



Faith • Science • Culture
Converging or Diverging Realities A 40 Year Retrospective

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Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology

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Astronomy Cosmology Breakthroughs and the God Question

Abstract:

This conference, marking the 40th anniversary of the founding of Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology (ITEST), treated the converging and diverging lines of development in Faith, Science and Culture from 1968 to 2008.

The 1960's witnessed an upheaval in the social and cultural structure of the country threatening to tear apart the fabric of what we proudly called the America of the 20th century.

Not all was upheaval however; a decade earlier science had revealed the wonder of the "stuff of life", DNA which led eventually to the coding of the human genome in the 1990s, a vital first step in combating genetically based diseases.

Vatican Council II (1962-1965) had a profound effect on the development of the faith in the life of the Church. Adaptation and renewal were bywords in the decades following the Council which concluded its initial work in 1965 but post conciliar documents continued to provide material for study, discussion and implementation for decades to come.

The presenters, Dr. John F. Haught, Edmund D. Pellegrino, MD and Carla Mae Streeter, ThD, traced forty years of developments and trends in these three areas: faith, science/technology and culture. They are joined by the participants in discussions which focused on the divergent and convergent aspects of the topics that go to the roots of American and world society from the 1960s to the present.

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Foreword:

This conference, marking the 40th anniversary of ITEST’s mission and ministry in the faith/science dialogue, is indeed an occasion we celebrate with pride coupled with humility. Pride because we have “survived into existence,” as our late director, Father Brungs used to say, with a twinkle in his eye; humility because the accomplishments associated with ITEST over the years could never have been achieved or even imagined without the dedication of loyal members and the daily sustenance of God’s grace.

When the ITEST Board of Directors met to discuss the topic of this landmark conference, we agreed immediately on “the 40 year retrospective” highlighting the advances made in the field of the life sciences during those four decades. We asked whether the growth and development in science and technology contributed to the good of humankind or conversely, hindered the growth of the human spirit. Are we subservient to the “technological imperative” — Artifacts; or are we obedient to the creative breath — Icons, made in the image of God?

Have we witnessed a convergence or divergence between science/technology and theology/faith since the birth of ITEST in 1968? Is the perceived “conflict” between science and faith still tenaciously clung to in some quarters, or is it resolving slowly into confluence?

What part does culture play in this human drama? How has the overarching secular culture of the past four decades influenced the culture of the Christian churches? Is the world too much with us? Although the accent during this weekend focused on the life sciences, particularly in the medical field, the implication for the survival of Christian culture within the prevailing secular culture lent a strong undercurrent to the discussion.

The participants examined and analyzed these and other questions — grist for the discussion mill—from the stance of Christians committed to probing the relationship evident in the natural “trinity” of faith/science and culture.

The Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* (“The Church in the Modern World”) promulgated more than 40 years ago served as the unifying thread throughout this conference. Over the decades we have seen great changes in society, and the ascendancy of a militant secularism that tries to exclude religious faith from having any influence. The notion of scientism is really a form of secular religion all its own, but it has gained the upper hand in universities and governments. Its adherents would like to drive religion completely out the door, consigning it to a backwater of irrelevance.

As we fight against that false doctrine, we have several advantages that we might not have noticed. For one, as Professor John Haught explained so clearly, the position of the secularists is logically incoherent. Their belief system is one that denies very fundamental characteristics that make us humans. They use the faculties of their own minds to deny the reality of the human mind. That is obviously in error. We don’t have to accept their terms.

In fact, the world is entering a “post-humanist” or “post-atheist” phase as the failures of such philosophies become evident. Natalia Pecherskaya told us about Russia, where the old Marxist mentality has been completely discredited, and people are finding meaning in Christianity once again. People are no longer afraid to speak from their religious values.

Ed Pellegrino described the dichotomy in contemporary bioethics, whereby the importance of the dignity of the human

being that is characteristic of Christian medical ethics is being forced out of medical schools and hospitals for utilitarian reasons. Again, we don't have to accept that and quietly slink away into oblivion; we don't have to cave in. The negative aspects of scientism and secularism are becoming obvious to all mankind. The Christian alternative we offer is a valid one, and our case deserves to be stated clearly.

Bob Morris pointed to the urgent need for marketing our ideas. The secular humanists are constantly marketing, and we need to be just as vigorous.

As Christians, we acknowledge at once that we enter the arena from a belief system. The secularists deny that their outlook is a belief system too, but people are now able to see through that. And speaking of the arena, Sr. Carla Mae Streeter reminded us that, just as the Christians in the Coliseum linked arms and sang as they went to their death, so today the "church beleaguered" sings that song of hope. This is how humanity will be renewed.

Perhaps the foremost "take home" message from the conference is that we as Christians can stand up and speak our values in the public forum. Not just that we're allowed to do so, but that we actually have something to say; and the world needs to hear it. Decades ago, Gaudium et Spes urged us to step forward and live Christianity in our personal lives in the modern world. With their specialized knowledge and training, scientists have a pivotal role here. ITEST has continued, over 40 years, to draw attention to the opportunities for Christians to make a difference.

The members of the ITEST Board of Directors and Staff offer this book as one in a long line of publications since the founding of ITEST in 1968. We urge you to read it carefully and thoughtfully not only for the wisdom contained in the essays but for the meaningful exchange of ideas occurring on faith, science and culture during the discussion sessions. Although disagreement occasionally surfaced, it was always resolved in a spirit of respect and courtesy — a hallmark of the ITEST conferences over the past four decades.

As Father Brungs wrote in an earlier book of proceedings, "[We] recommend the results to you all.

Thomas P. Sheahan, PhD, Director: ITEST
Marianne Postiglione, RSM, Associate Director: ITEST

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