



Moving Towards One World: The Interaction of Science and Theology

Milton Nicholasrajan

Jnana Deepa, Institute of Philosophy
and Theology, Pune 411014, India

Abstract: In today's postmodern culture, with its questioning of metanarratives and doubting of claims of truthful understanding, the issue of what we can know and how we can gain knowledge is one of even greater criticality than ever before. In this highly modernized and globalized world, I feel that science somehow rejects religion in search of truth and knowledge, and in turn, religion denies science in search of supernatural realities. There are issues, controversies, and problematic thinking. Science can be without religion and religion can be without science but for human beings, both of them are needed for the truth and meaning of life. Some issues affirm that science and religion are incompatible and there is interconnectivity that affirms that science and religion are compatible. In this book review, article in style, I explore the interaction of science and theology that Polkinghorne (1987) brought forth in his book, *One World: The Interaction of Science and Theology*, which has become a classic today.

Keywords: John Polkinghorne, One World, Science-Theology Dialogue, Religion

Cite as: Milton, Nicholasrajan. (2021). Moving Towards One World: The Interaction of Science and Theology. (Version 1.0) Vidyankur: Journal of Philosophical and Theological Studies. Jan-June 2021 XXIII/1 www.doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4718213 44-55.

Introduction

When we read the book “one world: the interaction of science and religion” what arises in one’s mind and imagination is that what is that one world Polkinghorne mentioned in this book? Polkinghorne, himself says that he described the context of One World as being the post-Enlightenment realization that the quest for clear and certain ideas, which could serve as foundations for reliable knowledge. They imply post-enlightenment world, the nature of science, the nature of theology, the nature of the physical world, points of interaction, levels of description, and one world. These are the areas that the author critically looked at and investigated in this book.

The Post Enlightenment World

In this highly technocentric world and our enhanced understanding and thinking of the physical world is held to have undermined the belief of many in a spiritual reality. Whether one accepts or not, this is the reality. The author states after having done a critical investigation and assessment that to see how science and theology have come to be thought of by many as being in some way in opposition requires a historical, rather than a logical, assessment. The author clearly states that Christian doctrine of creation, with its emphasis on the Creator’s rationality (so that his world was

Collins clearly states that Christian doctrine of creation, with its emphasis on the Creator’s rationality (so that his world was intelligible) and freedom (so that its nature had a contingent character which could be discovered only by investigation, rather than by speculation) provided an essential matrix for the coming into being of the scientific enterprise.

intelligible) and freedom (so that its nature had a contingent character which could be discovered only by investigation, rather than by speculation) provided an essential matrix for the coming into being of the scientific enterprise. We all know that definitely, the church fathers had problems with the scientists. There were conflicts, issues, problems, problematic thinking, chaos, and controversies between the scientists and ecclesiastical authorities. Newton had difficulties in accepting a Trinitarian belief. There was a problem between mind and matter, materialism. Descartes proclaimed the duality of mind and matter. How the thinking substance of mind and the extended substance of matter were related was not so easy to say. Ultimately, he had to invoke God as the guarantor of their connection. The remarkable success of Newton's ideas in explaining the behaviour of physical systems, both terrestrial and celestial, encouraging reliance on a discourse of reason whose paradigm was seen in the power of mathematics. The thinkers of the Enlightenment sought by cold clear reason to comprehend an objective world of determinate order. They saw themselves as self-sufficient and were confident of their powers and human perfectibility. Even theology was affected. In line with the spirit of the age, God had become the divine Mechanic. There was considerable suspicion of religious experience less ordered and decorous than that provided by attendance at public worship. As the nineteenth century progressed, the light of reason seemed to shine with ever greater clarity on a comprehensible and determinate world.

The Nature of Science

Science during the twentieth century developed a lot more than the previous millennium. In fact, science became part

and parcel of human existence. Humankind is pushed to a state where they cannot exist without the scientific inventions in their lives. The author of the book very clearly notes that the great enhancement that the twentieth century has seen in our understanding of the world in which we live, even encompassing an account of its earliest moments fourteen thousand million years ago and including the beginnings of comprehension of how life could have evolved from inanimate matter, together with the remarkable technological developments stemming from scientific advance lends a certain credibility to this triumphalist point of view. The modern technocentrism that born in the light of science also has somehow “disproved religion” on the basis of psychological effect rather than logical analysis or truth (Polkinghorne, 2012).

Karl Popper (1934: 446), therefore, claims, “But science is one of the very few human activities, perhaps the only one in which errors are systematically criticized and fairly often, in time, corrected.....in other fields there is change but rarely progress.”

The Nature of Theology

Scientists often use the word “theological” in a pejorative sense, implying the absence of rigour and the presence of unmotivated assertion. This shows how the scientists are trying their best to twilight the theology. “The true believer must stand by his faith whatever the evidence against it” (Davis, 1983: 6). The believer is ill and prays. If he recovers, he thanks God for his healing; if he does not, he seeks to accept that also as the will of God. Either way, he believes he has received wholeness, given by the sustaining grace of God, whose exact nature is to be found only within the experience itself. The unbeliever may exclaim in exasperation, “I God’s head never

on the block? Is it always ‘heads he wins, tails you lose’?” The brilliant mistranslation of the Authorized Version does not accurately render the Hebrew, but it expresses exactly an element of the religious man’s experience when it has Job says, “Though He slays me, yet will I trust in him” (Job 13:15). Tradition certainly plays an important part in religion. So, it does in science. We inherit the legacy of those who have preceded us, and it would be disastrous if every generation had to start from scratch. The view of the theological enterprise which the author in this book wishes to defend is summed up in a splendid phrase of St. Anselm: *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding.

The author has given more importance to the religious experience than dogmas and dogmatic interpretation. A. N. Whitehead wrote: “The dogmas of religion are the attempts to formulate in precise terms the truths

St. Anselm: *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding, sums up the goal of the author.

disclosed to the religious experience of mankind. One of the strongest indicators of the validity of the claim that religion is in touch with reality is provided in the universal character of mystical experience, understood as the experience of unity with the ground of all being. The Anglican theological tradition in which the author seeks to stand perceives a three-fold basis for its inquiry. First, there is scripture, that is to say, the record of the great teachings, great events, and great figures of the past which we believe are of particular significance for us in our search for God and an understanding of his ways with men. The second basis for theological inquiry is tradition, that is to say, the record of religious experience to which we

add our own mite of personal knowledge. The third basis for theological inquiry is the reason. Not only must we exercise our rational faculties, but a concern for sound learning will encourage us to examine the relation of religious assertions to other assertions about the world and to assess the degree of consonance we find between these differing discourses. The three-fold basis of scripture, tradition, and reason provides a public domain for theological discourse and delivers the discussion from the confines of an enclosed world of personal preference and idiosyncratic experience. Ecology and science differ greatly in the nature of the subject of their concern. Yet each is attempting to understand aspects of the way the world is. There are, therefore, important points of kinship between the two disciplines. They are not chalk and cheese, irrational assertion compared with a reasonable investigation, as the caricature account would have it.

The degree of their relationship is expressed by Carnes when he writes, "The activities of the theologian are as fallible and his theories as corrigible, as those of any other scientist and any other theories!" (Carnes, 1982: 68). (i) Coherence. The discourse must hang together. The ultimate achievement of this would be total consistency, but because of the considerations we have been discussing, theology may have to be content to live with some degree of paradox (just as science had to live for a while with the unresolved conflict between the wave and particle natures of light until it found the higher rationality of quantum field theory. (ii) Economy. The ecology is not wantonly to multiply entities and explanations. This criterion might be thought to give preference to monotheism over polytheism. (iii) Adequacy. The ecology must be sufficiently rich in concepts to be able to discuss all its matters of concern. (iv) Existential relevance. There must be an interpretative scheme that links theology with the actual content of religious experience. Clearly, there is a great deal here that is analogous to the demands made of a successful scientific theory.

Points of Interaction

People sometimes say that science is concerned with questions of mechanism, with posing the question “How?” Theology is concerned with questions of purpose, with posing the question “Why?” There are contemporary points of interaction between science and theology which some perceive as areas of conflict. They include religious claims about miracles and a human destiny beyond the disintegration of the body in death. We shall have to consider them in due course. The interaction between science and theology arises from the curious way in which modern science seems, almost irresistibly, to point beyond itself. In the last chapter, I sketched a view of the world characterized by order, intelligibility, potentiality, and a tightly knit structure. Such a beautiful harmony evokes thoughts that verge on the religious. In every true searcher of Nature there is a kind of religious reverence; for he finds it impossible to imagine that he is first to have thought out the exceedingly delicate threads that connect his perceptions.

The aspect of knowledge which has not yet been laid bare gives the investigator a feeling akin to that of a child who seeks to grasp the masterly way in which elders manipulate things (Moszkowski, 1970). Natural theology, the search for God

“Nor is God less excellently revealed in Nature’s actions than in the sacred statements of the Bible.”- Galileo

revealed in the works of his creation, has a long history. It played an important part in Thomas Aquinas’ theological scheme. Not surprisingly, it appealed to the Christian founding fathers of modern physical science. Galileo asserted, “Nor is God less excellently revealed in Nature’s actions than in the sacred statements of the Bible.” Newton, in the general Scholium to the Principia, was bold enough to

claim that “to the discourse of God does belong to Natural Philosophy.” Today natural theology is not a popular pursuit among theologians. The third point of interaction between science and theology is provided by the mutual influence of their habits of thought. The fourth point of interaction, indeed of total absorption, would be provided by the assertion that all non-scientific levels of meaning are ultimately subverted by a thoroughgoing scientific reductionism (Polkinghorne, 2002). This is the claim that in the end there is “nothing but” scientifically discerned reality.

Personal Evaluation

“Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth- in a word, to know himself, so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves.” I agree fully with this wise assertion of Pope John Paul II.

Science is our soul’s left hand, religion her right. By using both properly we reach divinity. Many scientists, as well as some theologians and philosophers, have argued that religion and science are not compatible. Some scientists and humanists have further suggested that natural science alone is sufficient to provide us with answers to questions about the meaning or purpose of human existence. Some scientists as well as many philosophers and theologians also have argued that science and religion are indeed compatible. I am inclined to side with them.

“To the discourse of
God does belong to
Natural Philosophy.”
Newton

The knowledge we obtain from our exploration of the world can be organized into a hierarchy, corresponding to the complexity of the systems treated as basic: physics, chemistry, biochemistry, biology, psychology, sociology, theology. All these disciplines

are contributing factors for the accumulation of knowledge. But, today the reductionists claim that ultimately everything is physics or can be reduced to the natural laws. The other disciplines are nothing but an epiphenomenal ripple on the surface of a physical substrate. We must consider all the disciplines. Here I am highlighting only science and religion since they are our concern.

The Interdependence of Science and Religion

We know that the great doctors of the church saints. Augustine and Thomas have contributed a lot to the compatibility of faith and reason. Faith and reason are complementary. Faith gives valuable service to reason by elevating the mind on its natural functioning. The reason, in turn, renders a valuable service to faith by the role it plays in theology.

St. Augustine

St. Augustine of Hippo is a very good example of dialogue between faith and reason. What is the connection that Augustine saw between the two? St Augustine called for a constructive synthesis between scientific and scriptural knowledge. Augustine emerged in the late fourth century as a rigorous defender of the Christian faith. But he was a strong compatibilist. He felt that intellectual inquiry into the faith was to be understood as faith seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*). To believe is “to think with assent” It is an act of the intellect determined not by reason, but by the will. Faith involves a commitment “to believe in a God,” “to believe God,” and “to believe in God.” Augustine considered nature as the prime Word of God through which God revealed Himself. This is a key issue and theme in Augustine’s Confessions, his profound and influential account of his search for meaning and conversion to Christianity. Augustine testifies to how reason puts man on the road toward God and how it is faith that informs and

elevates reason, taking it beyond its natural limitations while never being tyrannical or confining in any way. He summarized this seemingly paradoxical fact in the famous dictum, “I believe, in order to understand; and I understand, the better to believe”

St. Thomas Aquinas

St. Thomas’ cogent argument was that faith does not contradict reason, but complements it. From the beginning of Thomistic philosophy, we can notice the relation between faith and reason, with a systematic and complete analysis of the relation. He filled his writings with reason, especially *Summa Theologica*. Faith and reason are two different modes of knowing. Reason accepts truth as known by the light of reason. Faith accepts truth as known by the light of divine revelation. Aquinas says that faith and reason do not contradict. They have their respective judicial boundaries. The truth of faith and truth of reason derives from the same origin, God who is the truth.

David Horner

Many Christians would agree with that statement. These are the kind of people who say, “If you’ve got all this evidence for it, then where is room for faith?” They see faith and reason as opposites, and the relationship might be considered the relationship of divorce. These are two entities divorced from each

The opposite of faith is not reason; the opposite of faith is unbelief or lack of trust. The opposite of reason is not faith; the opposite of reason is irrationality. -Horner

other, one on either side. David Horner (2011) uses a metaphor in his wonderful book, *Mind Your Faith*. He says it’s not divorce; it should be marriage. Faith and reason are partners working together. Reason assesses faith trusts. Horner states that reason is: “Assessing reasons for a point of view and logical relationships to see if there’s adequate justification for a belief. No conflict. The opposite of faith is not reason; the opposite of faith is unbelief or lack of trust. The opposite of reason is not faith; the opposite

of reason is irrationality. So, it certainly is possible to have a reasonable faith, and it is also possible to have unreasonable unbelief. (Horner: 2011). Mary the model for the relation between Faith and reason Mother Mary can be quoted for rationality. When the angel Gabriel greeted with the message that she will bear a child, she didn't accept immediately but she reasoned out for a while and replied to the angel

Conclusion

Science and theology are two fruitful sources of human knowledge. Though they belong to different domains, they are intertwined in every act of cognition and they complement one another in our search for truth. In the light of the insights drawn from Polkinghorne's *One World: The Interaction of Science and Theology*, we can comfortably conclude both are compatible with each other and interconnected with one another. The creative interaction between science and theology, reason and religion make our world better for the whole of humanity. That leads to one world, where we are all united with our different religions and diverse sciences. In such a world, we will be there for each other, connected and related to one another.

References

- Carnes, J. R. (1982). *Axiomatics and Dogmatics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Davies, P. (1983). *God and the New Physics*. London: Dent.
- Horner, D. A. (2011). *Mind your Faith: A Student's Guide to Thinking and Living Well*. Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic.
- Mozokowski, A. (1970). *Conversations with Einstein*. New York: Horizon.
- Polkinghorne, J. (1987). *One World: The Interaction of Science and Theology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Polkinghorne, J. C. (1996). *Scientists as theologians: A comparison of the writings of Ian Barbour, Arthur Peacocke and John Polkinghorne*. London: SPCK.
- Polkinghorne, J. C. (2002). *Beyond science: The wider human context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Polkinghorne, J. (2012). *Science and religion in quest of truth*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Popper, Karl (1934). "The Christian doctrine of Creation and the Rise of Modern Natural Science." *Mind* 43.

Milton Nicholasrajan is a student of MSPR (Master of Science and Religion) at Jnana Deepa Institute of Philosophy and Theology, Pune. He belongs to the Order of Missionary Oblates of Mary

Immaculate. Email: milton.Nicholasrajan@jdv.edu.in ORCID. 0000-0001-5917-592X



Article Received April 14, 2020: Accepted May 1, 2020: Words: 2890



© by the authors. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license. (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)