

Editorial

MYSTERY?

In *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*, the Harvard theologian Gordon D. Kaufman (1925–2011) has sought to rearticulate religious symbols in a way that is relevant to contemporary problems and consistent with modern knowledge. Kaufman acknowledged the human, constructive nature of any theology but still argued that there is a meaningful way of speaking of faith in God, when God is not conceived as “a quasi-person” but rather “as the serendipitous movement which we discern in the cosmic evolutionary and historical processes that have created human existence” (Kaufman 1993, 342; see for a discussion in *Zygon*, Wiles 1994; Ferré 1994). Kaufman has contributed several articles to *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* (1992; 2001; 2003a, b; 2005).

“Mystery” is a mysterious term, or at least a term with a variety of meanings. I would prefer to distinguish it from a “puzzle”—that is, a problem that has not yet been solved. I also hold that we should distinguish it from “secret.” Knowing a secret is having power; keeping others in the dark is manipulation (or a consequence of intimacy).

“Mystery” seems to be a placeholder for “God,” just as “transcendence,” the “Ground of Being,” and many other expressions. However, “mystery” has an epistemic feel to it, even when it seems to be used to refer—if it refers at all—to a reality “at the end of all our exploring.” Further complications can be raised when used in the religious context. Are there persistent mysteries, or will everything be transparent? Is there a single “mystery” at the end of it all, or rather a plurality of disjunct mysteries? And when “mystery,” as the horizon of our understanding, is used religiously, how does one get to the valuational issues that are so characteristic of religious life?

“Mystery” is a term of self-conscious restraint, acknowledging that we don’t know. This is quite wise, and one with important antecedents in the history of religious thought. What has been called “negative theology” or the *apophatic* tradition stresses categorical differences between God and creation, and thus the inadequacy of any analogy we construct. Such modesty with respect to our abilities may serve the reconciliation of apparently different views, but it may also be part of a polemic against an orthodoxy that pretends to know it all. Nicholas of Cusa, theologian of the fifteenth century, titled a book *De docta ignorantia*, on learned ignorance, rather than on ignorance due to a lack of learning. “Learned ignorance” might be a motto for any serious agnostic.

There are risks to agnosticism, such as the risk to close one's eyes to genuine knowledge, and also the risk that one pretends modesty while suggesting to know nonetheless—at least to know the limits of knowledge possible to us. I once heard of a professor of theology who taught on the attributes of God, such as omnipotence, dedicating also a session to the unknowable attributes. For the sake of consistency, and out of respect for the possible subject matter, restraint in speaking of that which is beyond our reach seems desirable. Not being able to accept the finality of a scientific or a religious explanation, I personally think one might do well in joining the physicist Charles Misner (1977, 95): “To say that God created the Universe does not explain either God or the Universe, but it keeps our consciousness alive to mysteries of awesome majesty that we might otherwise ignore.”

This issue of *Zygon* touches upon various real or imagined mysteries. A mystery, a miracle, or perhaps just a puzzle has been “the Star of Bethlehem” that is said to have guided the three magi (astrologers, kings, wise men) to the birthplace of Jesus. By offering a detailed history of interpretations, Aaron Adair provides a cultural history of theology and of the appropriation of astronomy in this context. He finds that natural theories of “the Star”—treating the text as a puzzle—are most often defended by scientists, whereas theologians mostly treat the reference to the star as an element in a significant story.

John Wilkins wonders whether an evolutionary theist can hold that God—no immanent “mystery” here—could arrange the conditions such that an evolutionary process, with all the contingency characteristics of it, can result in the outcomes providentially desired by God.

In her analysis of studies on intercessory prayer, especially prayer for healing, Wendy Cadge touches upon the reach of medical understanding. The article addresses some of the same issues as the article on the religious appropriation or rejection of the placebo effect presented last year by Anne Harrington (2011).

Joshua Moritz considers discussions on hominid evolution. This is a most lively topic, with new finds and interpretations—for example, the Denisova hominid and the Flores hominid, parallel to Neanderthals and *Homo sapiens*, complicating existing ideas. Moritz addresses claims about human uniqueness, as made, for instance, by Wentzel van Huyssteen (2006), discussed in this journal previously (Howell 2008; King 2008; Peterson 2008; Van Huyssteen 2008; Wildman 2008). As I see it, the key question is whether one can really consider our type of hominid as an exception, a species that has passed a threshold no other species has. Can such a claim be maintained in light of the evidence, or only temporarily, as evidence is limited? Is an epistemic shortfall pointing to a genuine mystery and the unique significance of human existence, or is more to be seen as a puzzle, as we more and more understand the development of culture and language within the evolutionary process?

With Nathan Kowalsky's paper on Merold Westaphal's appropriation of the French philosopher Derrida for philosophy of religion, we come to the epistemic heart of issues also discussed by Gordon Kaufman—the coexistence of construction and engagement with the real world, and the “transcendent” beyond that horizon. Constructive projects, of various orientations, are of great interest, alongside the more analytical projects that study what people have done with religious ideas. The contribution by Thomas Howe on Nietzsche and Dawkins is partly description and analysis, but the author does not hide his preference for the richer view of life that is found in Nietzsche's challenges to theism, compared to Dawkins's atheism.

Manussos Marangudakis treats modern technology in the context of a very large narrative that stretches from the first human settlements of the Neolithic Age to the present. Whereas salvation had dealt with the soul, the imagination of modern techno-optimists speaks of salvation of the body through technological intervention, overcoming deficiencies, limitations, and death. Even if it is not true, so the author argues, the prominence of this self-image and the values thus promoted will be most important.

A recurrent theme in our self-understanding is the issue of free will when human “inner” life is presented more and more in terms of neuroscience (see for other approaches Teske 2010; Balslev 2011; Cary 2011). Sally Severino draws on the medieval theologian John Duns Scotus to propose a model for approaching free will in relation to the neurosciences as a human ability to decide.

Two interesting papers consider bioethical issues in the context of Islam. Mohammed Ghaly studies the rich history among Muslims of discussions on the beginning of life. He especially brings to our attention a conference of Islamic theological and legal scholars, medical doctors, and scientists, held in Kuwait in 1985, as a major event in the history of modern Islamic bioethics. Ghaly contributed previously on the Islamic organizations in which scientists and religious scholars meet and collaborate (Ghaly 2010). Ayman Shabana focuses on paternity and the questions raised by DNA testing. The new technology seems to challenge Islamic law, as it undermines the strong link between paternity and marriage. He concludes that DNA testing is accepted as a means to establish biological identity, but that such insights about identity do not change the Islamic understanding of paternity with its legal and social dimensions.

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