

Science Meets Theology in Cracow, Poland

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If evidence were needed that the study of science and theology is a field of growing international importance, hardly anything could be more conclusive on Science and Theology, held in Cracow, Poland, March 26-30, 1996. Not only does the number of nearly 180 participants reflect the continuous growth of these conferences over their 10 year history, the location also allowed an unprecedented number of scholars from Eastern Europe and the former Communist countries of Central Europe to meet with their Western counterparts.

In fact, the Eastern and Western groups were almost equal in size, each accounting for about 40% of attendance. The remaining 20% of participants came from Canada, the US, Brazil, Iran, Hongkong and Australia. That no less than 22 of the participants of a nominally “European” conference came from the United States, prompted one of the participants to ask whether one had to travel to Europe to find a serious academic discussion of science and religion.

The choice of Cracow at this particular time was also a way of celebrating the 600th anniversary of the Jagellonian University. Though the Faculty of Theology, which had been the oldest part of the university, did not survive Communist rule, it has a direct successor in the Pontifical Academy of Theology in Cracow. The Academy, now an independent institution, acted as host for the meeting.

As in previous conferences of the series, the program was divided between plenary lectures and small workshops. Financial support by the John M. Templeton Foundation made it possible to invite a number of highly distinguished plenary speakers. The series of five lectures opened with Ernan McMullin of Notre Dame University, who spoke on *Evolutionary Contingency and Cosmic Purpose*. Other plenary lectures were delivered by Jean Ladrière (Louvain, Belgium) on *The Role of Philosophy in the Science-Theology Dialogue*, Michael Parsons (Derby, UK) on *Scientific and Theological Discourse - from Dialogue to Integration*, and Xavier Sallantin (Béna, France) on *Do New Insights in Physics Bring a New Light on Creation?* The final event of the conference was a lecture by Józef Zycinski, formerly professor at the Pontifical Academy and now Bishop of Tarnow, on *The Laws of Nature and the Immanence of God in the Evolving Universe*.

Much of the workshop discussion centered on the difficulties of mutual understanding. Of the one hundred eleven papers submitted so many fell into this general area that the workshops on history, philosophy, and methodology all had to be split into parallel sessions to keep the number of papers per group to a manageable number of six to ten. Other topics for the sixteen workshops (altogether) were, for example, *Theology of Nature*, *Science and Religion in Public Life*, and *Ethics in the Sciences*.

This concern with mutual understanding is not without a practical significance of its own. Scientists and theologians do frequently misunderstand each other, but in addition the dialogue between them follows decidedly different paths in different cultures. As both the workshops and informal discussions made clear, differences between the Orthodox and Western Christian traditions run deep, and sometimes make communication difficult. Seventy years of Communism have aggravated the situation. As one participant remarked, under Communist rule anyone who wanted to maintain a level of independence chose to work in the natural sciences. Even scholars who would under other circumstances have entered theology or philosophy, studied mathematics or physics instead. As a result, the relationship between these fields is now very different in the former Communist countries from the way it is in the West. This is especially obvious in the predominantly Orthodox region which had a different cultural heritage to begin with, and was under Communist rule the longest.

Although Eastern scholars are usually too polite to mention it openly, Western attitudes are not always helpful. All too often foreign visitors, whether they are exchange scholars, business emissaries, or self-styled religious missionaries, arrive with a patronizing attitude of “showing those poor people how things are done in the real world.” Aside from causing understandable resentment, this attitude makes it impossible to engage the long and valuable cultural history of the region in any kind of productive dialog.

Excursions provided a break from the intense discussions for one morning during the conference. Participants could choose between tours of Cracow, the Auschwitz Concentration Camp, or the Wieliczka salt mine. A highlight of the cultural program was a concert by the *Capella Cracoviensis* arranged especially for attendants of the conference in the National Picture Gallery on the Old Market Square.

ESSSAT, the European Society for the Study of Science and Theology which organizes the conferences, held its plenary meeting and elected a new president. Karl Schmitz-Moormann, a distinguished anthropologist and editor of the works of Teilhard de Chardin, turned the presidency over to Ulf Görman, a theologian of the University of Lund in Sweden. The society also awarded the first ESSSAT prize for young scholars in the field of science and theology to Dr. Hubert Meisinger for his doctoral dissertation at the University of Heidelberg. Dr. Meisinger's work, *Liebesgebot und Altruismusforschung --- ein exegetischer Beitrag zum Dialog zwischen Theologie und Naturwissenschaften* ("Love command and altruism research --- an exegetical contribution to the dialogue between theology and the natural sciences") was cited as an original, careful and fruitful combination of exegesis, theology and the natural sciences. The cash award that accompanies the prize was made possible by the Radboud Foundation of the Netherlands.

Conferences in the series have been held every two years since 1986. After Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy, and Poland, the probable venue for the 1998 conference will be Durham in Northern England. Graced by one of the oldest and most famous cathedrals in the world, as well as a famous university, the town has long been a focal point for the science and religion dialog within the Church of England.

An assessment of the conference from a specifically Catholic viewpoint, together with some general comments on the science-theology dialogue, will appear in a future issue of the ITEST Bulletin.