

A View from the Pew: Religion and Science from a Pastoral Perspective

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Abstract

The following essay explores the proposals of a theologian, philosophical ethicist, and renowned scientist in order to glean from their respective contributions elements of a recommendation for one way in which the local pastor, as theologian in residence, can best prepare him or her self for engagement in the ongoing dialog and debate between Christian religion and the scientific community in its variegated areas of exploration and experimentation. The purpose for such preparation on the part of the pastor is to assure a well-thought-out and reasoned position on issues critical to this conversation, while at the same time assuring a healthy respect for the complexity of related issues and the wealth of wisdom evident in both the more traditional and contemporary explications of Christian doctrine. In the current environment where there is often more heat than there is light, the pastor has an opportunity to reach-out and to shape the understanding and point-of-view of congregants regarding the issues faced, while at the same time deepening respect for the separate yet equally important worldviews. This proposal is intended to defuse much of the heated debate, exaggerated accusations, and distortion of fact evident in the debate over evolution vs. creationism, or in its more contemporary form, intelligent design, so the pastor can provide congregants with a far more balanced perspective on the salient issues at hand.

Introduction

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:16-20, NRSV).

It is imperative to the clarity of the argument made in the following essay that the underlying presuppositions in relation to issues of faith-conviction and confessional commitments be confidently stated at the outset. The purpose in using the above biblical passage from the closing verses of Matthew’s gospel is to provide three presuppositions which, even though they will not play any significant role in the development of the thesis, articulate in the clearest of terms three theological principles acknowledged as distinctively Christian in their orientation and indispensable to the form and content of a particular religious identity. The first is evident in the charge of Christ as a commandment to the church: “go and make disciples of all nations,” which represents the core rationale for the church’s existence in every generation. The

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second, baptizing “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” defines the specificity of the “God” Christians speak of whenever they haltingly speak of God; that is to say, the Christian church confesses faith in One-God, in a Trinitarian conceptualization, and without the ambiguity that can accompany the more generalized notions, e.g. “ground of being,” “ultimate reality,” or “source of life and the living.” The third and final presupposition is located in the reference Christ makes to “the end of the age,” which forces upon our attention the particularity of an eschatological diffidence; that is to say, Christianity has never been a confessional community restricted to a limiting fixation on the “origin” of all things, but has rather tended to locate the essential nature of creation and creature in an eschatological consummation of all of life, nature, and the cosmos, suffused in promise and hope, evident in the central event of revelation as the life, teaching, passion, death, resurrection, ascension, and promised return of Jesus Christ.

The ecumenical creed of the Christian community (at least in its Western expression), that is the “Apostles’ Creed,” is arguably the standard by which the church determines what is proper to theological orthodoxy (“right praise”); to fixate on any one of the three “articles” of the Creed, to the exclusion of the other two, diminishes a more full-bodied comprehension and expression of Christian doctrine. The fullness of the Christian faith is evident in a balanced confessional approach, which recognizes the integrity of the Creed as a summary of the more detailed narrative of the history of God’s self-revelation and the covenantal imperatives implicit in the biblical story of creation, call, redemption, conversion, and consummation. Capturing the richness of the Christian heritage demands a fuller telling of the narrative of God than is evident in a truncated focus on the first chapter (i.e., a doctrine of creation) only. Should the scientific community welcome an engagement with the Christian “religion” it must be prepared to move

beyond debate regarding the “origin” of all and take the whole of Christian doctrine under consideration; should the Christian community welcome an engagement with the community of science it must be willing to move beyond a fixation on the perceived need to resolve the evolution vs. creation(ism) debate as essential to any further or future dialog.

The Context Of The Church-Science Dialogue

The closing verses of Matthew’s gospel, which include the command of the risen Christ to his disciples, constitute the essential mission of the Christian church and have throughout the centuries of its existence. In an age of scientific discovery and technological advancement the primary mission of the church has not changed and the command of Christ remains in effect. Nevertheless the environment in which that mission takes place has changed considerably, even over the course of the last several decades. There is in the contemporary context very little of the church-culture which can avoid contact with technological and scientific dynamics, and it may be in the best interests of the church and to her overall advantage to seek open and deliberate engagement with members of the scientific community.

Before engaging in any form of responsible dialog with members of the scientific community, the church has an obligation to clarify the primary theological concepts and models fundamental to the formation of her own unique identity; a lack of precision in defining such terms will only lead to further obfuscation and hamper progress in communication. Because the formal term “religion” lacks specificity, suggesting a multiplicity of beliefs and associated practices, it quickly becomes problematic in the use of theological categories such as the term “God,” which can become wide-ranging and unmanageable.

In the body of this essay wherever the term “religion” is employed it will refer specifically to Christian beliefs and practices, and therefore the term “God” is used in the traditional fashion of Christian theology to refer to the Triune God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is crucial in order to establish that I am not here concerned so much with any other form of religion than the Christian, and to substantiate from the outset my particular interest in asserting the uniqueness of the Triune God as fundamentally distinct from all other theological definitions or descriptions of the deity. I hold that Christians are constitutionally trinitarian and cannot be glibly associated with any other categorizations such as Deists, Dualists, Unitarians, Polytheists, or any other form of Theism in general.

Historical Tensions

It is unfortunate that the history of engagement between scientific and religious communities, at least in the United States, has been tainted by distortion, hostility, and political machinations. The scientifically uninformed Christian, no less than biblically and theologically illiterate Christian, is a grave menace to the church, leaving local congregations and communities vulnerable to extremists in opposition to almost any form of scientific and technological development. One need only consider the unfortunate situation that took place in the state of Pennsylvania, in a small community in the central part of that state (Dover, PA), where a select few conservative-evangelical school board members forced a re-enactment of the disturbing absurdities of the Scopes trial, with similar, objectionable results.¹ Generally speaking, the conversation between Christian religion and science has historically been strained, and hard-line positions on both sides of the dialog have only exacerbated any attempt to move forward,

¹ For an engaging narrative of the situation in Dover, Pennsylvania, see *Monkey Girl: Evolution, Education, Religion, and the Battle for America's Soul*, Edward Humes (New York, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007).

seeking a more reasonable and fruitful result. Any desire to engage in meaningful dialog has been hindered by stereotyping on both sides of the issue; unfounded accusations and fear tactics have replaced well-reasoned debate and helpful appraisals of what both science and religion have to contribute to the welfare of community and the enrichment of the human soul and spirit. I wish to contend that both religion and science have intrinsic value to the culture at large, providing opportunities for the enrichment of life for both creatures and the natural order. I also maintain that the genuinely unique donation the *Christian* faith brings to this necessary dialog and engagement with the scientific enterprise cannot be limited to a debate concerning the origins of life, but is instead to be located in the three theological presuppositions stated at the outset of this essay: the *missio Dei*,² the Trinitarian conceptualization of God, and the eschatological reserve.

The Role Of The Pastor

In this rather guarded environment the role of the local pastor, as theologian in residence, takes-on a new and vital significance; it is the local pastor who can be the first line of defense against the falsification of information and blatant distortion that often takes place between the extremists on both sides of the intended dialog. The local pastor will face many of the ethical and moral issues surrounding advances in science and technology, being forced, by virtue of the office held, to guide church members through the murky waters of difficult and perplexing questions associated with real concerns, e.g., in vitro fertilization, the termination of pregnancy,

² P. Mark Achtemeier in his article entitled, “The *Union with Christ* Doctrine in Renewal: Movements of the Presbyterian Church (USA), writes, ...*participation in the trinitarian life of God—which is the church’s communion with the Father by her union with the Son in the power of the Spirit—involves also and at the same time participation in the mission of God to the world. The church’s union with Christ’s person makes it a participant in Christ’s mission, which mission is constituted by the Father’s sending of the Son into the world in the power of the Spirit.* See, *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*, ed. Wallace M. Alston, Jr. and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), pp.336-345.

organ donor and transplant issues, the release of stem cells for research purposes, or quality of life decisions. It is increasingly more common for the local pastor to be called upon to speak to the biblical and theological range of issues associated with the debate over the teaching of evolution in public schools and the advocacy of those who wish to have Intelligent Design introduced to the scientific curriculum, providing what is thought to be a more balanced perspective.

To perform that same role of education, adjudication, and implicit responsibility with integrity, the pastor must give serious and deliberate attention to furthering an awareness of the salient issues involved and the impact they may have on the lives of church members. The purpose of this essay is to propose a model, with several related components, with which the local pastor can begin to formulate an approach to this critical and extremely challenging development in the life of the Church. George Lindbeck's, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, provides a methodological component; Alasdair Macintyre's, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, provides an ethical model; and Stephen Jay Gould's, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, provides an epistemological model.

The Contribution Of George Lindbeck

In the opening pages of Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*, and referring to the thesis of his book, he writes: "What is new about the present work...is not its theory of religion, but the use of this theory in the conceptualization of doctrine, and the contention that this conceptualization is fruitful for theology..."³ The "conceptualization of doctrine" to which Lindbeck refers is that "rule theory of doctrine" he advances throughout the body of his proposal.

³ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Westminster Press, 1984), p.8.

Lindbeck's analysis of recent developments in doctrinal explication, together with originality of thought, makes his proposal fruitful in framing a methodological approach for the local pastor's development of an educational model to enable church members to engage in an exploration of the relationship between religion and science.

Lindbeck offers his own summary of the most recent development in theological methodologies, as well as theories of religion and doctrine, alleging that they can be divided into three formalized approaches:

One of the (approaches) emphasizes the cognitive aspects of religion and stresses the ways in which church doctrines function as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities....A second approach focuses on...the "experiential-expressive" dimension of religion, and it interprets doctrines as noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations....A third approach attempts to combine these two phases.⁴

Lindbeck contends this third approach holds the greatest promise for extracting theology from the labyrinth of difficulties associated with the cognitive-propositional and experiential-expressive approaches, while at the same time demonstrating the greatest promise; I would affirm this "third approach" as a methodological type for the local pastor in his or her desire to address the relationship between science and religion in a well-thought-out plan of educational engagement. Lindbeck's project advances along three interrelated lines of reasoning, which will be considered advantageous to those who wish to preserve a healthy dialogue between religion and science: (1) what he refers to as a "cultural-linguistic" view of religious belief and practice; (2) a "rule theory" assessment of doctrine; and (3) an "intratextual" hermeneutic.

It is Lindbeck's assessment that the contemporary Church is experiencing "the awkwardly intermediate stage of having once been culturally established but...not yet clearly

⁴ Ibid., p.16

disestablished.”⁵ One of the casualties of finding itself at this “stage” is the threatened loss of a uniquely Christian identity and sense of connectedness to a historically communicated confessional heritage. Another evident consequence is the Church’s attempt to maintain relevance through either accommodation to the surrounding culture (e.g. the experiential-expressive model) or a theological defensiveness that borders on a “ghetto” mentality (e.g. the cognitive-propositional model).

One of the clear implications of Lindbeck’s analysis is the manner in which, historically, the extremists in the science and religion debate have fallen within the parameters of one or the other of these models. For example, it could be argued that the advocates of “creationism” and “Intelligent Design” fall into line with the cognitive-propositional model, while the advocates of “scientism” or “scientific materialism” tend to argue that religious conviction is, in its fundamentals, a matter of experiential-expressive accommodations. If that is an accurate assessment then it only stands to reason that any attempt at dialogue is complicated from the outset by virtue of the conceptualizations in which the different parties are entrenched.

What seems to trouble Lindbeck most about the current cultural climate is the seeming indifference toward the Christian community—its message and mission—and the attending perception of the Church as impotent, unable to assert any real influence on the surrounding culture, an influence resonant with those values and convictions assigned to the Christian gospel. The perceived indifference is augmented by a growing acceptance of, if not appreciation for, a relativistic view of religious belief and practice among cultural contemporaries and also within the Christian community:

As we move into a culturally...post-Christian period...increasing numbers of people regard all religions as possible sources of symbols to be used eclectically in

⁵ Ibid., p.134

articulating, clarifying, and organizing the experiences of the inner self. Religions are seen as multiple suppliers of different forms of a single commodity needed for transcendent self-expression and self-realization.⁶

With the increased promotion and acceptance of both pluralism and relativism, “fewer and fewer contemporary people are deeply embedded in particular religious traditions or thoroughly involved in particular religious communities.”⁷ This, then, has become a fertile field for the experiential-expressive approach to religious belief and practice:

The rationale suggested, though not necessitated, by an experiential-expressive approach is that the various religions are diverse symbolizations of one and the same core experience of the Ultimate, and that therefore they must respect each other, learn from each other, and reciprocally enrich each other.⁸

The attractiveness and promotion of the experiential-expressive approach, while having something to do with a deficient knowledge of the particulars of any one doctrinal and confessional stance, is indicative of the degree to which the postmodern agenda has achieved dominance in the historical development of the church’s theological self-understanding. While some may in fact applaud such a movement within the Christian community, there is an equal reason for concern; the privatization of belief and extreme self-promotion will prove deficient and inhibit openness to the necessary dialogue between religion and science as quickly as do attitudes that are more cognitive-propositional and thought to be more objective and fixed in truth-content. According to Lindbeck, the Church should “resist the clamor of the religiously interested public for what is currently fashionable and immediately intelligible... and...prepare for a future when de-christianization will make greater Christian authenticity communally possible.”⁹ The “de-christianization” of culture could prove favorable to the enrichment and openness of dialogue between the scientific and Christian communities, but only to the extent

⁶ Ibid., p.22

⁷ Ibid., p.21

⁸ Ibid., p.23

⁹ Ibid., p.134

that the church has overcome the current vacuity or paucity of biblical and theological literacy in the general populace; from the side of the Christian community, the pastor cannot expect individuals to enter the fray between religion and science who have not first established a clearly defined and affirmed sense of confessional or creedal identity.

Continuing his description of the different approaches to religious belief and practice, Lindbeck assesses the cognitive-propositional approach. Unlike the experiential-expressive mode, which tends to be extremely individualistic, subjective and internally authenticated (i.e. “It is true only if it is true for me and if it resonates with my personal experience.”), the cognitive-propositional holds that:

Church doctrines are communally authoritative teachings regarding beliefs and practices that are considered essential to the identity or welfare of the group in question. They may be formally operative, but in any case they indicate what constitutes faithful adherence to a community....A religious body cannot exist as a recognizably distinctive collectivity unless it has some beliefs and/or practices by which it can be identified.¹⁰

One can discern immediate implications for the disconcerting results attributable to those on local school boards who hold to a cognitive-propositional concept of biblical interpretation and wrongly assess a threat to the Christian identity of their children who are being “subjected” to a Darwinian theory of human historical development, devoid of a religiously motivated alternative. In point of fact, Lindbeck argues that the two best paradigmatic embodiments of the cognitive-propositional approach are the “Protestant *biblicistic* and the Catholic *traditionalist*” where identity is preserved by “reproducing as literalistically as possible the words and actions of the past.”¹¹

Lindbeck is apparently driven by the desire to achieve several related objectives; among those objectives is one that runs along two parallel tracks: (1) a desire to propose the sustainable

¹⁰ Ibid., p.74

¹¹ Ibid., p.79

usefulness of the distinctive Christian faith-tradition in the contemporary milieu (which I have defined as “scientific-technological”); and (2) the effort to counteract the unfortunate consequences of “modernity” as a socio-political phenomenon responsible for the unhappy fate besetting Christianity in this present era. “Modernity” has created a religious environment in which communal norms have been all but replaced by personal preference. As Lindbeck observes:

The modern mood is antipathetic to the very notion of communal norms...the product of such factors as religious and ideological pluralism and social mobility. When human beings are insistently exposed to conflicting and changing views, they tend to lose their confidence in any one of them. Doctrines no longer represent objective realities and are instead experienced as expressions of personal preference.¹²

When one listens attentively to the voices of those school board members or parents expressing concerns regarding the teachings of evolution, it is evident that, expressed in a sympathetic light, they are worried their children will become conflicted as they hear an alternative description to the creation-narrative promoted in their Sunday morning classes.¹³ While wanting to remain sensitive to the apparent genuineness of such expressed concern(s), the pastor is here being encouraged to broaden the theological horizons of such parent-members by discussing in some education or “open-forum” conclave the deeper and richer dimensions of the biblical and doctrinal heritage upon which the Christian identity and “worldview” is founded.

Lindbeck also argues that as a consequence of the influence of modernity the Church faces strong opposition whenever the attempt is made to establish standards for belief and practice: “The suggestion that communities have the right to insist on standards of belief and practice as conditions of membership is experienced as an intolerable infringement of the liberty of the self.... Thus an experiential-expressive approach to religion can be easily, though not

¹² Ibid., p.77

¹³ See, Edward Humes, *Monkey Girl: Evolution, Education, Religion, and the Battle for America's Soul* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007) for a chilling account of the situation in the school district of Dover, PA.

necessarily, used to legitimate the religious privatism and subjectivism that is fostered by the social pressure of the day.”¹⁴ The pastor who, as theologian in residence, would undertake the task of enabling his or her members to engage in a meaningful study of and dialogue with science and technology will immediately recognize the need to provide a detailed and perhaps even rigorous study of the rich historical traditions of biblical and theological explication. He or she will most certainly encounter some resistance to such a program of study, but the fruits of such engagement can prove sufficient to the maintenance of interest and commitment on the part of those who participate in such study.

Lindbeck’s chief concern however lies in advocating the importance of maintaining a distinctively Christian faith-tradition, and in particular in this contemporary pluralistic setting. While the “liberal agenda”—theologically speaking—has been the desire to discover some universal principle capable of serving as an acceptable foundation for Christian beliefs, the advocates of a “post-liberal” agenda remain less than convinced and are skeptical of the merit in seeking a foundation in things external to the Church’s own biblically and historically shaped tradition. The post-liberal agenda is driven by the desire to provide the Church with an opportunity to reinvigorate its own unique identity amid the pluralism of contemporary culture. Lindbeck wants to affirm that the Church undertake the problem of identity, and recommends that it do so by remaining faithful to its own traditional “cultural-linguistic” particularities.¹⁵ As elaborated by Lindbeck, the issue is both *hermeneutical* (“intratextuality”) and *methodological* (“cultural-linguistic”). It is astounding how close Stephen Jay Gould, with his NOMA¹⁶ concept, comes to the proposal being made by Lindbeck!

¹⁴ Lindbeck, p.77

¹⁵ See, Lindbeck, pp. 130-132

¹⁶ “Non-Overlapping Magisteria;” in Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999).

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There are no neutral or universal criteria by which one can measure the rationality of theological or religious language and related discourse. Of course this raises the question of how one can speak of the intelligibility or truth-claim of the Christian message in order that it might be effectively presented to the modern (or post-modern) mindset, influenced as it is by both science and technology. Lindbeck contends that not unlike *apologetics* in general, only focused more on the “intratextual” significance of faith-claims¹⁷, the reasonableness of Christianity is “largely a function of its assimilative powers, of its ability to provide intelligible interpretation in its own terms of the varied situations and realities adherents encounter.”¹⁸ Furthermore, “intelligibility comes from skill, not theory, and credibility comes from good performance, not adherence to independently formulated criteria” (as would be common among many apologists for “creationism” and/or “Intelligent Design”).

Before moving on to discuss one of Lindbeck’s key terms, I would once again call attention to the phrase “intelligible interpretation in its own terms,” solely because this seems to be one of the areas in which there is prevalence of confusion and misunderstanding in the debate regarding the appropriateness of considering “creationism” or “Intelligent Design” as comparable to evolution as a scientific theory whose validity is now beyond doubt for any reasonable observer. The pastor can guide members through an educational process that emphasizes the necessity for respecting the unique and “intelligible interpretation(s)” both science and religion bring to the very same phenomena, but with incredibly different interpretive positions, while at the same time indicating those areas—regardless of their controversial nature—in which there has been or remains the promise of cross-fertilization.

¹⁷ See, Lindbeck, p.129

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.131

Because “intratextuality” is one of the fundamental concepts in Lindbeck’s work, a clear understanding of the term as he chooses to use it is essential to my thesis. Lindbeck states that “intratextual theology redescribes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating scripture into extrascriptural categories. It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text.”¹⁹ This seems to imply that those Christians who wish to influence public school policies regarding the teaching of evolution are mixing textual categories, to say the least, and are, perhaps, guilty of “translating scripture into extrascriptural categories.” I would merely add that the church stands in an historical vortex in which the necessity for reclamation of her biblical text and heritage of interpretation is no longer optional but essential to the enrichment of identity and place.

Finally, Lindbeck’s “cultural-linguistic” approach locates all religious meaning within the text of the faith-community, and the symbolic(s) generated by the hermeneutical exchange between the text-community-world in their interrelatedness and their interactions. Meaning is inherently derived from the way in which a particular language is used within a particular tradition:

Meaning is constituted by the uses of a specific language rather than being distinguishable from it. Thus the proper way to determine what “God” signifies, for example, is by examining how the word operates within a religion and thereby shapes reality and experience rather than by first establishing its propositional or experiential meaning and reinterpreting or reforming its use accordingly.²⁰

Part of the problematic in the dialogue between religion and science could be a consequence of attempting to employ language in one field of study, research, observation, and theorizing, that can only be intelligible within the community of faith that has been shaped and formed by that language for a different purpose and to different ends. The employment of the

¹⁹ Ibid., p.118

²⁰ Ibid., p.114

term “God” in the realm of science can have an extremely different connotation and denotation from the same term when employed in the faith community. It is evident that advocates of both “creationism” and “Intelligent Design” have a very unique understanding of the term “God;” the applicability of both “intelligence” and “design” to the Triune God of Christianity is a more severely restrictive denotation and connotation than has been traditionally employed in the history of Christian theology and creedal affirmation.

Lindbeck suggests that one reason for advocating the cultural-linguistic approach is that it down-plays the cognitive dimension of religious belief. What is primary in the cultural-linguistic model is “the conceptual vocabulary and syntax or inner logic which determines the kinds of truth claims the religion can make.”²¹ Rather than perceive religion as a deliberate choice to adhere to fixed propositions, the cultural-linguistic paradigm implies that to become religious one must “interiorize a set of skills by practice and training.”²² “The linguistic-cultural model is part of an outlook that stresses the degree to which human experience is shaped, molded, and in a sense constituted by cultural and linguistic forms...to become religious involves becoming skilled in the language, the symbol system of a given religion.”²³

For those trained in the skills of intratextuality, those shaped by the canonical writings of the faith-community, the Scripture “need not be...reinterpreted as world views change, but rather the reverse: changing world views may be reinterpreted by one and the same Scripture.”²⁴ According to the methodology of “intratextuality” Scripture “supplies the interpretive framework within which believers seek to live their lives and understand reality.”²⁵ The intratextual

²¹ Ibid., p.35

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., p.34

²⁴ Ibid., p.82

²⁵ Ibid., p.117

approach discloses the deepest meaning of the world while at the same time attempting to transform the world according to the biblical paradigm.

In relation to the question of relevance or practicality, Lindbeck contends that “religious communities are likely to be practically relevant in the long run to the degree that they do not first ask what is either practical or relevant, but instead concentrate on their own intratextual outlooks and forms of life.”²⁶ This also implies that the “grammar of religion, like that of language, cannot be explicated or learned by analysis of experience, but only in their own terms, not by transposing them into alien speech.”²⁷ Generally speaking, “religions are seen as comprehensive interpretive schemes, usually embodied in myths or narratives and heavily ritualized, which structure human experience and understanding of the self and world.”²⁸ The fact that faith-language cannot be transposed into “alien speech” would again seem to imply the necessity to maintain respect for the way in which science and religion have unique “language-games” and interpretive frameworks, and need not over-lap in order to be considered viable as an expression of a particular worldview, representing a non-transferable set of convictions, which is not to deny the value of cross-fertilization.

Lindbeck displays a deep sensitivity to the issues raised by those wishing to address the compatibility of science and religion, and to the pluralistic environment in general. In addressing the Christian claim to an unparalleled revelation of God in Christ (a claim, some would say, to exclusivity) as the foundation for the language Christians speak with authority, he writes this:

To hold that a particular language is the only one that has the words and the concepts that can authentically speak of the ground of being, the goal of history, and true humanity (for Christians believe they cannot genuinely speak of these apart from telling the biblical story) is not at all the same as denying that other religions have resources for speaking

²⁶ Ibid., p.128

²⁷ Ibid., p.129

²⁸ Ibid., p.32

truths and referring to realities, evenly highly important truths and realities of which Christianity as yet knows nothing and by which it could be greatly enriched.²⁹

It may well be that the church, in open and genuine dialogue with the scientific-community, will be “greatly enriched” and find that, rather than having all the central tenets of faith dismantled one-by-one, the dialogue will disclose those ways in which both religion and science can perfect the language they use to give voice to their unique worldviews, while at the same time preparing even more fertile ground for the eventuality of producing the valuable fruits of cross-fertilization as the by-product of cooperative dialogue.

The Contribution Of Alasdair MacIntyre

In what is arguably a modern classic in moral philosophy titled *After Virtue*, author Alasdair MacIntyre asserts that the current crisis in moral discourse and debate is a product of a regrettable circumstance in the recent past. As a consequence, moral inquiry was very nearly erased from contemporary culture and the *imperative* vocabulary of moral discourse altogether excluded from our contemporary language; all that remains is the residue of an ancient and once valued tradition. The end result of this unfortunate affair is that terms normally associated with moral inquiry, such as *justice* and *good*, have been removed from the context in which such terms were comprehensible. The present confusion in moral discourse has been accepted as the norm, sustained by the concept MacIntyre calls *emotivism*:

Emotivism is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are *nothing but* personal expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling; insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character.³⁰

²⁹ Ibid., p.61

³⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp.11-12

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If correct and contemporary moral discourse is dominated by “emotivism,” moral judgments are little more than expressions of an individual’s personal conviction. Truth claims of any kind are rejected and all moral debate is ultimately about persuasion and decision. If, however, this line of reasoning is credible, then emotivism itself is without foundation, having no genuine truth value, leaving one to take it or leave it as an approach to moral suasion. This presents some obvious problems for the dialogue between science and religion, and in particular on those issues that are morally ambiguous and ethically charged (e.g. stem cell research, eugenics, cloning, organ transplants, etc.). Even more troubling, emotivism leads to moral debate which can never be finally resolved! The baby of any ultimate principle is discarded with the bath water of one’s personal preference! What remains is a cultural climate in which bureaucratic individualism reigns supreme and the “emotivist self is naturally at home.”³¹

Social dislocation, as one of the more evident symptoms of emotivism, produces a sense of exaggerated individualism. When viewed through the lens of emotivism the moral self as individual is totally detached from all social particularity; rather than being perceived as in partnership with a socio-cultural milieu, the emotive moral self is understood to be “entirely set over against the social world.”³² With incisive assessment, MacIntyre says that, “the emotive self, in acquiring sovereignty in its own realm, lost its traditional boundaries provided by a social identity and a view of human life as ordered to a given end (*telos*).”³³ As a result of these factors the emotive self experiences a certain helplessness and turmoil; as theologian in residence, the pastor in a local setting can offer direction in terms of moral guidelines that have been fundamental to the Christian tradition from the beginning; this will also provide an opportunity to broaden the basis by which individual members make moral choices not simply as individuals,

³¹ Ibid., p.65

³² Ibid., p.32

³³ Ibid., p.34

but in some sense as participating in, accountable to, and representative of a moral tradition of discourse.

Historically, MacIntyre identifies the failure of the eighteenth-century “Enlightenment Project” as fundamentally responsible for the current disarray in moral discourse and debate:

The problems of modern moral theory emerge clearly as the product of the failure of the Enlightenment Project. On the one hand the individual moral agent, freed from hierarchy and teleology, conceives of himself (sic) and is conceived by moral philosophers as sovereign in his moral authority. On the other hand the inherited, if partially transformed rules of morality, have to be found some new status, deprived as they have been of their older teleological character and their more ancient categorical character as expressions of an ultimate divine law.³⁴

MacIntyre argues that because the Enlightenment Project discarded the more traditionally shared concept of the telos of human life, in fact, it chose to reject the question of what human life is for altogether; the project was forced to find some alternative premise. It chose the idea of the human as an autonomous agent, leaving all moral principles to be grounded in the untutored human nature; the same human nature that is in need of guidance if it would attain fulfillment. Subsequently the void created by the rejection of the concept of telos was, on theory alone, filled by advocates of a more utilitarian ilk; these pragmatists argued that morality should be based solely on the principle of the “greatest good for the greatest number,” a concept that would prove disastrous if taken seriously by those making moral decisions in areas of genetic research and cloning. It is the “history of utilitarianism (which) thus links historically the eighteenth-century project of justifying morality and the twentieth-century decline into emotivism.”³⁵

MacIntyre proceeds to argue that the meaning of such moral categories as the good, or the just, or even the telos, are provided by tradition alone, where tradition has a specific content. He defines tradition as “an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument

³⁴ Ibid., p.62

³⁵ Ibid., p.65; see also, pp.93-95

precisely in part about the goods which constitute the tradition.”³⁶ Minus an appropriate appreciation for the role played by tradition, all moral debate will sooner or later dissolve into either expressed indignation or moral protestation:

But protest is now almost entirely that negative phenomenon which characteristically occurs as a reaction to the alleged invasion of someone’s rights in the name of someone else’s utility. The self-assertive shrillness of protest arises because the facts of incommensurability ensure that protesters can never win an argument; the indignant self-righteousness of protest arises because the facts of incommensurability ensure that the protesters can never lose the argument either.³⁷

An essay of this length prohibits any detailed description of the way in which MacIntyre weaves together historical development of a particular moral theory from Aristotle through Aquinas to the method he himself advances. But there is one term that serves as the cornerstone of his entire project, and that term is “practice,” which he defines as,

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conception of the ends and good involved are systematically extended.³⁸

His complicated linguistic style aside, it is clear that for MacIntyre the term practice involves several related conceptual frameworks: (1) As a human activity practices are socially instituted and therefore cooperative in nature; (2) practices require the practitioner be engaged in relationship with others who share his/her ideas; (3) practices also contain goods that are intrinsic to any activity, and these goods can only be appreciated by participants in that particular social setting in which practices are generated and sustained; (4) practices possess certain standards, and the attainment of the good requires an above average degree of competence; and (5) over

³⁶ Ibid., p.222

³⁷ Ibid., p.71

³⁸ Ibid., p.187

time practices evolve, taking on new characteristics of excellence, while requiring that participants improve in the level of proficiency.³⁹

Having defined practice, he defines the word “virtue” in more specific language as “an acquired quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.”⁴⁰ To suggest ways in which MacIntyre’s program holds promise for illuminating certain areas of Christian theology in general and practical theology in particular, consider how participation in the practices that been shaped by and shape the Christian tradition are essential to the attainment of the goods intrinsic to that tradition and those practices, and it is only through forming relationships within the community of faith that one learns those practices necessary to the attainment of the good; one must develop proficiency in those practices that will enable growth toward the telos of an enriched moral character.

The virtues innate to the Christian tradition will be cultivated by those who seek ever greater proficiency in those practices through extended participation. Both the scientific and the religious communities bear sole responsibility, and in their respective traditions, for the development of those virtues essential to the promotion of excellence in moral choices and decision-making. In other words, the communal context in and through which one acquires the skills of moral judgment and decision-making are common to both the scientific and religious traditions, and the capacity to pursue excellence in making moral choices rests with those who serve as leaders, mentors, or educators in those respective communities of interest, which would be the pastor in the local church setting.

³⁹ Ibid., pp.189-191

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.191

The communal aspect of tradition and practice, as well as the trajectory of both tradition and practice through time, is essential to MacIntyre's thesis:

To enter into a practice of the community is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose achievement extended the reach of the practice to its present point. It is thus the achievement, and a fortiori the authority, of a tradition which I then confront and from which I have to learn.⁴¹

It is only in the context of community that one learns the practices, and in which one can develop proficiency.

In summary, MacIntyre's program forces us to reconsider the emotivist conclusion—that morality is fundamentally little more than a matter of personal preference—as hopelessly inadequate in helping people deal with the complex moral decisions endemic to scientific research and technological developments. The emotive modality will also prove woefully deficient in enabling people to assess the moral complexities of issues related to the theory of evolution and the misuse or abuse of Darwin's benign intent; the informed pastor can teach the richness of the Christian moral tradition and provide his or her members with a sense of connectedness to tradition at its best.

While MacIntyre would contend that there can be no universal answer to the question “What is human life for?” allowing instead for only specific answers from within particular traditions (whether religious or scientific), he nevertheless stresses two features shared by all particular descriptions of the human *telos*: (1) all accounts emphasize a quest for the human good; and (2) the capacity to see the *telos* requires a lifetime commitment. In his own words, “the good life for (anyone) is the life spent in seeking for the good life for (everyone), and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and

⁴¹ Ibid., p.194

what else the good life for (everyone) is.”⁴² That seems to me a goal that could be embraced by the practitioner of science and religious alike.

The Contribution of Stephen Jay Gould

Due to the present length of this essay I limit my analysis of Stephen Jay Gould’s contribution. In his book, *Rocks of Ages*, Gould proposes what he refers to as “NOMA,” or the principle of “Non-Overlapping Magisteria.” Taking his direction from the use of the term in the Roman Catholic confession, Gould states that a magisterium is “a domain where one form of teaching holds the appropriate tools for meaningful discourse and resolution...the magisterium of science covers the empirical realm; what is the universe made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The magisterium of religion extends over questions of ultimate meanings and moral value. These two magisteria do not overlap, nor do they encompass all enquiry (consider, for example, the magisterium of art and the meaning of beauty).”⁴³ With respect for the domain of the distinct magisteria, “religion can no longer dictate the nature of factual conclusions residing properly within the magisterium of science...scientists cannot claim higher insight into moral truth from any superior knowledge of the world’s empirical constitution.”⁴⁴

Gould contends that both magisteria are essential for a well-rounded understanding of the complexities of life and human life in particular. While of equal worth, these two domains must remain logically distinct and separate in their styles of inquiry, “however much and however tightly we must integrate the insights of both magisteria to build the rich and full view of life

⁴² Ibid., p.219

⁴³ Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999), pp.5-6

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.10

traditionally designated as wisdom.”⁴⁵ Science and religion must and do ask different and logically distinct questions, and yet both and together they “stand watch over different aspects of all our major flashpoints.”⁴⁶ Neither the scientist nor the religious practitioner is free from the guiding principles of NOMA; the “facts of nature cannot determine the moral basis of utility, and...a scientist has no more right to seek such power than his fundamentalist neighbor can muster in trying to become dictator of the age of the earth.”⁴⁷

Gould takes-on the controversy at the heart of this gathering when he writes,

The saga of attempts by creationists to ban the teaching of evolution, or to force their own fundamentalist version of life’s history into science curricula of public schools, represents one of the most interesting, distinctive, and persistent episodes in the cultural history of twentieth-century America.⁴⁸

It also represents one of the most convoluted and problematic areas of controversy in pastoral ministry, affecting clergy in settings as divergent as the inner city and small rural parish. In all fairness to those embroiled in this controversy, Gould makes a compelling case for balance when he writes,

The political campaigns of American creationists do represent—as usually and correctly interpreted—an improper attempt by partisans of a marginalized and minority view within the magisterium of science. But, scientists have also, indeed frequently, been guilty of the same offense in reverse, even if they don’t build organized political movements with legislative clout.⁴⁹

Sounding very much like a resonance of both Lindbeck and MacIntyre, only with a slightly different point-of-interest, Gould argues that

Science is a discipline, and disciplines are exacting. All disciplines maintain rules of conduct and self-policing. All gain strength, respect, and acceptance by working honorably within their bounds and knowing when transgression upon other realms counts

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp.58-59

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.110

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.94

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.126

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.164

as hubris or folly. Science, as a discipline, tries to understand the factual state of nature and to explain and coordinate these data into general theories. Science teaches us many wonderful and disturbing things—facts that need weighing when we try to develop standards of conduct, and when we ponder the great questions of morals and aesthetics. But science cannot answer these questions alone and science cannot dictate social policy.⁵⁰

One could almost wish that such a balanced assessment would be read by those in the religious community who take an extremist point-of-view. But that is exactly the role the local pastor can play as theologian in residence; not so much the “spoiler,” but as one who willingly undertakes the magisterium within his or her own setting, inviting members to grapple with these deeply troubling questions and moral conundrums. The role of the pastor as teacher is almost as old as the office itself; the laity will take their bearings from the one whose ordination vows have committed him or her to serve as a companion in the pursuit of a common wisdom. To the extent that the pastor neglects to maintain an active interest in the complexities of the relationship between science and religion, his or her people will become increasingly more vulnerable to the distortions and scare-tactics of the extremists on either side of the issue.

Even though brief in analysis, I will close with this profound observation offered by Gould near the conclusion of his book:

NOMA does cherish the separate status of science and religion—regarding each as a distinctive institution, a rock for all our ages, offering vital contributions to human understanding. But NOMA rejects the two paths to irenicism on either side of its own tough-minded and insistent search for fruitful dialogue—the false and illogical union of syncretism, and the perverse proposal of political correctness “that peace may best be secured by the ‘three monkeys’ solution of covering eyes, ears, and mouth.”⁵¹

Any pastor who willingly and in all good faith assumes the task of guiding interested lay-persons through the same labyrinth of complex and compelling issues in the relationship between science and religion should also reject the false irenicism as described by Gould.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.169

⁵¹ Ibid., p.221

Conclusion

My purpose has been to recommend the proposals of a theologian, philosophical-ethicist, and renowned scientist as making a contribution to and providing the methodological substance for the potential development of a pastoral response to the controversial relationship between science and religion. Rather than address this critical dialog from the perspective of “religion” in general, my concern has been throughout to speak as a member of a Christian confessional community and as a pastor whose primary interest is in the local congregation. I have sought to provide direction to the pastor who wishes to explore the methodological, ethical, and epistemological dimensions of the issues we face and the environment pastors will be required to create should they take-on this task with the seriousness it rightly deserves. It is essential that clergy become a far more active and engaged presence and not surrender this incredibly important relationship to those extremists who pander in fear, intimidation, and out-right falsification of information available.

There is perhaps no impediment to the advancement of a healthy interface between science and religion as great as is the apathy of clergy who would rather leave this issue and all of its associated tensions to those who hold to rather extreme positions and tend not to fairly or adequately represent the rich and variegated biblical and theological traditions of the historic Christian community, the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” church.⁵²

⁵² Theologian, Alister E. McGrath, offers the following: *The long history of Christian theological reflection has thrown up at least three ways of conceiving how Christian tradition offers what is in effect a meta-traditional “reading” of the world:*

- 1. The idea, particularly associated with patristic theologians (such as Justin Martyr) dialoging with the Platonic tradition, that seeds of the divine wisdom or nature were planted within the fabric of the created order, and were capable of being discerned as such by the human mind.*
- 2. The Thomist doctrine of the “analogy of being” (analogia entis), which holds that the created order is able to offer an accommodated or refracted vision of God, particularly through analogies which ultimately rest upon the creative action of God, coupled with the faithful discernment of this*

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analogy on the part of the observer.

3. *The Barthian concept of the “analogy of faith” (analogia fidei), which affirms the radical dependence of the created order upon God, so that any correspondence between creation and God is established by God in the act of revelation, not by his creatures through the act of theological reflection.* Alister E. McGrath, *The Science of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), p.115.