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# Foreward

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*Boston University*

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The Boston Theological Institute was founded in 1967-1968 to provide a forum for ecumenical and ethical reflection, and to contribute to the formation of church leaders with a strong ecumenical commitment. It is not separate from its member institutions, but as an independent body seeks to strengthen the schools for their respective missions and tasks. It is to be something of a university of theology, bringing fundamental reflection to the problems besetting persons and culture in the contemporary period. It operates out of the assumption that, in our contemporary cultural period, groups identifying themselves as related to the churches have much in common.

Many of the ethical problems facing the churches and their schools in the founding period of the Institute were primarily sociological in nature. Many of those same issues endure. Additional questions confront theological education today as our knowledge of the world around us and of ourselves has become more complex. Whether it is to understand better our place in the cosmos, the method for sustaining life on earth in the midst of ecological degradation, or the nature of personhood from early life through to its termination, religion and the sciences are called to carry on a better conversation than has characterized their recent past.

This conversation is not new. Apart from reaching back to the foundations of religious and Christian reflection, schools foundational to the BTI like Harvard University were stamped in their earliest years by a theological quest that was undivided. Leonard Hoar, Harvard College's third president, carried on an epistolary exchange with the eminent chemist Sir Robert Boyle. Hoar illustrates

the way in which science was conceived as theological at core by Puritan Divines. The first endowed professorships in the English colonies were the [Thomas] Hollis Professorships of Divinity and then of Mathematics, illustrating how, in the opinion of their Baptist benefactor, God worked through Word and through Nature.

### **What does science offer religion?**

Religion without science lacks substance and the contextual resources with which to understand the world. The word science simply means knowledge. Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, a French Enlightenment philosopher reminds us that science is advanced language. The second task given to Edenic humanity was to name creation. Science is the act of naming the world around us. Scientists are trained to insist on rational explanation and consistent observation so that what is named can be known. It is not the job of science to construct that identity. The world that the scientific endeavor seeks to understand is stubborn, hard, and self-existing world. Scientific understanding grows through careful measurement and disciplined mathematical thought. The knowledge that it yields is usually not exhaustive, but opens new doors of mystery for further inquiry. The twentieth century has shown us that this mystery is as open to manipulation as it is inviting of religious wonder and scientific speculation. In fact, without a common understanding or unified epistemology about nature, the symbols of our worship life become eviscerated and science devolves into technique.

### **What does religion offer science?**

It is often clear enough today why science is important to religion. Less clear is the way in which scientism can define a

worldview and replace religion. For some, of course, this may be appropriate. However, such sentiment often obscures the meaning of religion, its role in shaping understanding, and its function in human societies. A worldview, derivative of religion widely defined, is the formulation we give to a general order of existence. Religious perspectives are elaborated theologically and applied ideologically, but we know more surely today than ever before that those ideas which become central to our lives are not necessarily the religions of inherited social expression. Anything to which we bind our lives may become our religion.

Given this pervasive definition of religion the social problems that we encounter as a society might be reconceived. For example, for some it is not traditional forms of religion but the world of dualistic (Cartesian) science, wed to technology and market expansion, that is the problem behind the failure to deal with patterns of consumption and issues of population. For others, scientism defined as such has contributed to an "economic (European) religion" of the market which distorts the real costs to populations and the environment. This is not to excuse traditional patterns of religious expression from their role in the social problems that we face. However, it is no longer possible to scapegoat any one domain of human activity in the face of deepening environmental problems or as we begin to encounter the difficult issues surrounding cloning, genetics, health care, or issues raised by artificial intelligence, to name only a few.

Although there were always voices questioning the relationship between science and a narrowing mechanistic positivism through the nineteenth century, European and Anglo-American societies grew to accept its division of facts from values, increasingly practiced from the Enlightenment into the modern period, often for good reason. Writing with David Hume's epistemological skepticism in mind, Immanuel Kant's work and legacy was to put empirical knowledge on a firmer footing—but to the

detriment of religious understanding, which was never satisfactory to Kant. Although the "real" God escapes knowledge, as Kant defines God in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, the idea of God is valuable for speculative thought in at least three ways. First, the concept of God helps to distinguish between appearances and things-in-themselves. This is the idea of "radical monotheism" often associated with the Protestant theologian, H. Richard Niebuhr, with Judaism, or with Islamic iconoclasm. Second, the idea of God suggests an explanation for the mystery of intuition, a variation on the early modern "God-of-the-gaps" theology so discredited through the nineteenth century. A third function of the idea of God is such as to promote scientific inquiry by offering confidence in the intelligibility and unity of the world.

### **A deepening conversation**

Each of these three areas has fallen subject to hermeneutical and cultural discussion, in part due to the intensifying debate over the nature of rationality. Whether scientism or religious dogma has foisted upon the world a domineering anthropomorphism is not something to be resolved here. What is demanded by the deepening conversation between the sciences and religion is a more nuanced approach to our social problems. Whether religion as such, or a particular religion, can provide this wider vision for engaging ecologically tinged issues may depend on whether a given tradition or religious expression is seen as bearing signs of transcendence (symbolic instrumentalism) or as symbols embedded in religious forms of life (linguistic pragmatism), rationality grounded in a greater mystery. What does seem apparent is that what we acknowledge as foundational will shape our ethics.

The social questions that we face mandate a deeper conversation between science and religion, a conversation that includes at least three observations. First, it is increasingly recognized publicly that the language of facts needs that of values. For example, a coherent ethic for sustainability

requires all the information that the sciences can muster. Yet, as Paul Ehrlich reminds us, above and beyond that technological and legislative changes that are mandated, the most important change that is required is a change in ourselves. That such a dialogue is possible is the result of many startling discoveries about the nature of our world in the twentieth century and comes out of a different intellectual climate in the philosophy of science and the sociology of knowledge since the Second World War.

Second, this change in intellectual climate has made for a more equal relationship between science and religion in the Academy. New departments of religious studies have developed across the land, adding to the many divinity schools, schools of theology, and seminaries that have been a part of this country's inheritance. This relationship is not merely based upon a deepening interest in the academic pursuit of religion, its bio-anthropological, sociological, as well as historical development, but is matched by discoveries in the sciences which discern in history, rather than in the laws of determinacy, a more basic perspective by which to understand cosmology, the origin of particles and their transformation into the molecular structures with which we are so familiar, and the plenteous forms of life itself. History rather than determinacy provides the "gate" for increased traffic

between science and religion, notes theologian Ted Peters, adding that this is a space in which both theologians and practitioners of the new sciences are at home.

A third observation that might be made about the conversation between science and religion is that this "groundedness" in history implies a value placed upon human activity. It also evokes the question of how a Creator, and perhaps humanity as well, participate in the management of nature. Theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg implies by the providential activity wherein God aims to accomplish God's tasks, not a *telos* or entelechy, but that nature itself is to find its own fulfillment. This idea relates to a point raised by the Australian biologist Charles Birch, who, drawing from Alfred North Whitehead, finds in process theology the conceptual tools for a theology of nature. However, governance may also imply resistance. This reminds us that in the theologies of a number of different religious traditions, creation is not an extension or emanation of God: it is an object of God's love, free to depart from or participate with God's purposes. The arena for this drama is human activity in history. If history is a "gate" through which science and religion meet, we are drawn into an evolving narrative which includes conversation with all peoples of living faith.