

The Human Project in Science and Religion
Copenhagen University Discussions in Science and Religion
VOL I.

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and Jacob Wolf

Acknowledgements**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Niels Henrik Gregersen: Introduction to the series.....3

Lluis Oviedo: Introduction: Science and Theology as an Instance of Reflection5

Alister E. McGrath: Truth, Beauty and Goodness. A New Vision for Natural Theology.....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Anne L.C. Runehov: Natural Theology or Theology of Nature and the Natural?**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Mikael Stenmark: In Science (Alone) We Trust?**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Niels Henrik Gregersen: Preferential Scientism: A Useful Fiction**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

John A. Teske : Stories, Myths, and Human Identity in Cognitive Neuroscience and Religion**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

René Rosfort: The Inexpressible Meaning in Narratives**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Peter Gärdenfors: The role of understanding in human nature .. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Christine Tind Johannessen-Henry: Meaning of Patterns - Patterns of Meaning**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Biography of the Authors**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

What is the meaning of human life, or of organic life altogether? To answer this question at all implies a religion. Is there any sense then, you ask, in putting it? I answer, the man who regards his own life and that of his fellow creatures as meaningless is not merely unfortunate but almost disqualified for life.

Albert Einstein

Niels Henrik Gregersen: Introduction to the series

The Human Project in Science & Religion is the first volume in a new series of Copenhagen Discussions in Science and Religion.

Copenhagen is often associated with two major figures in theology and science: *Søren Kierkegaard* (1813-1855), the forerunner of philosophical existentialism, and the physicist *Niels Bohr* (1885-1962). By happenstance this publication antedates the jubilee year of 2013, when Copenhagen University will celebrate the bicentennial of Kierkegaard's birth as well as the centennial of Niels Bohr's famous atomic model of 1913. Here, Bohr introduced the theory that electrons travel in orbits around the nucleus of the atom. While Kierkegaard spoke of leaps of faith, Bohr referred to electronic jumps between the orbits; in both cases discontinuity prevails over continuity.

Against this background, it is perhaps more than a coincidence that the Copenhagen discussions on science and religion since 2001 have taken place under the name *Forum of Existence and Science*¹— a somewhat unusual title, perhaps, but a very apt one in a Danish context. In general, Nordic philosophers, theologians and scientists tend to be sceptical about too high a claim for a unified world-view amalgamating science and religion. Existential first-hand perspectives cannot very easily be accommodated within a scientific third-person perspective. Thus, either models of complementarity (in the wake of Niels Bohr) or models of a discipline-based dialogue are preferred over and against more extravagant claims of grand-scale metaphysical synthesis in our *Forum of Existence and Science*. We prefer to speak about interdisciplinary inquiry than about trans-disciplinary unification.

Since 2005, the Forum became part of the *Copenhagen University Network of Science and Religion* in collaboration with the *Department of Systematic Theology* and the *Centre for Naturalism and Christian Semantics*. This move was facilitated by two generous grants from the *Metanexus Institute* and the *John Templeton Foundation*. We are grateful to these institutions for supporting our research as well as for giving us the opportunity to be a part of the *Global Local Societies Initiative*. We also thank Teol. Dr. Anne Runehov, who in 2008 took over the leadership of the Network. Without her commitment this series would not have been initiated.

¹ www.forumforeksistensogvidenskab.dk

Lluis Oviedo: Introduction: Science and Theology as an Instance of Reflection

What does science have to do with theology and vice versa? Why would the one care about the other? Furthermore, why would science care about religion? Apparently different branches of the natural sciences are concerned with religion. One reason is perhaps that religion belongs to the faculty of being human which has provided the most interest for scientific investigation. Due to today's advanced equipment, scientists are now able to study subject matter such as consciousness and emotions. Previously, these subjects remained the domain of the philosophers. Religion offers a wide range of interesting features to study: higher states of consciousness; rituals; religious experiences; religious emotions; religious cognition; religious behaviour, etc. These topics are of interest for different branches of the natural sciences: neuroscience; cognitive science; behavioural psychology and evolutionary psychology to name only a few. Due to the successful progress of the scientific enterprise in providing reliable knowledge of the universe and its content, theologians have felt the need to consider these findings but also to reconsider their theology. Scientists and scholars taking the debate seriously face the following questions. Firstly, the question of how to relate scientific theories and findings to questions of faith, meaning and purpose as raised by theology. Secondly, the question of how to relate empirical questions and answers to ethical and existential questions and answers. On the one hand there is the scientific quest for reliable knowledge that is not dependent on cultural constraints and subjective preferences (even though one may ask if this is entirely possible) and on the other hand there is the religious quest, which concerns meaning and orientation in our lives but is a quest that is to a larger extent dependent on cultural constraints and subjective existence. These questions and reflections and the quest for finding adequate understanding of the world that does justice to what it is to be a human being embedded in oneself, the world, and for many, in God, led to a new discipline being born: Science and Theology. As the name suggests, academics working in this field are interested in both science and religion in one way or another. They may belong to the academic field of the natural sciences, the social sciences, the human sciences, theology or religious studies. It was during the 1960s that

major developments in the philosophy of science and the philosophy of religion, new theories and discoveries in the natural sciences, as well as complex shifts in the

theological landscape, made possible constructive interaction between often separate or even hostile intellectual communities (Russel and Wegter-McNelly 2003:746).

One could perhaps say that it was Ian Barbour with *Issues in Science and Religion* who built the first bridge between the two fields (Barbour 1996). He accounted for the mutual aspects he found in the methodology, linguistics and epistemology of the two disciplines of science and theology, namely “[b]oth made cognitive claims about the world expressed through metaphors and models, and both employed a hypothetic-deductive method within a revisionist, contextualised, and historicist framework” (Russel and Wegter-McNelly 2003:746). Thus Barbour maintained that what both disciplines have in common is that they need to work with hypotheses, metaphors or other figurative language, explanatory models, etc. to construct theories about our world.

However, some esteemed voices are concerned about some of the recent developments in this new discipline. There is some unease about the consequences of an excess of specialisation, which would render this new field too “professional” and too far removed from the traditional interests and methods of scientific as well as theological communities.

These opponents argue that the disciplines of *science* and *theology* remain distinct. One reason for the concern that the disciplines distance themselves from their traditional interests might be that the academic programme of *Science and Theology* is confused with the programme called *Theology of Science* on the one hand and the programme of *Scientific Studies of Religion* on the other. Science and Theology is ideally an intellectual venture that aims at informing scientists about the theological relevance of their work as well as informing theologians about the meaning and impact of scientific progress for their religious hermeneutics.

Seen as such, a specialisation of the academic field of Science and Theology seems unavoidable. Hence, to put it in the words of Willem B. Drees, “there is not only a need for serious study of ‘Religion and Science’, as an object to be studied [by theologians], but also for serious reflection in ‘Religion and Science’” (2010: 150). This, however, does not prevent the programme of Science and Theology from comprising several dimensions. We can mention at least four. (1) A dimension concerned with establishing the Theology of Science. (2) A scientific dimension concerned with Studies of Religion. (3) A professional interdisciplinary dimension of Science and Religion concerned with studying specific topics of religion from an interdisciplinary point of view. This dimension is more *reflective* and ambitious, and reflects true academic specialisation. (4) A dialogic dimension of Science and Religion, which is more “dialogic”, which renders science understandable for theologians and theology for scientists but has the ambition of deepening the debate between science and theology by an emphasis on religion.

The present collection of essays is the result of several lectures organised by the *Copenhagen University Network for Science and Religion* during 2008. In my

opinion, the lectures especially mirror the third and fourth dimensions of Science and Theology mentioned above. The present collection of studies represents a professional level of analysis that aims at accounting for some of the current questions arising in the interface of science and theology. In my opinion, the most interesting point in these essays is that they clearly show how one of the ambitions of Science and Theology is to raise the standard of debate thereby supplying a meta-platform for discussion. Obviously this ensemble of intellectual reflections mirrors the reflective dimension of Science and Theology: when both fields come into contact, a second or third order of reflection is required to deal with the impending challenges.

Presentation of the chapters

Let us now look at the main essays and the responses which resulted in fruitful discussions. All the authors are well known specialists in the field of *Science and Theology*, with highly acclaimed publications and careers in attempts at bridging both sides of the perceived divide. The idea of organising this project is really interesting and appears promising, since the respondents to the main essays manage to develop the reflection still further, showing the relevance and limits of the proposed points. If at least one aspect of scientific progress is measured by the level of discussion reached here, then these essays will clearly contribute to the advancement of the field, prompting further development.

In chapter one the well known English Theologian, Alister McGrath, pleads for the revival of “natural theology”, after a cosmetic operation pointing to a change of identity and mission. Indeed, part of the essay aims at reviewing the history, achievements and flaws of that theological project, and proposes a new kind of natural theology more in keeping with the present conditions. The flaws are located in modern times: the bad influence of the Enlightenment, which settled a wrong agenda; the destructive criticism of Karl Barth of the entire project; and the inability to deliver what was promised: rational access to the divine. The alternative connects in some way with the medieval tradition of universals and with Trinitarian theology. Natural theology would become a more confessional programme of how believers see and feel the natural world, including – beyond the cognitive dimension of truth – the other two less empirical aspects left somewhat behind: beauty and goodness. The narrative appears plausible, even if this history has been told many times: Enlightenment has ruined the theological tradition, and looking at more remote sources of inspiration, in the great Christian tradition, it is probable that better ways can be found to revitalize the prospect of theology engaging with nature.

In the second chapter, Anne Runehov shows that she has done her homework well as respondent, and has applied her analytical skills to better frame McGrath’s proposal. In her view, the new project is clearly distinct and distant both from its

medieval and modern versions. Then she engages in the thorny issue of nature and our experience of it, which admits several approaches, social construction being just one of them. As a result of the critical revision, Runehov proposes to call McGrath's project a "theology of nature", instead of a "natural theology". Following the criteria of McFague, a similar programme finds great plausibility and actuality, as it is able to connect Christian revelation with the scientific and ecological sensitivity of our time. In my view this is more than a semantic question: how to deal theologically with nature and its scientific and technological management. This becomes a big challenge for a more engaged theology. Medieval inspiration seems inadequate for the job.

It would be extremely useful to continue the dialogue in order to ascertain which would constitute the best theological programme both for making space for the recent developments of science, and for keeping the provision of hope, truth and love revealed in the Christian tradition. What seems clear is that things cannot continue in the same vein and that even at the curricular level, a new model of the Theology of nature and creation needs to be developed to keep pace with the events of our time. If a more reflective theology needs to have an impact, a good case is found here. The efforts of trying to renew the theological understanding of the natural world – which is more than just our environment, since we are embedded in it – should point to a renewed teaching programme in our faculties.

Chapter three presents the criticism that Mikael Stenmark raises regarding scientism in its epistemological version. The topic is very much related to the close programmes of naturalism and reductionism. It is obvious that these questions are at the centre of the basic agenda of *Science and Theology*. Indeed if the method assumed by scientism or naturalism is accepted, any engagement between science and theology will suffer immensely. It is a priority of the current programme of the sub-discipline to dismantle every attempt to reduce our theological knowledge of the real to what can be obtained only through scientific scrutiny, a strategy that automatically dismisses the methods of theology as an invalid form of understanding. Stenmark manages in a magisterial way to do the job, and provides convincing arguments to refute the epistemological reductionism linked to that version of scientism. The self-referential paradoxes of that programme are well exposed, even in their weaker versions. Furthermore the evidence points to a set of ideas that are obtained outside of the scientific realm, to the specificity of intentional conscious knowledge, and to its social forms, transcending scientific patterns. No privilege can be conceded to the purely scientific approach when a phenomenology of real life is taken into account.

In chapter four Niels Gregersen builds on further distinctions regarding the programme of scientism, this time between a *worldview* and a *precept*. The result is called *preferential scientism*, a programme at work inside the sciences as well, in the form of "minimalism" or what others have called "reductionism". However, the results delivered seem more "science fiction" than real science; more an aspiration

than true achievements. There is surely all the realm of human behaviour requiring a more hermeneutical approach, beyond sheer scientific treatment. Nevertheless the dreams of scientism could push some research programmes towards useful results.

The issues being put forward in this discussion are far reaching, and allow me to think about the consequences of scientism for the study of religion. On one hand, several of these studies provide useful insights, allowing for a better understanding of religious phenomena. But on the other hand, their extreme reductionist positions appear as a blow for traditional wisdom, including theology. The challenge presented lies in the capacity to integrate both approaches, which could be mutually enriching. Furthermore, some theologians presuppose some items of *preferential scientism* in their aim to conduct a more scientifically informed theology that reaches beyond rhetorical excess and aprioristic impasses. They have learned from the scientific ideals of tangibility, conciseness, and verification how to better focus theological points. In my opinion, it is not impossible to pursue an even more “experimental theology” if one were to follow the path of the similar programme of “experimental philosophy”. The field of theological anthropology offers many possibilities in which to explore this method. I assume that some degree of scientism may be healthy, even for theology, once the excesses have been avoided.

The issue under examination in chapter five corresponds to “meaning” and how it is built into Science and Religion. The author, John Teske, develops an interesting line of argument showing how meaning requires patterns and that these are often built in a narrative form. This essay makes a good case for the narrative form of self identity. It borrows from several scientific and philosophical areas as well as from neuroscience and the past decade’s long discussion on personal identity. The author clearly limits his scope, aware of how broad and onerous is the issue of identity, focusing on the role played by memory and its narrative patterning. More interesting is the way in which myths and religions re-enter this schema, as meta-narratives able to frame life events and provide new meaning. The point is that these broad narratives are complementary to science and fill some areas out of the reach of more methodological approaches. They clearly provide an imaginative incentive to moral commitment and offer to enlighten our understanding of the eschatological future.

In chapter six, René Rosfort opens three critical fronts: first against too sharp a separation between scientific accounts and the narrative form, both for science, and in the formation of meaning; second, the revision of the narrative pattern as the origin of consciousness on the base of phenomenological reflection and psychopathological evidence; and third, the normative doubts concerning the reliability of narrative versions of self and others. Curiously, Rosfort’s claim identifies the weakness of narrative reconstruction of self in two opposite forms: the inability to express some affective dimensions; and the need to complement a more scientific explanation.

Reflecting on some of the important questions raised in this collection of essays, it appears that the centre of the discussion on science and religion clearly turns on

anthropology. I mean by this that the issue of personal identity and consciousness, being one of the most discussed in the cognitive sciences and philosophy of mind, points inevitably to the centrality of human beings and the difficulties in rendering a complete account of this most mysterious dimension. Such a perception clearly calls for theology to be able to say how a radical reflection on human identity ultimately leads to theological topics, in a free and almost fictive version of the ontological argument.

The subject matter of inquiry of chapter seven appears less immediately theological, but nevertheless highly relevant: the role of understanding. It clearly brings to the fore the old discussion between explaining and understanding, as a way of specifying the roles of science and human hermeneutic disciplines, including theology. Peter Gärdenfors rightly identifies understanding as “seeing a pattern”. He develops a model started in *Gestalt* psychology, identifying patterns of causality as the way the human mind works. The “intentional stance” of Dennett comes to mind too. This drive makes us apt to read others’ minds and to identify agents behind every event. The approach also finds clear applications in education and science, where understanding follows the same schema of identifying patterns. We miss, amongst the several possible applications, the religious field in which this strategy could offer interesting insights.

In chapter eight, Christine Tind Johannessen-Henry tries to fill the gap, and offers valuable comments on how theology can be inserted into this cognitive programme. She wisely poses the question on the existence of maxi-patterns which are able to include in a holistic way most of reality and human experience. Drawing on Pannenberg’s suggestions, the respondent reminds us about the “given nature” of some fundamental patterns, which are not the result of subjective activity, but are rather acquired through some form of learning. This model fits better with the theological approach, which appears as complementary to the scientific one, as the first evokes some form of transcendence.

These last essays and the discussion they promote are highly inspiring, and – together with the two preceding ones – have the merit of returning to old-fashioned issues in theology and philosophy of religion, such as the question of meaning and purpose in life, which are constitutive elements of personal identity. The striking point is that this exercise on updating old topics can be perceived as the result of the recent interaction with science and the scientific treatment of some cognitive and anthropological activities. This seems encouraging, since it contends that transcendental approaches, too characteristic of former seasons of theological discussion, are returning to centre stage at the hand of an unexpected protagonist, one that seemed rather to question traditional theological views. As has been said many times: science apparently closes some doors, but unexpectedly opens other doors and windows to theology, offering surprising views of new landscapes, helping us to

think more deeply about our long term ideas on the human condition, our future, and the future of the entire world.

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