



Editorial: Science, Religion and the Future

by Charles P. Henderson and Robert Pollack

We are pleased to offer this issue on the often contentious relationship between science and religion. There are at least four major ways in which our contributors construe that relationship. First, one can accept the authority of both science and religion, separating them into two separate domains, “non-overlapping magisteria,” as the late Stephen Jay Gould famously proposed. In this maneuver, potential conflicts as well as the possibility any deep convergences are sidestepped. Second, one can acknowledge that there are irreconcilable differences between the methods, theories, and conclusions of scientists and theologians, but when conflict appears, the authority of either science or religion is favored. Finally, one can attempt a synthesis between science and religion in which the insights and findings of one correct, expand, or deepen the insights of the other. Contributors to this issue represent all four of these approaches and, with an eye to highlighting the diversity of voices involved in this conversation, we do not privilege any one of these paradigms over the others.

Robert Pollack, who directs Columbia University’s Center for the Study of Science and Religion has the first and last word in this volume. Bob is a trusted colleague and one of the key participants in the currents of thought at the interface of science and religion today. Several of the articles contained herein were delivered as part of CSSR’s regular lecture series. The articles by Philip Kitcher and Neil Gillman are illustrative of the quality of thought that emanates from CSSR.

Kitcher, a philosopher of science, will stir strong reactions from many of our readers as he comes closest to any of the voices represented here in suggesting that science is to be privileged over and against theology. Few will have a problem with his declaration that Intelligent Design theory is not only incompatible with science, but intellectually bankrupt. But in Kitcher’s view the conflict between an Enlightenment based science and religion runs deeper than our contemporary culture wars suggest. Evolution functions as a stand-in for the wider conflict between reason and revelation, and in Kitcher’s view, belief in a supernatural God is contrary to reason itself. Still, he concludes his article on a positive note, envisioning a new partnership between what he calls “spiritual religion” and secular humanism. In fact, Kitcher suggest such an alliance between religion and science is essential for the preservation of a free and democratic society.

Neil Gillman, also a philosopher, as well as being, arguably, the preeminent theologian of Conservative Judaism, generously volunteers his time as a member of our Board of Directors. Here he contributes his strong mind to our topic, and in the process, draws an analogy between science and religion:

Rarely has there been a time when science and religion have had so much in common. The ancient conflict . . . is properly behind us. Both disciplines now realize that they deal with realities way beyond the very possibility of any form of human experience. And, both are doing the same thing—

trying to explain the world we see by referring to a world we do not see. Both find the ultimate explanation for the immediately visible by postulating a world that is invisible and accounts for why things are the way they are. That's what myths do; they deal with the invisible to explain the visible.

Even so, Gillman comes closest to the view that science and religion exist in entirely separate domains. They are, he suggests, "two equally valuable master stories dealing with equally significant realities that, for the most part, do not intersect."

While Kitcher sees traditional religion as being upended by science, Gillman argues that a scientific world view leaves humanity bereft of any real hope. And Gillman finds in the eschatological hope of biblical religion a remedy for the hopelessness that appears to be the inevitable consequence of a purely secular view of the world.

If Kitcher and Gillman offer sharply contrasting notions of the relationship between science and religion, William Carl and Nancy Fuchs Kreimer share a similar view. Both are leaders in the field of theological education, and both believe that it is essential for a new generation of religious leaders to be well versed in the sciences, in addition to the subject matter that prevails in seminaries and rabbinical schools. Carl happens to be the President of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary while Kreimer is Director of the Religious Studies Program at Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. They share a deep interest in the neurosciences and find significant areas of convergence between science and theology, suggesting that current research into human consciousness, not only illuminates the nature of religious experience, but offers rich new opportunities for the theological enterprise itself.

Several of the articles in this issue result from the research undertaken by Coolidge Fellows at our annual Research Colloquium. We are grateful to the John Templeton Foundation for a grant that permitted us to award ten fellowships to scholars whose research explored the connections between science and religion. The articles by Charlene Burns and Suchismita Sen are products of this Templeton funded effort. Sen teaches in the Religious Studies Department at Pennsylvania State University and focuses on the difficulties of defining both "religion" and "religious studies," especially in the context of a large, secular university. She observes that a comprehensive view of religion makes the study of it necessarily interdisciplinary. She argues that the points of convergence between religious studies and the sciences are critical, and further suggests that the study of religion plays a potentially powerful role in the lives of students. Sen's article might be considered as a reply to Philip Kitcher's call for an alliance between spiritual religion and secular humanism. One implication of Sen's analysis is that a religious studies program at a large public university is one of the settings where such a partnership might be forged, with important benefits for democratic society itself.

Charlene Burns also teaches at a large, public university, but she writes here as a theologian. Her article goes further than any of the others in this collection in the direction of finding a convergence of science and theology. Specifically, Burns sees the central affirmations of a distinctly Christian theology as being transformed in the encounter with science, even as theology provides a frame in which the discoveries of science can be fully understood.

Ironically, and for all their differences, the articles in this issue of CrossCurrents confirm Albert Einstein's aphorism: "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind."

In addition to thanking Robert Pollack and CSSR for their help in putting this issue together, I'd like to thank Professors Deborah and Solomon Mowshowitz who served as science advisors at the colloquium, and Laura Bothwell, Program Director at CSSR for her helpful collaboration. Laura's article makes a good starting point for the conversation. She traces the sometimes troubled history of the relationship between science and religion, suggesting, like the other voices in this volume, that people of faith have little to fear from science; in fact, constructive engagement with the sciences is essential to the vitality of religion as well as the health of democratic society itself.

—Charles P. Henderson

There is a common notion among many of my most dedicated colleagues in the sciences that bad behavior is simply the result of ignorance, and that given enough facts, anyone would be certain to act well. But as any serious religious person would tell you, evil does exist, and it is not the same as ignorance.

On the Friday after Thanksgiving, on a clear, warm, blue-sky morning in Manhattan, my wife and I were walking across the ground-zero of high-end New York tourism, from the west side of Fifth Avenue and 59th Street past the golden statue of General Sherman on his horse to the southeast corner of Central Park, when I was hit by a horse and carriage.

I was crossing from the island of the statue of Sherman, to the corner of the park itself, and found myself in the street, facing a very wide deep puddle, with a horse-drawn carriage coming toward me at a trot. Figuring the driver would not come right at me I hesitated to jump into the puddle to avoid him. But he did come at me, either obliviously or intentionally, and so at the last minute before impact I did at last try to leap into the puddle.

I was an instant too late. The horizontal beam that links the carriage to the horse caught me at the junction of my upper arm and chest. Though my memory of what happened next is only episodic, it includes the experience of being hit, then of being in the puddle on my hands and knees, unable to draw breath without making a hideous roaring sound, then breathing, standing up, being confused, being led by my wife to a bench next to the park wall, sitting dazed, and having my wife decide to walk me to a cab.

The cab got us to four blocks west to the Roosevelt Hospital Emergency Room very quickly, certainly more quickly than had she called 911 and waited for an ambulance. The ER was efficient, with staff at once attentive and concerned. The receiving nurse sent me through triage to a bed without delay, my wife was allowed to stay with me, and there a very young attending physician examined me. My O₂ level was near 100%, but my pulse was racing, and my blood pressure was high, and so I was asked to rest on a bed while waiting for X-rays.

I was given Tylenol, and my wife was able to get me blankets so I could get out of wet clothes; I was very clammy. X-rays showed neither bone breaks nor fractures. A sonogram of my midsection excluded internal bleeding; my pulse and blood pressure returned to near-normal levels after a few hours; my severely bruised bicep was bandaged, and I was sent home to recover.

I tell this personal story because it pertains to what I believe to be the appropriate connection between science and religion.

Clearly, the event did not bring out the best in anyone but my wife and the staff of the emergency room. None of the hundred or so people seeing this incident taking place a few feet from them and in broad daylight, helped either her or me. Nor did the buggy driver give my wife his license number when she asked him for it. I was, in short, the victim of an 1880s version of a hit-and-run accident, and at the same time the dehumanized object of mild interest to many dozens of close bystanders.

I was, in that sense, also the subject as well as the observer, of an experiment. The standing crowd of tourists who watched me flounder and choke were the control for this experiment, as my wife and the ER staff who helped me were the experiment itself. And the results are clear: if you have a prior sense of right and wrong, and if that sense includes in it an obligation to help someone— whether a close person or a stranger is not relevant here—then you will act well under duress; and if not, not.

Let me generalize: there is a lot of suffering and pain in this world, most of it wholly undeserved. Sometimes some people say it is their job to ameliorate that suffering; most of the time most people say, it is none of their problem so long as they are not suffering themselves. Lying in the Roosevelt Hospital Emergency room, reflecting on how it was that one set of strangers were so kind to me, and the others so cold, I did not see how the difference could possibly be due to ignorance: everyone saw me in pain, and with equal clarity.

The issue of what is right, and of what one must do, is wholly undetermined in nature and wholly independent of education. Good and evil, right and wrong, are both real choices, and people do in fact have their freedom to

choose one or the other, for no data-driven reason at all. Their different choices did not in either case emerge from nature, nor did either choice need to be justified as a fact uncovered by science.

But as I reflect a few months later on my near miss with what—in the words of Jane Kenyon’s great poem—certainly could have been otherwise, I am even more certain that the question of what is right and good, must remain an issue for us all, despite our inability to find data that justify moral values. And because it must, the question of “science and religion” has to be seen not as a debate, but as a single question: what shall we all do with our science-based knowledge of nature, and why shall we do it?

Shall we stand aside to see what happens when someone suffers in a moment like the one I went through, or shall we intervene unbidden, to help keep that moment at bay? We may differ in our answers, but it remains the right if not the only first question we should ask ourselves.

At the Center for the Study of Science and Religion here at Columbia University, every conversation, every program and every course we are responsible for, exemplifies the necessity, primacy and gravity of this choice.

—Robert Pollack

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Source: Cross Currents, Spring 2007, Vol. 56, No 1.

