Editorial

Arie Leegwater

On Boundaries: Let Science Be Science? Let Religion Be Religion?

In a perceptive article (*Journal of Religion* 86 [2006]: 81–106) Peter Harrison, Andreas Idreos Professor of Science and Religion at Oxford University, describes how the dual categories of science and religion have been invented over time. Not only are the boundaries of science in flux, only becoming somewhat stable in the nineteenth century, but so are those of religion, having been constructed earlier during the European Enlightenment, usually in terms of a set of propositional beliefs. This demarcation or boundary issue, what is properly science and what is properly religion, has also exercised the Christian community, including ASA.

Perhaps a historical example can help illumine what I mean. Charles Alfred Coulson, an English quantum chemist, gave a lecture at the 1951 British Association for the Advancement of Science meeting entitled, "The Place of Science in the Christian Faith." He was present at the invitation of Oliver R. Barclay, who represented the selection committee of the Research Scientists' Christian Fellowship. Besides the invitation extended to Coulson, Barclay also offered some ideas for a suitable topic:

> I do not know what you have in mind for a subject. I would suggest something along the lines of fairly fundamental apologetics would be best, e.g., something on "The Difficulties for Christian Faith raised by a Scientific Attitude," or perhaps something on "Materialism and Christian Faith."[1]

Although Coulson did not follow the advice, Barclay thanked Coulson for the lecture, but expressed several reservations: one of these was that Coulson considered science to be a religious activity. This claim revealed some of the fundamental differences in interpretation between the two correspondents. The nuances are partially reflected in the use of the preposition "in" found in Coulson's title, "The Place of Science in the Christian Faith," and by Barclay's preference for using the preposition "for" [for Christian Faith] and the conjunction "and" [and Christian Faith] in his suggested lecture titles. Barclay argued that science should be a religious activity and can be for a Christian, but, in no sense, can science be religious for an atheist without thereby degrading the word "religious." For Barclay, religion and science were seen as complementary. For Coulson, science seen as a religious activity was "significant in terms of the process of appeal to a larger body of professional scientists."[2] For him, religion and science were not complementary, but inherently intertwined and related.

> If what I have said is even faintly true, then scientific enquiry holds within itself the stuff of religious search. This is true in two senses—first, that the scientist himself keeps on coming up against feelings and convictions with an unmistakably spiritual content; second, that his work is essentially religious.[3]

Coulson identified some of these convictions:

> [T]hat this world is not alien to us, but that its secret may be revealed to those who seek; that truth is accessible, and that mental integrity is both possible and necessary in its apprehension; that the criteria by which we judge the acceptance or rejection of some new scientific theory contain some elements which lie outside our particular culture, and other elements which lie within it; that the patience, the austerity, the self-discipline without which science cannot prosper are not mere techniques, but are somehow fundamental to the search.[4]

For Coulson, science and religion were expressions of a deeper unity that rested on a personal act of reflection. For him, science and religion did not represent contiguous harmonious domains, nor were

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they at war or in conflict with each other. They were intimately related, but not in a complementary fashion. Their intimate relationship depended on personal experience, which could be partially communicated to others, but ultimately was exclusive. In our act of reflection on our experiences, which come to us and which are sought, we engage in an essentially religious activity:

> To accept Nature as, in some senses, given: to receive the gift, and behave in a creaturely fashion towards it: to believe that it carries with it meaning and significance; and to seek, in reflection, what that meaning is—this surely is to act religiously. But in that event, religion is not merely one view of the mountain [*the world,* AL]. It is some attitude which colours all the separate views, and gives them a depth which otherwise they would lack, more or less as a yellow filter reveals a pattern of clouds in a sky that without it appears pure blue. This attitude, without which we do not get the full value of our studies, or gain full understanding of our environment, cannot properly be described, because, although it falls within the field of human experience, it does not lie within that part which is susceptible of rational discourse.[5]

For Coulson, "religion is the total response of man to all his environment." The word total is crucial. By it Coulson meant to convey the whole person: thought, emotion, human relationships, and so forth. Similarly, the term environment included everything: things in heaven and in earth.

I favor Coulson's take on these matters. We may engage science as active participants in its investigative regimen or as casual observers and commentators of its grand theories, but religion is not something we engage. We may participate in religious practices, cultic events, worship services, but life lived is religion. Only then, I think, will we do justice to a person such as Charles Coulson and his efforts to 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. ❋

Notes

[1]Coulson Papers (hereafter CP), Bodleian Library, Oxford. MS 114, D.7.2. Letter 6 March 1951.
[2]CP, MS 114, D.7.2. Letter 1 October 1951.
[3]Coulson, British Association for the Advancement of Science Lecture, Typescript, 15.
[4]Coulson, *Science and the Idea of God,* Eddington Memorial Lecture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 28–9.
[5]Coulson, *Christianity in an Age of Science,* Riddell Lecture (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 13.

Arie Leegwater, *Editor*
leeg@calvin.edu

In This Issue

This December issue of *PSCF* has articles impinging on a diverse set of disciplines: anthropology, immunology, chemistry, physics, and botany. Todd Vanden Berg (Calvin College) analyzes the habits and perspectives of Christians that have limited their participation in the field of anthropology. Craig Story (Gordon College) raises issues of randomness and complexity in the discipline of immunology. Karl Johnson and Keith Yoder, both of Cornell University, conduct an interview with Robert Fay, a member of Cornell's Department of Chemistry and Chemical Biology.

The last two articles are biographical in nature: Edward Davis (Messiah College) provides the final installment of his analysis of Arthur Compton's influential life, while Paul Fayter (York University) situates Joseph Hooker, the Victorian botanist and gentleman of science, in historical context in an essay book review.

The issue closes with a number of book reviews and three letters to the editor. Speaking of book reviews, Rebecca Flietstra (Point Loma Nazarene University) has decided to step down as one of our three book review editors. Jim Peterson and I wish to thank Rebecca for her editorial work over the past two years. We are actively searching for a new editor to begin in 2010. ❋