaphor of improvisation, particularly as it is embodied in the visual and performing arts.

Keywords: future; hope; improvisation; mediocrity; responsibility

An Ellington composition is the product of a musician who has an extraordinary embodiment, if not archetype, of the artist as playful improviser.

—Murray 1996, 107

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[*Zygon*, vol. 45, no. 2 (June 2010)]

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www.zygonjournal.org

In the first editorial of *Zygon*, in March 1966, the mission of *Zygon* focused both on how humanity should live together with the rest of the natural world to build a hopeful future on this planet and on creating a novel approach for “reformulating religion for an age of science” (quoted by Hefner 2010, 420). Although these goals are still within the scope of *Zygon’s* mission, the challenges that both religions and sciences face require ongoing reflection and imagination. In a world where all of life is on the edge of extinction and destruction by humankind, those who practice religion-and-science within a mutual dialogue bear the responsibility of doing so with this edge of life in mind. To speak of religion-and-science as a field of inquiry is to acknowledge the ethical responsibilities it entails. Our world faces unparalleled crises that jeopardize the future of the planet, and the religion-and-science dialogue will be completely remiss if it does not address the crisis of meaning and of survival for all of life. To lament is not enough. To analyze is not enough. To simply write more articles is not enough. Where a difference can be made to create a more wholesome future for life together in this world (to use Philip Hefner’s language), those involved in the dialogue are called to imagine new ways of thinking, create different ways of acting, and offer strategies that bypass and challenge the old patterns of thought that have helped to create the crises.

To help accomplish these goals and to reflect on the mission and future of *Zygon*, I appeal to the metaphor of improvisation, particularly as it is embodied in the visual and performing arts. Improvisation can serve as a model for the creative processes found in the sciences and in contemporary religions. To be human is to create; it is our evolutionary calling. How the composition of *Zygon’s* future is perceived is the key to understanding the purpose and meaning of the relationship between religion and science. To further elaborate on the metaphor of improvisation and the nature of creativity I employ the writings of George Steiner, Alfred North Whitehead, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

If one of the tasks of *Zygon* is to reformulate religion in light of the future dialogue of religion and science, we need to think about *what kind* of hope for the future is needed. Clearly, we are not simply called to repeat the past or comment on what has already been done by other academics. Improvisation involves much more than mere repetition. Steiner, in *Real Presences*, comments about the language of hope and its relationship to the aesthetic task of human creativity: “Above all else, language is the generator and messenger of and out of tomorrow. In root distinction from the leaf, from the animal, man alone can construct and parse the grammar of hope” (Steiner 1991, 56). In Steiner’s words, we might say that the vocation of *Zygon* is to construct and parse the grammar of hope.

How can we go about this? In order to understand the future, we must listen to and interpret the present in all of its cultural manifestations, texts, and symbols. Interpretation is a key ingredient for improvisation. Like

learning a language, one must become skilled at the basics before one can build new grammars and carry on new conversations. Indeed, one legacy that Hefner leaves with *Zygon* is his astute reflections on and interpretation of the cultures in which the religion-and-science dialogue is embedded. Hefner's work is a contribution to this construction and parsing of the grammar of hope.

To interpret the grammar of hope one must remember the basics of the past and practice the nuts and bolts of the present. Almost a century ago, Whitehead commented on the aims of education from the perspective of his British culture. What he wrote eighty years ago rings an ominous bell for our culture today:

In estimating the importance of technical education we must rise above the exclusive association of learning with book-learning. First-hand knowledge is the ultimate basis of intellectual life. To a large extent book-learning conveys second-hand information, and as such can never rise to the importance of immediate practice. Our goal is to see the immediate events of our lives as instances of our general ideas. What the learned world tends to offer is one second-hand scrap of information illustrating ideas derived from another second-hand scrap of information. The second-handedness of the learned world is the secret of its mediocrity. (Whitehead 1970, 51)

What we cannot seem to realize (or, if we do, we deny it) is that theory and practice should never be opposed to each other, that such separation leads to secondhand information and learning. We are a culture of mediocrity—marked by secondhand information, disconnections between mind and body, and the separation of the general and particular. The academic field of religion-and-science is not exempt from this critique.

Steiner likewise warns the academy about belonging to a culture of mediocrity, a culture that literally buys into a consumption of knowledge based on commentaries and paraphrases of others' works. Such mediocrity kills a culture and a discipline. *Zygon* has not turned into one more paraphrase on someone else's secondhand knowledge—and it dare not do so. Both Whitehead and Steiner remind us that education begins with first-hand knowledge: interpreting what we know in our body, with all of its restrictions and dreams for what might be. Hefner claims that we are to “venture to live on the basis of *uncertain certainties* or what we might call *provisional absolutes*. We wager our lives on certainties about whose truth we must always remain uncertain. That is our peculiar fate” (Hefner 2010, 425). This wager is one that makes a difference to who we are and what we do with what we know.

In order not to fall prey to the seductive sirens of the culture of mediocrity, we must emphasize the power of firsthand or what I call embodied knowledge, rejoin the mind and body, and move constantly between the general and particular. These skills of engagement require four tasks: embodying this grammar of hope, listening with others who practice this

grammar, experimenting with other ways of speaking without fear of making mistakes, and then boldly constructing new ideas and paradigms. This is the task and culture of improvisation. Csikszentmihalyi writes: "Because for better or for worse, our future is now closely tied to human creativity. The result will be determined in large part by our dreams and by the struggle to make them real" (1997, 6). Are we capable of creating such bold dreams? Our answer will in large part determine the nature of our future. Such is the wager we take.

First, what does it mean to know something deep within our bodies? I offer an example. When I was a piano major in college, I was preparing for my junior recital. Sections of the Beethoven concerto that I was trying to memorize seemed to vanish when I felt anxious. I knew the chord progressions, the form of the piece, the key signature, the twists and turns—all in my head, memorized. But I did not know them in my fingers. I did not trust the touch of memory; that is, I didn't think that my fingers could walk through the music apart from my mental gymnastics. My piano teacher suggested that I take off my glasses when I played the music. He knew how nearsighted I was: I couldn't read the notes on the page. I could barely see my hands with clarity. I had to rely on my other senses, primarily the physical memory of where my hands went, how my body remembered the piece, where my feet knew the movement of the pedals. At first it didn't work. One more failed attempt at memorization. But then, bit by bit (as it always is with practicing music), I relearned the piece. I re-remembered it. Beethoven was now embodied in my body—his music in my fingers, shoulders, feet, and heart. To create is to know this deeply.

Second, to listen *with* others is to learn in new ways. *Zygon* is indeed looking toward the future. Although much has been accomplished (indeed some very fine works) in the academic arena of religion-and-science, the range of voices can be expanded in a variety of ways. The religion-and-science conversation raises profound spiritual and ethical questions. Indeed, one could just read the editorials in local, regional, and national newspapers to see what folks are concerned about. I am not advocating that the carefully disciplined practices of scholarship in the academy should be abandoned. Rigorous scholarship implies that one must read one's audience as broadly as possible. Disciplined scholars (including myself and those who read *Zygon*) are morally bound to and responsible for what they say and write because such discourse is of a public character. If we are to widen the audience and engage a broader public, we must realize that we are the public and that our own voice is always moderated and amplified by those around us. That seems so self-evident. But when we really look at what we want to accomplish in this dialogue between religion and science we need to look not only to the academy but also, and I believe more importantly, to the public square where voices are exchanged about issues that are critical for human flourishing. We also must search for and listen

to those voices that are never heard or traditionally have not mattered. They are vital to the well-being of our lives as a human race and to the survival of our planet.

Third, we are called to be artists in the boldest sense—to interpret and translate the world in which we live by generating novel ideas. Whitehead once commented: “The true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation” (1979, 5). Ideas never exist apart from the bodies that think them up. Novelty and creativity are first and foremost embodied practices, generated through relationships in communities who practice what they think. When Steiner comments on the nature of the aesthetic he claims: “The point is that these categories need to be lived before they can be stated” (1997, 6). Novelty arises from practice, not from those who merely talk about the practices with secondhand narratives trapped inside metanarratives. And yet we all do it. Present company included. Our culture desires knowledge that can merely be consumed, not savored through careful “in-gestion” (Steiner 1997, 9). *Zygon* must offer the opposite of consumption; *Zygon’s* menu must be one for “in-gestion.”

Finally, we make bold proposals, think in new ways, and hope that what we are doing is a novel approach to “reformulating religion for an age of science” (Hefner 2010, 420, quoting the journal’s first editors). To create something new is to re-member the past. Improvisation never happens without an embodiment of, critique of, and new construction of past traditions. I offer an example. I was listening to NPR one day and went to the blog site where the history of Beethoven’s *Kreutzer Sonata* was explored. The Violin Sonata No. 9 in A Major written by Ludwig van Beethoven was written in 1803. The piece is unusually lengthy and emotionally overwhelming. Inspired by the violin sonata decades later, Leo Tolstoy wrote a novella, *The Kreutzer Sonata*, in which the emotional climax of the story occurs during a performance of the Beethoven sonata. Years later Leos Janacek wrote a string quartet, *Kreutzer Sonata*, this time inspired by Tolstoy’s novella instead of the Beethoven sonata. In 2005, Margriet De Moor wrote a small novel that included both emotional passion and string quartets. Beethoven’s composition inspired Tolstoy, deMoor, and Janacek. Steiner reminds us: “To look closely at the world is to alter it” (1997, 71). To improvise is to offer a critique and new construction of the past at the same time. Steiner’s definition of the aesthetic/critical act, I claim, is similar to the task of *Zygon*:

Be it realistic, fantastic, Utopian or satiric, the construct of the artist is a counter-statement to the world. Aesthetic means embody concentrated, selective interactions between the constraints of the observed and the boundless possibilities of

the imagined. Such formed intensity of sight and of speculative ordering is, always, a critique. It says that things might be (have been, shall be) otherwise. (Steiner 1997, 11)

To be an artist is to offer a reflection on and critique of the culture in which we live and work.

So, what specific directions might *Zygon* take for its future? In a recent Op-Ed in the *New York Times*, Mark C. Taylor asks for an end to the university as we know it. He decries the “mass-production university model” that has “led to separation where there ought to be collaboration and to ever-increasing specialization” (Taylor 2009, 1). His proposals may seem farfetched, but they offer us food for thought. Here a few proposals for provocation:

1. *To encourage the dialogue between specific sciences and specific spiritual/religious traditions.* *Zygon* encourages dialogue at highly specific levels. I believe that religion and science are not abstract disciplines but persons speaking from specific traditions. An academic discourse that respects and even encourages such disciplinary and religious/spiritual specificity is required for the dialogue to have integrity.

2. *To foster research and conversations about the cultural embeddedness of the religion-and-science dialogue.* Whether in religious or scientific settings, I would foster more interpretive work on how culture(s) shapes the religion-and-science dialogue. Hermeneutical dialogues around myth, narrative, public icons, and worldviews would be encouraged. Such work would benefit from the restructuring of the disciplines and academic curriculum. Taylor writes: “The division-of-labor model of separate departments is obsolete and must be replaced with a curriculum structured like a web or complex adaptive network. Responsible teaching and scholarship must become cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural” (2009, 2).

3. *To expand the dialogue with topics that address global and local crises.* Simple basic human needs such as adequate water supply and food sources raise profound questions for research and dialogue. Scholarship that is innovative and imaginative could provide new directions for *Zygon* about issues that are basic to the survival of human life. Taylor also calls for abolishing “permanent departments” and for creating what he calls “problem-focused problems” (2009, 000). He cites water as one such problem where various disciplines are necessary for thinking through the solutions to this environmental crisis.

4. *To use metaphors from the arts for exploring the religion-and-science dialogue in order to disclose or reveal new insights.* The visual and performing arts provide valuable lenses for insight and creative direction. As a practical example, *Zygon*’s Web site could provide links to articles and Web reproductions of the arts. I could easily see themes related to the musical nature of the human person or the role of the arts in the history of religion-and-science as possible topics.

5. *To support new voices, new topics, new ways of saying things.* At the level of the American Academy of Religion, the religion-and-science group has formed relationships with new working groups, but it has not been easy. Donna Haraway writes about how disparate disciplines function together: they

can only be put together in emergent practices; i.e., in vulnerable, on-the-ground work that cobbles together non-harmonious agencies and ways of living that are accountable both to their disparate inherited histories and to their barely possible but absolutely necessary joint futures. For me, that is what *significant otherness* means. (Haraway 2003, 7)

To take seriously this “significant otherness” requires that practice precedes theory. *Zygon’s* future and its significance will be in part determined by how this otherness is engaged and what difference it makes for our life and future together on this planet.

NOTE

A version of this essay was delivered at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, 2 November 2008, in Chicago.

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