

Zygon and the Future of Religion-and-Science

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WHY ZYGON? THE JOURNAL’S ORIGINAL VISIONS AND THE FUTURE OF RELIGION-AND-SCIENCE

by Karl E. Peters

Abstract. This essay briefly examines the original visions of *Zygon*, how they helped explain the publication of a new journal, and what they imply for where we might be going today.

Keywords: Ralph Wendell Burhoe; cultural evolution; Philip Hefner; hope; knowledge; meaning; morality; motivation; reformation; reformulating; science and religion; values; worldview; *Zygon*

The purpose of the symposium 8–9 May 2009, honoring Philip Hefner, was to explore *Zygon’s* place in the future of science and religion from different perspectives. As others responded to the question “Where Are We Going?” I was wondering how the founders of the journal might respond to that question. In this essay I briefly examine the original visions of *Zygon*, how they help explain and justify the publication of a new journal, and how the original visions may provide some direction for us today. I

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highly recommend to readers the four editorials from 1966. They are carefully crafted and contain much more food for thought than I can offer in these brief remarks.

There are no fewer than eight statements of vision or purpose in the first editorial, March 1966, by “The Editors,” Ralph Wendell Burhoe and Robert B. Tapp.¹ They suggest that the journal is a sourcebook and forum for critically exploring the relationships of science and religion with two primary, related purposes in mind. The first is to explore ways to “yoke” science and religion together. The other is to explore ways of reforming or reformulating religious beliefs and practices in light of scientific knowledge. However, the yoking and reforming are not for the benefit of science or religion; they are for the benefit of the wider culture, specifically for preserving and advancing life.²

The editorial opens as follows: “*Zygon*, the Greek term for anything which joins two bodies, especially the yoking or harnessing of a team which must effectively pull together, is a symbol for this journal whose aim is to reunite the split team, values and knowledge, where coordination is essential for a viable dynamics of human culture” (The Editors 1966, 1). Three ideas are to be noted in this statement. The first is that science tends to be equated with knowledge and religion with values. “Knowledge” refers to a culture’s “general beliefs and practices—the sciences (philosophies, world views, myths) and technologies” (1966, 1–2).

It is significant that the idea of “world views” is related to the general beliefs and practices of a culture, not specifically to religion. A religion may be expressed in terms of the worldviews of a wider culture, but a particular worldview is not necessarily the religion itself. Instead, religions express basic values or what is most sacred to human beings. “In every human culture, some form of religion has been a central element—some program of seeking and transmitting life’s prime values or aims (rights and wrongs) and motivations therefor (hopes and fears).” What is communicated by religion is not knowledge of how the world works; instead, “sacred knowledge” involves “messages of aim (goals, values, meanings, purposes) and their corresponding motivations” (p. 2). Together with knowledge about the world, including the more general cultural world view, a religion enables “a viable dynamics of human culture.”

Viable cultural dynamics is the second idea of the opening sentences in the editorial. Neither science nor religion is an end in itself. Nor is uniting science and religion. The primary end envisioned is a viable dynamics of human culture that preserves and advances life on earth. Science and religion are parts of a larger social-cultural system that also includes other subsystems such as technology and political structure. All of these need to work together in a viable dynamics so “that the values of life should be maximized” (p. 2). “We must find higher and more adequate patterns of preserving and advancing life on earth” (p. 4).

A third idea in the opening statement is that there is a split between knowledge and values. What has brought this about? The editors were working with the view that both science and religion are parts of cultural systems that change over time. Sometimes these changes have led to major religious reformations. This occurred some twenty-six centuries ago during the rise of city states, nations, and empires, when the great religious traditions of the world emerged. Currently with the rise of modern science during the last four centuries, we are part of “the most radical reformation of culture in human history, immersing all cultures of men simultaneously in new knowledge and new technology” (p. 4).³ “Science is radically transforming man’s world view, including his concepts of who he is and of the nature of the forces and realities that shape his destiny. Through technological applications of these new images of reality, science is radically transforming man’s ways of life and hence his duties and moral requirements” (p. 3). Older forms of religion, with many valid insights about human meaning, values, and purpose, which motivated people to live rightly, are no longer credible in light of this new knowledge. Hence, “there must be a corresponding reformation of religious ideas and practices, probably far exceeding those of the centuries which gave rise to Buddhism, Christianity, and other great religious traditions of the world. This journal is established to serve it” (p. 4).

It is not that religion alone has to adapt. The same is true of other institutions of culture. “Under the forces producing cultural changes, the change of any one element of a society—whether it be its ecology, its technology, its world view, its political structures, or its religion—may require corresponding changes in other elements in order to maintain an effectively integrated system” (p. 3). The journal focuses on religion because the reformation of religion is needed in order to reunite the split team of knowledge and values that must work together for human well-being and the well-being of all forms of life.

This is a grand set of visions that places the work of *Zygon* in the course of human history. What does it imply for where we are going today? We might compare it with the four main ideas developed in Hefner’s keynote address: the journal’s serving (1) the role of public intellectual, (2) an academic discipline of religion-and-science, and (3) religious communities, along with (4) the irony of attempting any joining of science and religion (Hefner 2010). Reflecting on that original set of visions, it seems to me that the goal is to contribute to what happens in the public square. At the same time the fact that the journal was founded in conjunction with a center for advanced study at Meadville/Lombard theological school implies that the founders recognized that the reformation of religion required the participation of people from particular religions. Further, it was necessary that those writing in the journal engage in sound, critical inquiry found in academic disciplines. Otherwise any resulting unity of science

and religion would not be credible. So there is a place for both religious communities and academic expectations even as *Zygon's* founding editors place the journal in the larger course of history by envisioning a reformation of the world's religions that heals the split between knowledge and values, so that sacred concerns will guide societies for the greater good and the advancement of life.

There is irony in this vision, as Hefner points out. In my view, the irony could facilitate the exploration of creative possibilities for yoking religion and science. However, many have rejected the *Zygon* visions as impossible and even dangerous. Some have thought that it was sufficient simply to study religion scientifically and to examine its historical interaction with science. Others within religious institutions have devoted their time to showing why advances in scientific knowledge were not relevant to religion (The Editors 1966, 7). To some extent this has been true. During the 1960s and in subsequent decades religious values did emerge to play a public role: in the civil rights movement against racism, the women's movement against sexism, and the moral majority movement emphasizing family values. From the perspective of many in religious communities, science was not needed to guide and motivate the doing of this work in the public sphere, although science has played a significant role in the peace movement following the explosion of the atomic bomb and in the environmental movement. Still others have held that religion was no longer necessary, while others thought that "religiously satisfactory beliefs" could not be true (R. W. B. 1966, 216). Today these views still are expressed. Many go even further and say that religion is dangerous as a guide for public life. Others respond that a secular, atheistic view of the world and life is dangerous. The result has been the "culture wars" of our current time.

If one follows the thinking of the 1966 *Zygon* editorials, one might recognize the importance of considering that the current animosity in our culture between persons committed to traditional religions and the scientifically minded secularists (the "new atheists") is influenced by identifying religion with a worldview. Religious conservatives in various cultures are trying to hold on to their faiths as expressed in prescientific worldviews, believing that aspects of a particular worldview are essential to their religion. Secularists are trying to assert a new, scientifically grounded view of the world and claim that religions are antiquated. The original set of *Zygon* visions affirms the importance of religion but not of the older worldviews in which religions have been expressed. It affirms the importance of religions' sacred knowledge in providing moral direction, motivating people to do what is right, giving meaning for human living, and offering hope when the events of life can lead to despair. These kinds of things need to be expressed anew in relation to a scientific worldview. This is the kind of reformation of religion that is needed.

Aiding in this reformation might be new understandings from the sciences that help ground some of the important functions of religion itself. Since 1966, increases in knowledge from various sciences have helped us better understand how it is that humans need meaning for their lives, how we are capable of morality and also immorality, how we can be motivated to do what is right and what prevents us, and how we require ways of finding hope in times of despair. This does not mean that science provides specific meanings, moral codes, motivations, and hopes. Religions and other aspects of culture that provide values, purpose, and meaning do this. Still, with increased understanding of our species as having evolved in relation to other primates and of how our brains work in interactions with others, religious practices related to the goals of life can be enhanced. This is a direction *Zygon* can continue to explore.

Traditional religions offer important wisdom as we seek to gain new knowledge through the sciences. A part of the meaning that sacred knowledge has brought to cultures is that there is a reality more than human that judges our efforts of life and thought. The closing words of the first editorial express this idea in terms compatible with a contemporary worldview grounded in the sciences:

We recognize that the ultimate judgment and selection of human beliefs and behaviors are made, not by the wisdom or foolishness of men, but by historical forces that far transcend our puny wisdom to comprehend. We conceive it our duty and our hope to stimulate and participate in this search: How can man effectively join his understanding of reality from the sciences with his sense of what for him is sacred? (The Editors 1966, 10)

In Burhoe's later work, this kind of statement was expressed also in the traditional religious symbol of the "Lord of History" to whom our life and thought is accountable (Burhoe 1975). We live most effectively when we are cognizant of the wider reality that has created us and in which we "live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

Interestingly, the first editorial's concluding statement is consistent with a key feature of science, the scientific method. It is compatible with a scientifically grounded epistemology. In responding to the question of whether the journal aims to found a new religion, the editors write about the need for continuity with the past if a culture is to continue to be viable:

. . . neither science nor traditional religion permits man to believe simply what he happens to wish or want. We hold that true statements and valid patterns of life are those which can bear repeated tests for validity by many experiencers in many ways, times, and places. We adopt for problems of religious believing and behavior this criterion for validity which has been formulated by the philosophy of science and which is attested to by the evolution or history of both organic and cultural life forms—including religions.

On the question of whether to reform or to create a wholly new religion, we fancy we are scientifically informed enough to understand that we cannot lightly throw away ancient wisdom in any religious tradition. Man is not clever enough

to produce a new language, religion, or any other cultural structure of long evolutionary history without starting from some model provided by prior cultural evolution. Even the especially rapidly evolving languages or concepts of the sciences and mathematics always arise out of the foundations laid by the cumulative experience of prior generations. Continuity of basic functions is as essential in the evolving patterns of cultural as in biological organization. Basic discontinuity is another way of spelling extinction. (The Editors 1966, 7)

This does not, in my opinion, discount the fact that individuals and groups of individuals develop new philosophies of life that address many of the same issues that organized religions address. The thinking of many contemporary religious naturalists has been presented in the pages of *Zygon* in recent years. Such thinking, which affirms a naturalistic worldview grounded in the sciences, may be used to inform in various ways the reformation in religious communities of more traditional forms of religion. Conceivably, over decades or even centuries, religious naturalism could lead to a new significant form of organized religion with a structured community, ritual practices, and ways of moral living. Whether and how much religious naturalism or any other reforming movement (or even a reaffirmation of religion expressed in terms of old worldviews) will be a significant guide for future human societies, only historical forces and processes, which transcend our own efforts in this particular time and place, will tell.

So, in light of the original vision, where are we going in religion-and-science? In the final analysis, it is not within our capacities to decide. Each of us working in this field in our own ways can only follow our own abilities, enhanced by our respective forms of education. We can only follow our own intuitions as to what might be helpful to reconnect knowledge of the world and ourselves from the sciences with values, meanings, and purposes from religions. If the value-meaning-purpose side of life can be effectively expressed in the context of the knowledge of the world coming from the sciences, there can be a more credible and effective joining of knowledge and values to preserve and advance life on our planet.

NOTES

I am grateful for Philip Hefner's invitation and encouragement to develop a presentation of the original *Zygon* vision for the Advanced Seminar of the Zygon Center for Religion and Science in January 2009. The presentation laid the groundwork for this essay.

1. The March 1966 editorial is signed "The Editors." The following three editorials in 1966 are signed "R. W. B." Burhoe was the editor until 1979 and continued to contribute to the journal and lead science-and-religion work in Chicago for several years after that. He died in 1997. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ralph_Wendell_Burhoe. Tapp was managing editor for one year and taught at Meadville/Lombard theological school until 1972. He then became professor of humanities and religious studies at the University of Minnesota, 1972–94. See <http://web.me.com/rtapp4/Main/Index.html>.

2. This understanding of *Zygon* is still in effect in the following "Statement of Perspective," which appears for the first time in March 1979 and continues until today in the front or back matter of the journal. It was written by Burhoe and myself during the time of editorial transition from him to me.

The word “zygon” means the yoking of two entities or processes that must work together. It is related to “zygote”—meaning the union of genetic heritage from sperm and egg, a union which is vital in higher species for the continuation and advancement of life. The journal *Zygon* provides a forum for exploring ways to unite what in modern times has been disconnected—values from knowledge, goodness from truth, religion from science.

Traditional religions, which have transmitted wisdom about what is of essential value and ultimate meaning as a guide for human living, were expressed in terms of the best understandings of their times about human nature, society, and the world. Religious expression in our time, however, has not drawn similarly on modern science, which has superseded the ancient forms of understanding. As a result religions have lost credibility in the modern mind. Nevertheless, some recent scientific studies of human evolution and development have indicated how long-standing religions have evolved well-winnowed wisdom, still essential for the best life.

Zygon's hypothesis is that when long-evolved religious wisdom is yoked with significant, recent scientific discoveries about the world and human nature there results credible expression of basic meaning, values, and moral convictions that provides valid and effective guidance for enhancing human life. (“Statement of Perspective” 1979, 2)

In addition to this clear statement of perspective the editors also state in the guidelines for manuscripts, “Although *Zygon* seeks material that expresses its perspective (see p. 2), it also publishes manuscripts that are not fully in accord with or are critical of its viewpoint as long as such papers contribute to a constructive dialogue between scientific knowledge and concerns about fundamental meaning and values” (“Manuscripts” 1979, 97).

3. The use of “men” for humanity reflects common cultural practice during the early years of *Zygon*. Beginning with the March 1986 issue, the stated practice of the journal has been to use inclusive language (“Manuscripts” 1986).

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