

SELECTED SESSIONS

VOCATION AND MODERN SCIENCE

Topic: The Vocation of the Theologian
and the Encounter with Modern Science
Convener: James R. Pambrun, Saint Paul University, Ottawa
Moderator: Carolyn Sharp, Saint Paul University, Ottawa
Presenters: Paul Allen, Concordia University, Montréal
Christine Jamieson, Concordia University, Montréal
James R. Pambrun, Saint Paul University, Ottawa

James R. Pambrun spoke of "The Vocation of the Theologian and the Two Books of Revelation." Based on the idea that God desires to be part of human beings' making of their humanity, he suggested that the vocation of the theologian is to accompany the scientist in acts of understanding. Listening to the scientist becomes then a spiritual act, an act of *kenosis*, in which the theologian recognizes a certain debt to modern science. The meaning of such an act of understanding in science was then presented in terms of the joy of discovery and the fragility/vulnerability of our experience of finitude. Finally, the paper asked what can a theologian learn from this act of accompaniment and how does it lead to a deeper understanding of our testimony to revelatory experience.

Paul Allen spoke of "Theology and Reason beyond Paradigms." Following the idea that theologians should accompany scientists in their practice of science, his paper suggested that a caution is in order when theologians attend to science. Since Thomas Kuhn's landmark development of paradigm theory in the philosophy of science, numerous theologians have referred to paradigms as the fundamental framework for understanding human knowledge. This incorporation of paradigm theory is itself a limited philosophical venue for the practising theologian, and it can come at the cost of believing in the validity of truth claims or simple wonder at the world.

Christine Jamieson spoke of "Theology in Times of Distress." She began by explaining how new scientific developments such as genetic technology create a disorientation and so motivate questions about the meaning of human existence. Theology is called in these times of distress to identify the essentially religious dynamism operative in these questions. She argued that Theology is uniquely equipped to address these questions and to move them in a direction that contributes to human flourishing.

The discussion that followed dealt with the status of theology both in relation to its own tradition of belief and in relation to its commitment to authentic meaning and justice. First, some asked about the implications of the theology-science dialogue and its impact on our understanding of religion and doctrine. Much attention is given over to attempting to understand the implications of science. But if too much is ceded to science, or if faith feels that it has to increasingly retreat before scientific understanding, what is left with regard to how we understand particular doctrines? Also, what contribution can faith continue to make to our understanding of the world and human existence? We discussed how the critical conversations that take place between theology and science need to be supported by conversations that are taken up internal to faith traditions, that is, in the relationship between theology and faith.

Secondly, comments were raised about a form of scientific dogmatism. Does science itself not at times close off too quickly options both within scientific debate and from religious understanding that may assist science? What is the status of scientific speculations (e.g. the existence of parallel universes)? In response, some pointed out that all scientists are not "homogeneous" in their thinking. Moreover, within science itself there is a clear distinction between what is considered speculation and informed speculation. Critical debates take place about these issues among scientists themselves. Moreover, not all scientists divorce their lives of scientific investigation and belief.

Thirdly, some discussion followed concerning the importance of attending to the dimensions of meaning and value. Emphasis was placed on how the openness to horizons of meaning and value transform the perspective within which we consider either scientific findings or the status of doctrines and the history of their development. Where does the language of hope emerge? Failing our adverting to these dimensions of meaning and value can lead to truncated solutions or responses in the encounter between theology and science.

Finally, a question addressed the ideological forces at work in scientific and technological research. Theology needs to be open in a positive manner to the developments of science. However, we should not naively overlook the role of economic, political and market forces that direct and at times determine public discussion and research. Should our approach be dialectically informed? The merits of such a caution were well received. In the remarks that followed, stress was placed on the fact that scientists themselves struggle with the power of these forces. Further, we need to be constantly vigilant about identifying and reenforcing where self-transcendence originates, where it comes from. There is something normative for understanding and praxis there.

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