

The Science/Religion Dialog - A Catholic Perspective

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Some Comments on a Recent Conference on Science and Theology by Alfred Kracher



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In the last issue of the ITEST Bulletin I reported news from the 6th European Conference on Science and Theology that was held in Cracow, Poland, March 26-30, 1996. In this second part of my report I would like to add some personal impressions of the conference and offer reflections on the role of Catholic thought in the science-religion dialog in general.

One attractive feature of ESSSAT, the European Society for the Study of Science and Theology, which organizes the biennial European Conferences, is the ecumenical mix of its officers and members. All major Christian denominations are well represented, and the discussions often demonstrate how fruitful an exchange between them can become. In part this is simply because the dialog with science takes place at a very fundamental level, at which all Christians, as well as the few Jews and Muslims attending these conferences, have much in common. But even on issues where the differences between the denominational traditions can become significant, such as the evolution of morality, the common goal of better understanding keeps the dialog open and productive.

Having said that it strikes me as surprising, however, that the theological contributions from the different sides do not have equal weight. After attending three conferences, I have heard a great deal about 20th century theologians, but with the inevitable exception of Teilhard de Chardin not a Catholic among them. To some extent this is a coincidence due to the particular workshops I happened to attend, but it is not an isolated experience.

Even Catholic participants seem more at ease discussing, say, Niebuhr and Tillich rather than Rahner and de Lubac.

As a Catholic one sometimes feels as if the entire Catholic tradition were thoroughly out of touch with contemporary science. A great deal of Catholic reflection is expended on moral evaluations of technology, but from an epistemological distance as if we were looking at the issues from alpha Centauri. Like everyone else, Catholics engage in the science-theology dialog, but they do so as citizens, not as Catholic theologians. The specifically Catholic voice seems to have been dumbfounded in the face of the profound epistemological revolution that has come with 20th century science.

Some of this may be merely a subjective impression based on limited data. But I have often enough heard Catholics claim that science has no bearing on theology (except as an object of moral reflection) to make me very much worried indeed about the future of Catholic thought. While other theologians confront science and wrestle with the most serious problems of our time, the most widespread Catholic attitude appears to be one of problem denial and facile traditional answers that fail to engage the real issues.

Notwithstanding the fact that many Catholics are active and articulate participants in the science-religion dialog, one cannot avoid the impression that something has gone very wrong on the Catholic side of it. It is as though Catholic theologians, at least the majority of them, speak a different language from everyone else, and without being aware that they do. At the European Conference some participants referred to this language as "Aristotelian." That label may not be entirely accurate, but it points to a serious problem. We have forgotten the reason why Catholic theology from about the 13th to the 17th century was cast mostly in Aristotelian language. The lasting insight of Thomas Aquinas was that theology had to proceed by using the best science available, which in his day happened to be found in the recently rediscovered writings of Aristotle. What happened to theology after Galileo was, to the eyes of a scientist, a monumental betrayal of this crucial idea. Instead of continuing the dialog with the best science of the day, which by the mid-1600s had mostly shed Aristotle's terminology as well as his principles, much of Catholic theology actually seemed to enjoy the possession of a private language which it had so fortuitously acquired. Thus it missed the point that it was using terminology that no longer retained its Medieval, fact-oriented meaning, if indeed it retained any meaning at all.

Tracing the root of Catholic speechlessness back this far may tell us something about the history of the crisis, but it is only one aspect of the problem that we are facing. For suppose we were to make a new start, like some 19th century Protestants tried to do, by re-inventing theology in the language of the day. This effort would certainly lend itself to a more easily intelligible dialog with science, but it would create a new problem no less pernicious: how do we make sense of our tradition, scriptural and ecclesial, in the light of modern science? Having no common language at all now reduces tradition to a dead object, to be inspected from outside, in much the same way that the Aristotelian theologian treats contemporary science. Under this demythologizing glare, the Bible shrivels into a fairy tale, and the richness of ritual desiccates into compulsive superstition. This cannot be the right outcome of a science-oriented inquiry either.

If we consider these stark alternatives, it becomes perhaps less surprising that one denomination that has assumed a disproportionately large role in advancing the science-religion dialog is the Church of England, which has retained a considerable part of Catholic tradition, while being free to revise those parts that are no longer tenable in the light of modern science. The only way to take the theological as well as the scientific tradition seriously is to find ways of translating their respective languages. This mediation between traditions is an intellectually demanding and highly creative enterprise, and like all creative activities it requires an environment of freedom to flourish.

At this point we encounter another, more contingent and more political problem that besets the Catholic side in the science-religion exchange: the deplorable state of academic freedom in contemporary Catholic theology. The ability to conduct a serious dialog depends on the credibility of the dialog partners. If a scientist sits down with a Catholic theologian for an exchange of ideas, it is of crucial importance that both sides can speak their minds freely. In academic discourse, someone who has to fear censure for his or her academic views is useless as a dialog partner. Especially in the precarious exchange between science and theology, even the appearance of such a fear can put the success of the dialog in jeopardy.

Until recently this has been well understood, but the current situation in the Catholic church is very peculiar in this regard. Pope John Paul II appears to be more interested in the science-religion dialog than any of his predecessors in at least a hundred years. He has revived old institutions for the purpose, and encourages meetings on the subject. Many diverse opinions are welcome there as long as they are not put forward by Catholics. When it comes to Catholic doctrine, only the language of insiders is permitted. This guarantees its irrelevance in the larger discussion, making even those voices suspect which would have something of value to contribute. Other denominations, too, have their Aristotelians. But within their theology, the latter are somewhat of a curiosity, not privileged wardens of official doctrine.

Sadly, the prospect for genuine improvement is not good. An institution whose pastoral hallmark was to have clear-cut answers to any problem is ill equipped for opening communication in a different language. The extreme difficulty and tentativeness of such a conversation makes problem denial an attractive alternative. But calling ourselves Catholic, which means universal, makes at the very least the demand on us to speak in a language that is universally understood. I am concerned that as far as the science-religion dialog is concerned we have not done that for quite some time.

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