

## Science and Religion in Dialogical Search for Truth

- Jose Panthackal<sup>I</sup>

The present day world is challenged to serious reflection and action by two ambivalent but important phenomena - science and religion<sup>2</sup>. Religion has created humanitarians who dedicate their lives at the service of humanity, as well as fundamentalists who perpetrate violence against humanity. Science on its part has revealed to us the mysteries of the universe and has improved the standards of human life with its tremendous discoveries. However, Sigmund Freud, the staunch supporter of science, expressed his anxiety recognizing the destructive power of scientific discoveries, especially of atomic power, even though he did not live long enough to see the use of that destructive power during the Second World War. At the end of his book *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he expressed his hope that the death instinct of man will be overcome with the power of love – of eternal Eros, so that man would not unleash the all-destructive power of science.<sup>3</sup> But Freud is not sure of the success of the eternal Eros and so he concludes his book with a question: “But who can foresee with what success and with what result?”<sup>4</sup>

It is a sad fact that the negative powers of both religion and science do come together and strengthen the destructive passions in man as we witness about the religious violence of today, which uses scientifically the most advanced weapons of destruction. As far as the betterment of man and the world is concerned both these powers are to be guided and brought under the power of the rationality of love (Sublime Eros) in which man experiences simultaneously unity and diversity, relativity and absoluteness, activity and passivity, freedom and determinism, reason and non-reason. It is in this paradoxical experience of love that wholeness and harmony of truth are attained.

The powers of religion and science become destructive or constructive not because of their declared openness to truth but because of man's surrender to blindness and authoritarianism - the basic self-defeating tendencies in man. With an attitude of mutual openness, both religion and science can co-operate with each other to know the truth and to commit themselves to the the progress of humanity.

The book under review, *Contemporary Science and Religion in Dialogue: Challenges and Opportunities*, edited by Job Kozhamthadam<sup>4</sup> is a very relevant and excellent effort to understand and recognize some of the important findings of contemporary scientific ventures and to respond to them from a religious perspective, especially from the Western Christian perspective.

The book has three sections with nine chapters written by various scholars. The first seven papers deal with the developments in physics, biology and psychology along with the authors' responses from the religious perspective. The last two papers approach both religion and science critically and present the opportunities for a mutually respecting dialogue, in openness to truth motivated by the highest expression of personhood - love.

The real problems addressed in the book are explained inside of its cover: "Science seems to be in a position to transform not only what we have, but even the way we exist. Has this overwhelming power of science eclipsed other traditional resources of influence, particularly, religion? What is the role of religion in the phenomenally successful scientific age? How can religion creatively and constructively face these challenges so as to transform them into opportunities for growth and enrichment?" The editor, after giving a concise and clear summary of the book in the Introduction, writes: "It seems to me that the message echoing from these nine original papers is loud and clear: the recent developments in different sciences are a blessing to humanity, and religion has no reason to be intimidated by them"(xviii).

The first four papers which constitute the first section, explain the developments in physical sciences and respond to them from the religious perspectives. The article by the editor, Job Kozhamthadam, "Science

and Religion: Past Estrangement and Present Possible Engagement” presents the Western developments of science and its encounters with religion from a historical point of view. He explains that the reductionist approaches to science such as the mechanistic philosophy were some of the important causes of the estrangement of religion from science. He points out that the institutional church and many churchmen, especially, the Jesuits contributed to the development of science in various ways.

The recent scientific discoveries and the emergence of the philosophy of science showed the relativity of scientific knowledge and rejected the absolutist and reductionist claims of scientific truth (p.37). According to the author, this new understanding reveals both the weakness and greatness of science; weakness, since they go to expose the inadequacies of science, and greatness, because despite these known inadequacies, science still can hold its own and claim to be the best knowledge humans ever have produced (pp. 39-40). Since the exaggerated claims of science are now given up, the way is open to religion to enter into dialogue with science. In this new situation, the author feels that such a dialogue is an act of obligatory assistance to science to achieve the goal it has long set for itself: the fulfilment of human and cosmic aspirations (p. 41).

The second paper by William R. Stoeger, “Developments in Contemporary Cosmology: The Challenges and Opportunities to Religion”, introduces the reader to the recent developments in scientific cosmology. Cosmological enquiries try to find out the mode of the origin and evolution of the universe using scientific methods. According to the author, cosmology presents a universe which is relational, hierarchically structured, formationally and functionally integral and evolving (p. 62). Besides, the author points out the ‘directionality’ of the evolution of the universe leading to life and consciousness (ibid). He moves from the observational level of knowledge to a level of religious concepts of creation and Creator. This level of knowledge is based on a Trinitarian God as Originator, Word and Spirit (p. 78). ‘There is change in God in as far as God expresses God’s Self in finite and material terms through the Word and in the Spirit.... However, there is no change in God in so far as God is in God’s Self’ (ibid). The author accepting the legitimacy of scientific models of the cosmos finds a meta-scientific meaning through

his philosophical and theological consideration which seeks intelligibility beyond the observational universe.

The third paper by K. Babu Joseph “Quantum Mechanics and Religion: A New Interface” presents the inadequacies of the classical physics as absolutist and reductionist and introduces the reader to the new physics - Quantum Mechanics. This theory rejects the absolute objectivity and determinism of the classical physics. In the microcosmic level subject-object interactions are inevitable, subject influences the object (p. 88). So also one can observe interactions of particles without the space-time limitations of macro-cosmos. From such a possibility of interactions beyond space and time in the micro-cosmic level, one may, according to the author, infer to an Agency beyond space-time, and so unchanging (p. 93). Thus he finds significance for religious concepts like soul, God, etc. in the micro level of the cosmos. Furthermore, there is a great similarity between the religious experience, which is subjective, and also the micro level experience given by Quantum Physics where the subject invariably influences the object and so any claim to pure objectivity cannot be made. It is to be noted that Quantum Mechanics can challenge the pure deterministic view of classical physics, however it can only point to the meaningfulness of non-material or religious concepts, and not to their reality.

The last paper of this section by Kuruvilla Pandikattu, “Science and Religion in Interaction: The Challenge of Physical Immortality to Religious Consciousness”, challenges the reader to reflect on the popular religious view of immortality. The scientists through cryonic suspension (a technique of freezing the human body for an indefinite period) put forward the possibility of an indefinitely prolonged life (physical immortality) for the humans. The author is confident that ‘God is the God of the living. God is God not because we will die’ (p. 108). Hence the new possibility of indefinitely prolonged life is seen to have deeper sense for religious consciousness. However, we need to reinterpret ethically our social relationships, family, etc. in the new context. Science and religion are seen as fostering life. However, the author is cautious to tell us that the worth of human person is not decided by the temporal prolongation of life. A spiritual immortality aims at deeper values of human worth than a mere prolonged life.

The next three papers go together as they present the contemporary developments in biology and psychology, both directly referring to human life. The first paper (Chapter-5) “New Human Genetics and Religious Vision: Some Options for the Twenty-First Century”, by Phillip R. Sloan takes the reader to the hotly debated world of Genetics. He deals with the topic from a historical and philosophical perspective and describes the Human Genome Project and the potential benefits in medicine as well as in genetic information useful also for commercial purpose. Biotechnology can give power to man to intervene in the genetic level to cure genetic defects and inherited diseases as well as to alter the genetic code for the problematic eugenics.

The author evaluates biotechnology from the theological point of view both from the traditional static creation theory and the dynamic ‘co-creator’ theory. He also exposes the inflated reductionist and determinist claims of scientists that the structured ‘genes’ stand in a one-to-one relation to the manifest human traits (p. 130). He rightly holds that the deeper knowledge of the DNA sequence of Human Genome forms only one component of a more general understanding of the human being (p. 136), i.e., man is more than his genes.

The paper by George Therukattil, “The Challenge of Science and Technology to Christian Ethics with Special Reference to Genetic Engineering” deals with a very challenging problem of our times - genetic engineering. He recognises, and also promotes the beneficial discoveries of science especially in the field of genetics. The author believes that the Christian ethics promotes science for human progress (p. 171). However, there is ambiguity in science - it can be both constructive and destructive to human life and dignity. In the light of the modern hermeneutics he rejects the claims of science to value-neutrality. Since the interventions in the human genetic level has a lot of ethical implications in the personal and social levels which affect also the future generations, an ‘agape ethic of responsibility’ (p. 154), an ethic that transcends the stringency of reason to the generosity of the heart, is proposed by the author. This is an ethic that respects the dignity and equality (p. 168) of human persons. The unconditional base of this ethics is ‘human life in dignity for the present and future’ (p. 157). The author believes that the religious belief systems are to be rethought in the light of the discoveries

of science. However, he insists that ‘only faith in a transcendent reality can make science a promise, not a threat’ (pp. 157-58).

Based on such a faith in the transcendent and moved by love and respect for the dignity and equality of persons, the author, proposes a global ethic that respects also the mystery of the natural world in which human life originates and grows to its perfection.

The next paper (Chapter-7) is contributed by Anthony da Silva: “Understanding Religion in the Light of Psychology: The Example of Coping with Stress.” Eventhough mutual suspicion bordering at times on antagonism has coloured the relation of psychology and religion in the past, with the emergence of humanistic psychology, an atmosphere of mutual cooperation has emerged. The purpose of the paper is to illustrate ‘how the insights and research in psychology of stress could be used beneficially by religion (e.g. Christianity) to reinforce its rituals and practises in the cause of both religion and mental health (p. 178). The Christian symbol of cross is seen as an indispensable cognitive ‘Schema’ for processing stress-relevant information for a believing Christian. The psychological concept of “Catharsis” of emotion can be related to the rituals of individual confession to a priest. Furthermore, the aspect of psychosocial support can be related to the celebration of the Holy Mass. Thus the author believes that psychological insights can enrich the religious practices and can promote human welfare.

The last but one paper (chapter-8) by Augustine Pamplany, “Science and Theology: Epistemological Foundations of Dialogue”, clears the ground for dialogue between science and religion making an epistemological critique of both the partners. He seems to believe in the oneness and wholeness of truth and both science and religion are in search of the same truth. He accepts the fundamental unity of human rationality operative in the different approaches to truth. He questions the exaggerated claims of science and religion making use of the findings of modern hermeneutics and shows that ‘Science is not so objective and religion is not so subjective as they were thought of’ (p. 199), of course, granting to genuine religious knowledge a higher intensity and power in demanding personal commitment. Supernatural revelations are received in human history and they are formulated also in an empirical situation and so they need to be interpreted with the help of hermeneutics. In

such an understanding, much of so called immutable and supernatural truths of theology may appear as mutable and merely natural (p. 203). The meta-physical language used in the micro level of science and in the religious revelation show the similarity of their perceptions of truth. From a hermeneutical point of view, the author finds no true ground for conflict between science and religion - they are different approaches to one truth, God, the encompassing reality (p. 207). It is to be observed that the highly personalistic nature of revelatory knowledge needs to be explained in order to show its integrity and wholeness in comparison with the knowledge of science.

The last paper (chapter-9) by Victor Ferrao "Science and Religion: Duel or Duet?" tries to discover the 'ensciencing of religion and enreligionizing of science' (p. 211). The author quotes Albert Einstein: "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind" (p. 214). He seeks to find a dialogical unity between science and religion keeping up the legitimate differences of both (p. 211). This is a process of 'dialogical dialogue that is based on a liberative hermeneutics' (p. 221) leading to a 'synoptic seeing' (p. 223) of truths. It is a fusion of two horizons, the blending of two voices, contributing significantly towards the human quest for meaning (p. 223). Ferrao proposes hermeneutic based on openness, truth and honesty to purify religion of its arrogance and science of its narrow scientism in order to be able to sing in unison a lovely duet rather than provoking them to fight a violent duel.

The book as a whole, gives a very positive message of openness, cooperation and dialogue between science and religion for the progress of humanity. All absolutizations both of science and religion forgetting the space-time milieu of our existence in the cosmos are untrue and dangerous. The book challenges the scientist to grow beyond his reductionist and absolutizing tendencies to the 'meta-physical' dimensions of his own experience, and the religious persons to acknowledge the 'materiality' and historicity of the revealed texts and his experiences submitting them to the science of hermeneutics and to the critical enquiry of science.

The editor, as evident from the Introduction of the book, seems to accept the view of the ancient philosopher Heraclitus, who holds the cosmos as intrinsically dynamic. The modern science is seen to present

irrefutable proofs for this view and such a changing world seem to be offering an unlimited scope for growth and development. It is to be remarked that this approach tends to overlook the paradox of permanency in change as well as change in permanence in the heart of reality. Only in accepting such a paradoxical view one can do justice to human experience, which perceives both dynamism in permanence and identity in difference in the cosmos.

The authors discuss developments of Western science in the light of the Western religion, Western Christianity. Since the basic concepts of God, absolute, soul immortality, love, etc. are basic to all religions and cultures, the discussions can be applied to other religious traditions as well, in the present world where the challenges of sciences are now global. A glossary of the technical terms of both science and religion might have been very useful for the ordinary reader of the book. The proposed new volume by the ASSR (Association of Science, Society and Religion) which intends to study the important contemporary religious phenomena from the viewpoint of the contemporary science (xi) will be a great service by science to religion to clear it off from its blindness and authoritarianism and thus to save humanity from fundamentalist violence of today.

As proposed in the present book, an agape ethic of responsibility that unconditionally respects the dignity of the person can promote a proper synthesis of science and religion for human progress. Science and religion should transcend the Old Testament command 'to subdue' the earth and should follow the paradoxical new commandment of the New Testament, 'you must, therefore, be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt. 5:48) - a Father who is not only a Creator but also a loving Father who cares not only for his people but also for the 'insignificant lilies' of the field. The ultimate demand on humanity is an ethical one. Science and religion become creative and promotive of human life only when it is guided by sublime demand of ethics. With justice, respect for the freedom of the persons and above all, with the generosity of love, life and humanity survive and grow into perfection. Without respect for such values, science and religion will end up in a self-defeating activity. This book is sure to give an inspiring vision to the students of religion and science to work together for the progress of humanity.



## Notes

1. Dr. Jose Panthackal CST is professor of systematic philosophy at Little Flower Seminary - Institute of Philosophy and Religion, Aluva - 1, Kerala.
2. Religion is understood here as a broad system of meanings, individual or social, based on the claims of God- related transcendent experience, while science is understood as mainly the empirical or observational science that explains the 'how' of man, society and other realities of the observable world.
3. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 21, Trans. and Ed. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), reprint 1981,
4. Ibid., p.145.
5. ASSR Series Vol. 1, ASSR Publication, (Pune: Jana Deepa Vidyapeeth, 2002), pp. xix+240, Rs.400, \$20. ASSR (Association of Science Society and Religion) is a centre of interdisciplinary studies at Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth.