

# European Society for the Study of Science and Theology in Durham

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Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology

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The European Society for the Study --- of Science and Theology (ESSSAT) traditionally holds its general meetings two weeks before Easter in even-numbered years. The 1998 conference, seventh in the series, was held in the ancient city of Durham in Northern England. About 160 participants from 27 countries met in St. John's College, a few yards from the magnificent Norman cathedral, to discuss this year's topic: *The Person-Perspectives from Science and Theology* .

The format of plenary lectures alternating with small group workshops familiar from earlier conferences was retained, but with some modifications to allow participants more flexibility in attending presentations of interest. Perhaps as a tribute to an old British tradition, a public debate was added to the schedule of events.

The series of plenary lectures was opened by Frazer Watts, Starbridge Lecturer at the University of Cambridge. The Starbridge Chair in Science and Theology is a private endowment by Susan Howatch, author of a series of popular novels about the Church of England. Watts, who is both a psychologist and theologian, considered *Psychological and Religious Concepts of the Person* , with particular emphasis on his own research area in the psychology of emotions. This previously neglected field of psychology is now recognized as, in Watts' words, "sitting on the fault line between biology and social science." It is thus a potential antidote to the absolutist tendencies on either side, which have led to the starkly contradictory claims of biological determinism on one side and social constructionism on the other. To engage the psychology of emotions in a useful way, however, theology has to overcome the "myth of the passions," which has wrongly equated goodness with rationality, and seen emotions solely under the aspect of "temptations."

Michael Welker, theologian at the University of Heidelberg in Germany, began his answer to *Is the Autonomous Person of European Modernity a Sustainable Model of Human Personhood?* with a semantic analysis of *persona* . The word originally refers to the mask worn by actors in Greek drama. As such it mediates between the subjectivity of the actor, and the public's expectation of the role, and also includes the aspect of social interaction between the public and the player. The European tradition of "subjectivisation of the person" did not endanger the balance among these aspects as long as social expectations were in any case rigidly structured. Welker believes, however, that today this development has gone too far, since all kinds of social abuses are justified in the name of individual autonomy.

One well known philosopher Mary Midgley brought penetrating analysis and sharp wit to bear on *Consciousness, Fatalism and Science* . Take, for example, her comments on epiphenomenalism. This is the theory that consciousness is a mere "epiphenomenon," a more or less useless by-product, of the neurological processes in our brains, or, as T. H. Huxley put it, a "steam-whistle which accompanies the working of a locomotive ... without influence on its machinery." Midgley suggested that its fancy label "epiphenomenalism" gives this view a spurious respectability. Instead, she proposed calling it the "steam-whistle theory of consciousness." Her main point, however, was that this view, and similar ones arising from the "selfish gene" metaphor, amount to fatalism. And whereas fatalism may be a legitimate literary device in fiction, it cannot literally apply to any person who is not mentally or physically incapacitated.

Hugo Lagercrantz from the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Sweden, brought a more science-oriented style to *The Child's Brain: On Neurogenetic Determinism and the Free Will* , illustrating his presentation with an abundance of spectacular slides. Medical and biological science is beginning to unravel the complex connections between neurophysiological development and social interactions.

The series of plenary presentations concluded with Philip Hefner from the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, who developed his idea of the human as created co-creator in *Imago Dei: The Possibility and Necessity of the Human Person* . Hefner summarized his view, explained in detail in his book *The Human Factor* , that freedom is an intrinsic part of human nature, and that there is genuine creativity in the exercise of this freedom in the context of human culture. God did not create as if from a blueprint, but built personal freedom into the very fabric of creation. Although this gives humans scope for being "cocreative," their freedom is not unlimited, since it is obviously possible to abuse it, that is, to use it in a way not beneficial to the rest of creation.

To add a personal observation to Phil Hefner's interesting ideas, I see the most serious difficulty in telling the proper use from the abuse of our "co-creative faculties." This is not a criticism of Hefner, however, since the problem of discernment (to give it its theological label) is existential rather than theoretical, and exists independent of the model that we use for making sense of our range of options. What does seem to follow, in my view, from Hefner's theory, is that there is normally not simply a single course of action that is consonant with "the will of God," but a range of possible actions that each in their own small way "shape the world" for all of us. If this is more confusing than the traditional picture of religion saying "do this" and "don't do that," it seems to me to be also more realistic, and thus ultimately more useful for individual lives.

The General Assembly of ESSSAT included a memorial to the society's honorary president, Karl Schmitz-Moormann, who died suddenly on October 31, 1996. Arthur Peacocke and James Salmon remembered Karl as a tireless and forceful voice in organizing the science-religion dialog. ESSSAT was formed mainly owing to his initiative, and until the 1996 meeting Karl served as its first president.

The second ESSSAT Prize for original contributions to the science-theology dialog by younger authors was awarded to Nicholas Saunders of Cambridge, UK. The monetary award of the ESSSAT Prize is made possible by the Radboud Foundation of the Netherlands. In the award-winning essay, *Divine Action in the Context of Modern Science*, Saunders takes a critical look at the idea that quantum mechanics introduces gaps in an otherwise deterministic universe which open up a place for divine action. He argues that it is unlikely that God acts in this manner.

The debate on *Does a Naturalist Conception Offer an Adequate Understanding of a Human Being as a Person* ? between Willem B. "Whu" Drees and Kevin O'Shea drew mixed responses. As an engaging way of presenting diverse ideas, such debates have a respectable tradition, especially in England. Nonetheless the short exchanges imposed by the debate format can rarely do justice to complex points of philosophy. In a debate held in England it is perhaps inevitable that T. H. Huxley and Bishop Wilberforce come to mind, and the history of their debate on Darwinism is an excellent example of the ambiguity of the form. Whereas history has unanimously sided with Huxley, contemporary accounts credit Wilberforce with making the better points. None of this detracts from the serious and candid efforts of Wim Drees to defend his theological naturalism, and of O'Shea to show that this is inadequate for a proper theological understanding of personhood.

Ultimately the success of a conference of this kind is largely determined by the workshops in which individual contributed papers are presented and discussed. To get a better impression of this, I asked several participants about their assessment of the conference. Since there are many different workshops held in parallel, and taste in plenary speakers varies, there is naturally a diversity of opinions. The majority of participants I talked to confirmed my impression that this ESSSAT conference was more focused on its general topic than previous ones. The choice of *The Person* as an overall theme may have been felicitous in this respect. It is sufficiently broad to allow for a variety of issues to be addressed --- from anthropology to pedagogy, and from ethics to extraterrestrial life. At the same time, I got the distinct impression that plenary sessions as well as workshop contributions were more coherent, and contributors made a stronger effort to place their papers in the framework of the overall theme than had been the case at earlier meetings.

Without taking away from any of the other aspects of the meeting, I must confess that the two things that decided me to attend the Durham conference in spite of personal scheduling problems were its unique location and the opportunity to meet Mary Midgley. I have already recounted the philosopher's role, but a word about Durham is in order. During the Middle Ages the city's easily defensible position on a rock almost totally surrounded by the river Wear made it a choice location for an outpost against Vikings and "Northern savages." After the destruction of the monastery of Lindisfarne by the Vikings the remains of St. Cuthbert were brought there, and the Venerable Bede found his final resting place in Durham as well. Today their burial places mark

respectively the East and West end of the cathedral, which was begun in 1093. With the exception of some later additions, Durham thus pre-dates the period of the Gothic style typical of most other English cathedrals. The complex of Durham Cathedral and Durham Castle is a World Heritage Site.

Holding a meeting about science and religion literally only a few paces away from such a unique and magnificent work of human creativity cannot fail to leave its mark on the event as well. Given the success of and general interest in the Durham meeting, most the participants are surely looking forward to the year 2000, when the 8th European Conference on Science and Religion will be held in Lyon, France.