



Arie Leegwater

Rapprochement between Science and Religion

New beginnings are events that do not occur *ex nihilo*. In a sense they entrain the efforts of the past, both the successes and the failures, and simultaneously they anticipate a pregnant, but unknown, future. *PSCF* has existed for sixty years; it has responded to many different needs and addressed a wide variety of concerns. Its voice is one that will need continual refining and updating. Stepping into the shoes of the previous editor, I have already become aware how delicate the task may become: whether, on the one hand, to become too enamored by the need for moderation, attempting not to make any waves, or, on the other hand, to antagonize everyone in sight. Clearly there is a fine line to be drawn, but a position that avoids any hint of controversy or detects no need for reforming action would not be one that I would want to stake out. So at times I will take the opportunity to speak my mind about matters which I think we should prize in our affiliation and journal.

What unites us is the Gospel of Christ, our Savior and Lord, who invites allegiance and calls us to lead a life that is deeply committed to the scriptural injunction not to be conformed to the patterns of this age, but to be re-formed by the renewal of our consciousness, so that we may discern what God wills for our lives—our scientific practices included. Ultimately our sciences and their practices are not what unite us, no matter how firm our allegiance to an academic discipline or professional association may be. But clearly there are particular views on offer that energize us and even seemingly divide us in implementing Christ’s call to be his servants in our scientific practice. To take but one example: in the long history of discussion about the relationship of science and religion, we often find that theology, particularly in its Christian theistic form,

is either being used to “sacralize” nature or is being employed as a complement to science in the interpretation and description of the “natural” world. As a consequence, the metaphor of warfare between science and religion would now appear to be dated; rather, warfare has been replaced by metaphors of rapprochement or harmony. We tend to invoke what I would call c-words in our descriptions: descriptions move from metaphors of conflict and confrontation to those of concordance, compatibility, complementarity, convergence, congruence, coherence, and so forth. Many of these ventures in harmonization and integration can too quickly curtail legitimate debate and discussion and evade the essential character of our work as Christian scientists and professionals.

The harmonization strategies in vogue also create a burden, or at least generate false impressions for scientists: for all too many, the word theology sounds like something that scholars advance in order to give Christian meaning to the otherwise secular pursuit of science. At least three options for scientists seem to be on offer: (1) to follow Stephen J. Gould’s advice, keep the solution simple: we must distinguish the legitimate sphere of science (the “physical” universe) from the legitimate sphere of religion (meaning, value, and ethics) and we must ensure that neither intrudes on the other [Gould’s famous, or infamous NOMA principle], (2) to develop a natural theology in which natural physical events are viewed as mirroring the action and activity of the Godhead, or exemplifying God’s very nature (Science, it is said, is “to think God’s thoughts after him”), or (3) to argue that modern science and its methodologies are the fruits of Christianity, so that our science is in principle Christian. All of these options have their own particular problems and assumptions which I cannot now trace.

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As much as systematic theology, as a discipline, should pay attention to developments in science, there are other, often confessional, worldview, and philosophical issues which need addressing if we wish to understand the relation between science and religion. For instance, how should we assess situations in which science itself begins to assume religious status, that is, when it offers itself as the *alpha* and the *omega*, the first and last word, on all matters? Can science harbor its own religion? Or to employ a telling phrase of John Brooke: “[Can] the excision of religion from science ... itself be a form of religion?”

Obviously very much depends on how we conceptualize the realities involved. Science, defined in terms of content and methodology—a methodological naturalism, if you will—will fail to take seriously the rich context of scientific practice. It will then be easy to dismiss or minimize religious matters as irrelevant. Similarly if religion is identified with theology or biblical doctrines, or limited to devotional practice, the role of faith will be greatly reduced in its ability to fund scientific practice. We tend to over-intellectualize the relationship between science and religion framing the issues in terms of comparing propositional statements in systematic theology with statements derived from the latest scientific theory. Recent biographical research (on, among others, Arthur Eddington and Charles Coulson) traces out how the relationship of science and religion is far more intimate in a person’s life than we have often assumed. Attention is properly shifted away from a narrowly confining focus on ideas and concepts to a broader, more integral concern with the practices of science. The focus then is not on what scientists say as much as on what they actually do.

In summary, what we need is a Christian anthropology which allows us to go beyond considering a person as a Christian and/or a scientist, but promotes a more integral view of what it is to be human. Only then can we do justice to our human condition and to those who consider religion not as irrelevant *to*, or in conflict *with*, or simply an influential factor *on*, but rather as the very *ground* for scientific practice. 

Arie Leegwater, *Editor*



In This Issue

This first issue in 2008 has a sparkling variety of articles and author exchanges on display. Denis Lamoureux introduces us to the thorny issues surrounding biblical hermeneutics and proposes certain limitations on the concept of biblical inerrancy. The next two articles explore the relationship of ethics to scientific and engineering practices. George Bennett’s article examines the principles of green chemistry and its relationship to environmental ethics found in Abrahamic religions. In the other article, Gayle Ermer, utilizing the idea of overlapping *magisteria*, proposes a solution to the seeming dilemma of integrating professional engineering ethics and the specific goals and values Christian institutions wish to advance.

Recent articles in *PSCF* have evoked spirited responses. Two author exchanges are featured. The RATE team responds to Randy Isaac’s assessment of their work, and Isaac and Kirk Bertsche offer rejoinders. The Poe exchange of views involves an assessment of the meaning and extent of “methodological naturalism.” Walter Thorson’s and David Siemens’ analyses elicit a reply by Harry Poe. I consider these types of exchanges to be important for the intellectual life of the journal.

A communication by Paul Seely, thirty-four book reviews, and several letters complete this issue.

Take up and read, and grace subsequent issues with such stimulating articles, author exchanges, and communications. Book reviews, of course, are also welcome. [Please consult the Call for Book Reviewers on p. 42.] 

Arie Leegwater, *Editor*

Looking Back: The Journal 50 Years Ago!

Fifty years ago in the March 1958 issue, the *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* published four major articles:

- “The Physico-Chemical Synthesis of ‘Biological’ Compounds” by Richard A. Hendry
- “Theological Aspects of Mechanists’ Views of the Origin of Life” by R. Laird Harris
- “Christian Beliefs and Personal Adjustment in Old Age” by David O. Moberg
- “What Are the Scientific Possibilities for Original Kinds” by Wayne Frair

To hear these voices from the past, you can access these four articles online at the ASA website using the following link:

www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1958/

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SCIENCE
AND
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– JOHN POLKINGHORNE

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