

SCIENCE

in Service to the Church

RICHARD O. RANDOLPH

As we move into the twenty-first century, the church ministers

in a context dominated by a scientific worldview. Science permeates and informs the way in which we think and see the world, as well as the way we minister.

The Church's relationship with science today is analogous to the pre-Constantine Church's relationship with the Roman Empire. Just as pre-Constantine Christians could have tried to ignore the Roman Empire, so also we could ignore science. However, we ignore science at our own peril. Today, if its mission and ministry are to be effective, the Church must come to terms with science. But, how do we come to terms with science? How do science and faith relate to each other?

The theologian Ian Barbour, in his book *Religion and Science*, identifies four principal methods of relating science and faith.¹ While Barbour acknowledges that many people will not fall neatly into a single category, I believe that his four-fold typology does offer a helpful way to think about ways in which science and religion may relate with one another for effective ministry.

CONFLICT

For many people, there is an ongoing war between science and religion. These

people—who locate themselves both inside and outside the Church—see science and religion as bitter rivals, with no possibility of reconciliation. This approach assumes that science and religion have two competing views of reality that are mutually exclusive. Barbour observes that proponents of this method can be divided into two sub-categories.

John Wesley recognized the accomplishment of the new science and sought to bring its power to serve the church.

—J.S. HAAS, JR.

At one extreme is **scientific materialism**. This position holds that physical matter and energy are the only fundamental realities of the universe. Therefore, the scientific method is the only reliable path to genuine knowledge. From this perspective, religious insight is not knowledge at all, but rather meaningless expressions of emotion or preference devoid of cognitive significance.

At the other extreme is **biblical literalism**. This position holds that scripture is literally true and inerrant in all aspects. Consequently, if there is a conflict between scientific results and scripture, then the science must be wrong. In the twentieth century, this led to "creation science," an attempt to conduct science within the rigid parameters set by a literal, word-for-word reading of the scriptures.

Both scientific materialism and biblical literalism abuse scientific inquiry. On the one hand, scientific materialists start with science, but then make broad philosophical and theological claims that cannot be

supported by the science. On the other hand, biblical literalists start from theology and then try to make broad scientific claims based only on scientific data and theories that fit within their narrow interpretation of scripture.

INDEPENDENCE

Also known as "two worlds," this approach sees science and religion as using their own distinct data, methodology, and paradigms of inquiry to examine completely different "worlds" or spheres of knowledge. Science explores the physical world, while religion explores the spiritual domain. As such, there is no interaction between the two endeavors. It is as though science and religion are hermetically sealed and separated from one another.

By preserving the distinctive character of both science and religious reflection, independence avoids the inherent flaws in either scientific materialism or biblical literalism. Yet, this very emphasis on the distinctive character of both science and religion is also a serious problem. As



Next

• **Ian G. Barbour**

When Science Meets Religion: Enemies, Strangers, or Partners?

(New York: HarperCollins, 2000). Probably the best basic introductory orientation to the science and religion dialogue, by the leading authority in the area.

• **Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Malony, editors**

Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature

(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998). Although this collection of essays is somewhat more difficult than the Barbour text, it is still accessible. The volume focuses on our understanding of human nature, drawing from theology, ethics and scriptural studies, as well as behavioral genetics, cognitive science, and neuroscience. This book also received an Outstanding Book award in 1999.

• **Ted Peters**

Playing God? Genetic Determinism and Human Freedom

(New York: Routledge, 1997). Offers a sound theological reflection concerning genetic determinism in light of recent advances in genetic science.

Barbour notes, we do not experience life as neatly divided into separate boxes for religion and science. Rather, we experience the physical and the spiritual together, as an interconnected unity. Anyone, who has held an infant, watched a brilliant sunset, or stood in awe before a magnificent oak, will acknowledge that the spiritual and physical worlds must not be hermetically separated.

DIALOGUE

This approach assumes that there are issues and areas where scientists and persons of faith can enter into dialogue with one another. Frequently, these dialogues occur at the “boundaries,” where science and religion meet. Scientists explore how the physical world operates, whereas theologians and other persons of faith explore the deeper meaning of why the physical world is as it is: For instance, physicists hope to understand someday how the universe originated, but it is theologians and persons of faith who can explain why there is a universe at all—and that God sees creation as good. Similarly, geneticists can explain how genes work, but ethicists and pastors help us think through the wise use of this knowledge.

INTEGRATION

This position goes a step beyond “dialogue” by maintaining that science and religion can make contributions to one another’s on-going understanding. From the perspective of Christian faith, our conception of human nature may be informed by work in behavioral genetics, biology, and neuroscience. While Christians can borrow discoveries from science, we must be careful to avoid relying too heavily on science. After all, current scientific insights may eventually be set aside by new discoveries. Further, our faith must always be grounded in the revelation of scripture, tradition, and experience. Thus, in the case of human nature, the *imago dei* will always be at the core of Christian understanding. Yet, our precise conception of the *imago dei* may be informed—or, perhaps even reformulated—by the work of science.

The last two methods of relating science and religion hold the most promise for effective ministry and mission to the world. Dialogue and integration also resonate most profoundly with the Wesleyan theological tradition. Science

provides an important type of *experience* in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.² That is, science provides important data, along with other experiences, tradition, and of course scripture, for theological reflection and discernment. John Wesley, himself, was very interested in the science of his day. He published books on electricity and medicine. Wesley also compiled a five-volume work, *Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation*, summarizing

current science in a number of fields. Wesley’s purpose in compiling this five-volume set was in the data that science provided for demonstrating God’s wisdom.³ J. W. Haas, Jr. has observed: “John Wesley recognized the accomplishment of the new science and sought to bring its power to serve the church.”⁴ As we move into the twenty-first century, clergy cannot find a better

model for incorporating science into their ministry—through methods of dialogue and integration. □

Notes

¹ Ian Barbour, *Religion and Science, Historical and Contemporary Issues* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997). I draw heavily from Barbour’s Chapter 4 in the subsequent section describing the four methods of relating science and religion.

² See W. Stephen Gunter, *Wesley and the Quadrilateral* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), especially the essays by Rebekah L. Miles and Randy L. Maddox.

³ Barbour, 42.

⁴ J. S. Haas, Jr., “John Wesley’s Vision of Science in the Service of Christ,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, December 1995.

It is theologians and persons of faith who can explain why there is a universe at all—and that God sees creation as good.



Richard O. Randolph is an instructor of Christian ethics at Saint Paul School of Theology and an Elder in the Kansas East Conference.

Continuing the Conversation

The guest editors of this issue of *Circuit Rider* invite you to contact them with comments, questions, and suggestions about practicing ministry from the intersection of faith and science. They hope to establish a network of UM clergy and others interested in these critical topics. Email them at: s&rdialog@spst.edu