

Pedagogy in Religion and Science

with Timothy Gibson, “Between Knowing and Being: Reflections on Being Taught Science and Religion by Professor Christopher Southgate”; Louise Hickman, “Modeling the Cosmos: Transformative Pedagogy in Science and Religion”; Willem B. Drees, “God, Humanity and the Cosmos: Challenging a Challenging Textbook”; and Christopher Corbally and Margaret Boone Rappaport, “Teaching Science and Religion in the Twenty-First Century: The Many Pedagogical Roles of Christopher Southgate.”

BETWEEN KNOWING AND BEING: REFLECTIONS ON BEING TAUGHT SCIENCE AND RELIGION BY PROFESSOR CHRISTOPHER SOUTHGATE

by *Timothy Gibson*

Abstract. It is a joy to be asked to contribute to this commemorative edition of *Zygon*, in honor of my friend Christopher Southgate. But a narrowly academic article seems not to fit the brief of writing a reflection on Southgate’s teaching of science and religion, as one who has witnessed it, gladly, as both student and colleague. What follows, then, is deliberately reflective in tone, with little in the way of academic references apart from occasional links to Southgate’s own work—though, I hope, enough of a strand of argument to justify inclusion in these pages. My argument is simply put: Southgate teaches by not teaching, but by drawing out knowledge from students and thereby empowering their growth. He is an exemplar, a kind man committed to the unfolding of understanding, interested too in forming dispositions in his students that will lead to their flourishing as thinkers and as people.

Keywords: Aristotle; episteme; formation and learning; pedagogy; phronesis; science and religion; Christopher Southgate; techne

There is something about Professor Christopher Southgate that sticks in the mind. It is not the well-worn tweed coat, or the wayward hair, bleach blonde when he taught me in the early 2000s as I recall. It is still less the countless pens thrust in clusters into his inside pocket. These are mere affectations—artifacts of the professorial self, constructed to soften and

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deflect from the shrewd intellect and calculating mind, like a snooker player's, capable of planning three or four shots in advance.

Southgate's task is reflection on ultimate questions, those raised by examination of the relationship between science and religion. So he wanders around the front of the classroom, hands alternately thrust deep in jacket pockets or gesturing forwards, inviting us to consider the minutiae of the quantum level or pointing towards the order-from-mayhem of chaos theory. For here we see Southgate the teacher, which is a misnomer since his pedagogical style is not really to teach so much as to draw out from the class knowledge located somewhere in the space between his impressive intellect and class's own wanderings, less articulate than his, less well-honed.

So his style is clear. I will embody the tension that I am seeking to expound. I will be the wrestling, before your very eyes, so that you may learn, and grow, and reorient yourself to the world in my unusual, awkward, loving company. Southgate is a partner in learning, a fellow seeker of understanding. Southgate the teacher reveals a small part of himself, while opening the world wide for us all to peer inside.

What, then, is his technique? What is he up to as he cracks open the universe and takes us on a guided tour? We know him well enough now to understand that there is a plan, albeit well disguised. That he knows what he's doing, even as he walks into the lecture room apparently surprised by our presence, uncertain of the task before him, stuttering and umming and grasping in the air between us for appropriate words.

But how is it that he *teaches*? How is it that of all my undergraduate studies, those led by Southgate, resulted in knowledge that endures, when all he seemed to do at the time was deepen my confusion, confound my limited intellect? How can it be that I have even some understanding of the deep science he spread out before us—I with the resolutely arty mind, who struggled with the most basic scientific concepts at school?

BORN TO TEACH

Southgate would be the first to admit that there's only so far you can take a group of undergraduates over a 24-week science and religion course. It is hard to condense the stuff of the universe into a few hours each week. Perhaps that explains why he does not so much expound on the great theories of the day as point at the world and say, "Look! It's seductively mesmerizing and complex! Look, there: it's the stuff of life!"

But there is an ideology behind this, or at least a belief in the power of education to shape lives. Why else would Southgate, the renowned scientist-theologian and poet, have dedicated so many years to the training of Anglican priests, or indeed to the careful instruction of undergraduates, let alone the endless church study groups that bear his thumbprint? To put it simply, he teaches because he must; because, for Southgate, this

conversation about the interplay between scientific understanding and belief in God's providence is one in which everyone is invited to play a part. And his vocation is to empower those whose voices may be muted through lack of understanding to participate, with confidence, because our insights have a place in the gradual unfolding of truth, warts and all—a place, if you will, in the groaning of creation (Southgate 2008).

To be clear, this is a commitment that transcends Southgate's identity as a high-flying scholar of international renown. Remember that his first exposure to academic theological study was by means of a course for beginners pioneered by the great Professor David Catchpole. This experience leaves its mark: it formed Southgate the theologian as one whose commitment, like his first theological teacher's, is to help all God's people—those of faith, those of no faith, and those of uncertain faith—explore, gesture, and reach for the truth that is yet to be fully known (1 Corinthians 13).

One thing, then, that surprised me about Southgate as I came to know him better was his profound knowledge of Scripture. The scientist-theologian who taught me as a teenager kept this under his hat—or in his inside pocket, at any rate; in among the pens, no doubt. We may have sensed the Christian man in gentle gestures, encouraging words, sincere attentiveness to the selves being formed before him. But we did not glimpse it in the intellectual interrogation of the universe. It was left to us to decide where we stood on that score.

THE SPACE IN BETWEEN

Perhaps this explains the great gift of Southgate the teacher, who does not teach at all: he has the confidence to create space. Even in a topic that would seem, *prima facie*, to invite didacticism and overspecification of the syllabus, Southgate manages to curate a space for becoming. Consider his assessment method for a final-year *God, Humanity and Cosmos* module as a case in point (cf. Southgate 2011). Rather than producing an abstract essay on the causal joint, say, Southgate invited us to map a model of the relationship between God, human beings, and the universe. This was Southgate the poet, encouraging our *poiesis*: the bringing into being of something that did not exist before. Not stuff, but understanding—a view on the world and our origins, and our place within it. The capacity to judge wisely who we are, and what it is we're becoming. And the confidence to know that our nascent grasping was as important as anyone's.

I regard this as the great gift Southgate imparts: the permission to consider yourself an equal in unfolding the world's mysteries. While we may not have his intellect, we students of his are given to believe that we have a place in the dialogue, nonetheless. Witness his Socratic teaching method, his openness to ongoing dialogue with students, his willingness to join them in the coffee shop for continued discussion. Here is not

some remote academic, glad of his ivory tower. Instead, we see a kind man, generous with his time, gracious in responding to even hare-brained theories—because that is his calling, not only to seek to make sense of the universe, but to encourage others to participate, and thereby encourage their flourishing.

EPISTEME, TECHNE, PHRONESIS

It is tempting to seek labels when describing Southgate's teaching, in order to facilitate deeper reflection on his methods. But the prevailing pedagogic theories of the day get us only so far. What Southgate is concerned with is dispositions, with the forming of selves that is the beating heart of all education.

To articulate this, we may reach for that other great dissector of the universe, one who could tell the whole from its parts, and understand how the parts contributed towards the whole: Aristotle. I have never thought to ask Southgate if he admires Aristotle, or even if he has read him. But his desire to form the students whose company he keeps, to serve as exemplar and guide, is one that I have always understood to be Aristotelian in spirit.

In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (1953) breaks human knowing down into three categories: *episteme*, *techne*, and *phronesis*. *Episteme* has to do with the acquisition of knowledge; it is, for example, understanding the science of quantum physics, being able to explain it to another. *Techne* is about technical ability; knowing how to conduct an experiment about wave-particle duality, say, or at least mount an argument in its favor. And while both categories of knowing are important to our formation, it is the final one, *phronesis*, which is the test of our learning. This term, denoting practical wisdom, has to do with our capacity to make wise decisions, depending on the circumstances at hand. What Aristotle sees with striking clarity is that this virtue transcends the specifics of a subject matter; it has to do with our very becoming as humans and is therefore the key to the acquisition of all other virtues. It is the key to the good life.

To consider Southgate's approach to teaching science and religion in light of these comments is to make quite a claim: namely, that his focus is broader, more ambitious than the acquisition of knowledge or technique in relation to his topic. It seems to me that his principal concern is how this educational encounter, between pupil and instructor, yields personal growth for both parties. Thus it is not only understanding that grows as a result of the conditions he sets up, but *selves*.

FORMING SELVES

Southgate himself, when the time comes, may read these reflections and shake his head in that owlsh gesture of dissent that his friends know so well. Either way, I am certain that he would see this as an opportunity to

encourage further discussion, deeper nuance, more careful expression. And I have long since abandoned any hope of successfully second guessing what makes him tick. But let me end by reasserting my beginning: Southgate is an unusual man, whose teaching sticks in the mind because it goes beyond enhancing understanding of a particular curriculum.

Southgate's teaching, embodied as much in its form as in its content, if not more so, is principally oriented towards the formation of selves. That is why he has been so successful as a ministerial and adult educator as well as a teacher of undergraduates. His gift is to treat students as equals, and invite them into the process of being formed—a process that he sees himself as a part of, too.

So Southgate the teacher is not so far removed from Southgate the student, who I see in my mind's eye tasting academic theology in that adult education class for beginners. He teaches as I suspect he was taught—as one who longs for the encounter to be deep, dialogic, formational. As one of God's people, no more and no less, searching for truth in community with others.

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