



Dialogue: Response

Is the Boundary Between Science and Theology Distinct?

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Walter Thorson roots his kind of "naturalism" in a theological claim. While I enjoyed his lucid, wide-ranging appraisal of historical, philosophical, and methodological issues in science, and agree with much of it, my space for response is limited. Consequently, since I am a theologian, I will focus on his pivotal theological claim.

Thorson insists that God is utterly transcendent, sovereign, and free. In fact, we would not know God at all, had not God chosen to be revealed to us through Jesus. This knowledge of God is personal and relational. Thorson contrasts it with scientific knowledge, which he traces to Adam's naming of the animals. Science operates entirely within the human task of cultivating and ordering creation. It cannot tell us about the sovereign, utterly transcendent God. In support of his basic theological claim, Thorson apparently enlists Karl Barth.

This epistemology allows Thorson to distinguish science clearly from theology. He next clearly distinguishes mechanistic explanations from those most appropriate to biology (I agree with him here). He apparently values such clear divisions. The first limits science to a particular realm, delegated entirely to humans. This division keeps science free from interference by theology, and from murky intermingling at their borders. It also places God beyond rational human scrutiny and control.

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So far as I can see, theological knowledge, for Thorson, deals with persons and relationships. Scientific knowledge deals with what many existentialist philosophers called "things" (something like "matter-energy" might be better). This distinction was fairly common in neo-Orthodox theologies. But not in Barth's.

Barth found God's freedom and transcendence most evident in God's being "God not only in Himself, but also ... in our cosmos, as one of the realities that meet us." God's transcendence is not basically one of distance, vastness, or inscrutability. "His majesty is so great" that God can become "identical with one of the realities of our cosmos" and be majesty "precisely in the midst of this lowliness ..."¹

Barth is expressing something that most Christians, historically, would affirm. God was most fully revealed not in some distinct realm of personal relationships, but by actually entering that realm of matter-energy which science studies, and relating to us personally in this intrinsically physical way. For Barth, and most Christian tradition, this meant that Jesus' conception and resurrection, at least, were truly physical events, though produced by processes quite different from any yet elaborated by science.

I recognize that talk of "divine intervention" has often retarded scientific progress. It is also hard to discern what implications, if any, this notion might have for scientific practice, which seems to function nicely within a "naturalistic" frame. Yet Thorson's sharp distinction between persons, with their relationship, and "things" creates significant theological problems. I do not see how it

could avoid implying that Jesus' conception and resurrection occurred by "naturalistic" processes, and that theology must distinguish between these "facts" and their "meanings." Accordingly, the meanings of *virginal* conception and *bodily* resurrection would have to lie in the personal, relational realm. Their purported physical features would have to be symbols of some existential or spiritual concern.

Despite the problems of leaving the theology-science border somewhat open, I do not see how it can be closed in Thorson's way without shutting down the very avenue which the free, sovereign, transcendent God chose for self-revelation.

I do not think Thorson's "naturalism" can really be rooted in God's transcendence and freedom, if these be understood biblically, as well expressed by Barth. "Naturalism" seems to be based, rather, on a concept of transcendence as vastness and as inscrutable, impenetrable mystery. This concept, however, appears to be simply the reverse of general notions like immanence and finitude. To be sure, Thorson enlists this concept to reverence God, to place the Infinite beyond finite scrutiny and control. Yet if theology begins from God's self-revelation, with God as known in Jesus, transcendence must be understood in connection with God's extraordinary self-humbling and self-giving. Transcendence must be, very largely, the marvelous transcendence of that Love over all else, actualized most fully by God's own entrance into the creaturely sphere.

I doubt that Thorson's notion of science can really be derived from Genesis 2 either. Theological history is littered with diverse, often discordant attempts to base anthropology on Genesis 1–3. This, I believe, has occurred precisely because these chapters provide very little data, and indirect data at that, for this enterprise. Consequently, numerous anthropologies can be read into them. (For me, anthropology begins with Jesus, the most complete human, as for Barth.)

Perhaps I simply seem to be rehashing what scientists too often hear from theologians. Perhaps theology seems to once again be curbing science simply through inferences from its own data, without really investigating science itself. In any case, my approach does leave the borders between science and theology somewhat murky and messy. Yet perhaps this is not all bad.

Thorson himself notes that scientific models and notions often arise not from a strictly delimited scientific realm, but through broader cultural processes. Science, he affirms, cannot prescribe what it should be, in the large, apart from, or in advance of, its actual explorations. Further, Christian notions—which theology articulates—have significantly shaped science as we know it.

It seems, accordingly, that both science and theology might continue to grow and be enriched by holding open some of those murky problems on their borders. Perhaps the very issues which seem most intractable will finally spark those imaginative leaps requisite for truly new insights and paradigms in both disciplines. Even if such speculation has sometimes appeared fruitless and has retarded, rather than advanced, theology and science, persistence at these messy borders has also borne much fruit.

In contrast, clear divisions between the two might actually encourage that human autonomy over against God that Thorson rightly fears. For they make science autonomous, if not ultimately, at least in methods and criteria. As Thorson says, they delegate the scientific enterprise entirely to humans, and imply that it can be rightly pursued without personal change, or repentance. (Of course, insistence on some murky interrelations could yield opposite effects. Perhaps faith would intrude too far into thought, or thought into faith. Perhaps religion would intrude into the public realm, or the public realm into religion.)

In sum, Thorson, if I understand him at all, proposes a relationship between science and theology largely informed by clear distinctions between things and persons, facts and meanings. Many sincere Christians have indeed found these the best way of relating faith to scientific understanding. Clear distinctions between ways of knowing will always appear attractive to numerous people. Yet if this model is viable, I do not think it can really be derived from God's transcendent freedom expressed through Christ, or from Adam's naming the animals.

At the end of the day, I suppose I emerge a theologian. Despite the problems of leaving the theology-science border somewhat open, I do not see how it can be closed in Thorson's way without shutting down the very avenue which the free, sovereign, transcendent God chose for self-revelation. ◇

Note

¹ Or, as Gregory of Nyssa put it: "The 'divine transcendent power' ... is proved by the fact that that which is high, without descending from its height ... itself appears in that lowliness, in that Deity becomes human and yet remains divine." All quotes are from Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I, Part II (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), 31.