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The Theology and Science Dialogue

What can Theology Contribute

Expanded Version of the Taylor Lectures
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Neukirchener Theologie

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Preface

Over the last decades, the dialogue between theology and the natural sciences (also termed the “science and religion dialogue”) has been characterized by a clear imbalance. The amazing discoveries and successes achieved by physics and biology during the twentieth century have compelled and obliged theology to listen, learn and reassess its teachings. Deficient or false images, ideas and theories about the universe, the world and its development, or about the human person and its defining characteristics all needed correction. Yet the strong developments that theology has also experienced during the twentieth century have often been overlooked (in this context I am thinking particularly of developments in the Christian and Jewish traditions). Social and historiographical research, archeological discoveries, rich academic exchanges with conceptual systems ranging from process philosophy, sociology, psychology, semiotics as well as memory theory, not to mention genuine developments in the field of dialectical and biblical theology have all led to deep, fundamental changes in theology. They woke theology from its metaphysical and existential slumbers. Unfortunately, these advances have been overlooked by some educated outsiders who persist in their attempts still to perceive and address theology in that earlier context.

Against this background, the current volume aims at two goals. In Part A it discusses five possible answers to the question: At a general and fundamental level, what can theology critically and constructively contribute to the dialogue with the natural sciences? Of

course, there is no question that theology must listen, learn, and self-critically correct the contents of its teachings. But this is not a complete solution. The first task of this book (chapter I) is to warn against searching for a “resolution” to the dialogue between theology and science by constructing a so-called meta-level, a theological or scientific framework – conceived of in philosophical, or sociological terms, etc. – in which it is then supposed both camps could meet. It is not that such meta-discourses are useless, rather they are limited to adopting only short-term supportive functions. These dialogue partners must prove themselves in their work on specific topics, and in their ability to provide convincing answers to specific questions.

With the courage to focus on thematic topics, theology can and must challenge the natural sciences to correct their false perceptions of theological themes and contents. For example, chapter II of this book will point out several grave misjudgments common in the views of outsiders with regard to the topic of “creation” and the most important of the biblical creation narratives (found in Genesis 1). This biblical creation narrative operates with two systems of time: the days of God (immense periods of time) which need then to be distinguished from the days under heaven. While the narrative does not have access to the cosmological knowledge of the twentieth century, it does not claim that the earth was created in six periods of twenty-four hours. The narrative bears witness to the deep entwinement of cosmological, biological, cultural and religious processes over long periods of time. The fixation on a simple “beginning” (even in the form of a “Big Bang”) cannot encompass the rich phenomenon of “creation.”

Much more problematic and far-reaching in its effects was the move to place creation in opposition to evolution, a move which completely bypassed biblical thinking. The independent activity of the creatures – of the heavens to divide, of the stars to rule, the earth to bring forth, and the human mandate to dominion – is both a vitally central theme as well as decisive challenge for serious theological thinking. Although the creation is called “good,” it is certainly not paradise. It is full of self-endangerment and self-destruction. This is disregarded and ignored by a metaphysical theism (which paints God as an “all-determining reality”), which then leads to the problems in ideology and worldview with which we are all too familiar.

Chapter III takes up the example of Stephen Hawking to show that even a brilliant cosmologist can be utterly confused in his metaphysical and theological thinking. In his worldwide bestseller *A Brief History of Time*, Hawking plays with three models of God and creation yet without managing to reach a single, well-formulated position. This chapter also draws attention to the fact (largely unnoticed by the media and the public) that Hawking recanted on, what was at that time, his most provocative thesis: that mathematical-physical thought can describe the universe in such a way as to leave no room for a creator.

The central chapters, IV and V, seek to expand the rather defensive tasks of theology in the dialogue with the natural sciences by offering more constructive possibilities. These chapters approach this task by focussing on the area of anthropology, and do so by first taking an exegetical and phenomenologically-oriented “bottom-up approach”, followed by a systematic and speculative “top-down approach.” Both approaches, and their resulting insights into an interdisciplinary, multidimensional anthropology, have developed out of multi-year international consultations between theology and the natural sciences.

The final chapter (Part B) sheds light on my cooperation, yet also personal, academic and theological friendship with John Polkinghorne. It displays the way in which the attainment of concrete insights is often intertwined with decisions regarding the organization of research. It displays the way in which advances in knowledge (in empirically-, historically- and exegetically-oriented work) often strike us as being rather modest, until they are invested into further research and cognitive processes, where they sometimes then lead to astonishing advances.

The purpose of all the expositions in this current volume is simply to lead readers to courage: the courage to persevere earnestly in the often difficult (and often mocked) dialogue between theology and the natural sciences. This book aims to promote courage among theologians, that they may openly present and plead for their genuine insights and forms of thought within this dialogue, and that they may persistently and determinedly search for appropriate topics as well as possible (often small) bridges which may enable true engagement or fruitful conflict between these two academic fields. Yet this volume also seeks to promote courage among natural scientists, that they may take seriously theology's

often foreign concepts and symbol systems, thoroughly and critically test them, and yet also see, in the words of John Polkinghorne, that they are striving to open “new windows into invisible realities.” Theology wants to be measured by its claims to belong among the “truth-seeking communities.”