

THEOLOGY AND THE NATURAL SCIENCES

Topic: “Science and the Saint: Is Personal Holiness the Bond Between Science and Religion?”

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Presenters: Michael J. Dodds, Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology
Heidi Russell, Loyola University Chicago
William A. Durbin, Independent Scholar

What does it mean to talk about sanctity in an age of science and religion? Michael Dodds began this session by examining the role of miracles in making saints as a way of engaging the science and theology dialogue. If we take a miracle to be a divinely caused event that exceeds the capacity of nature, how do we decide whether a certain occurrence is miraculous or not? In the canonization process, this involves the work of both scientists and theologians. Similarly, the dialogue between science and religion, like the canonization process, works only if we recognize the limits of each discipline. Theology should not invoke supernatural causes where science can find natural ones—whether for alleged miracles or for purportedly “irreducibly complex” biological structures. Science cannot deny the very possibility of supernatural causes without becoming scientism, making its methodological naturalism into a metaphysics, nor can science assign a supernatural cause to an event without again violating its method. It can offer only a negative judgment—that no natural cause is presently known. Yet that judgment has real “traction” in theology, since without it theology cannot declare an event miraculous. As many scholars look for ways to increase the footprint of science in theology, the cooperation of the two disciplines in the making of saints may provide a paradigm.

The question “who is the saint” in an age of science was the topic of Heidi Russell’s paper. Relying on Rahner’s notion that saints “are the initiators and the creative models of holiness which happens to be right for and is the task of their particular age,” she asked, “what does it mean to be the initiators and find the new creative models of holiness relevant to the present day world?” She examined Rahner’s understanding of the mysticism of everyday life and the relationship between the transcendental and the categorical as it relates to the way we engage science as theologians. She drew on Rahner’s concept of God as holy mystery in relation to our experiences of the cosmos and the human person as mystery and used this concept to engage two contemporary scientists: Steven Hawking and Andrew Newberg. In his book *The Grand Design* physicist Steven Hawking argues that science is the appropriate source for answers to the questions about the meaning of humanity and the universe. He dismisses the western Christian God as an anthropomorphic God who plays dice. While he defends scientism as intellectually satisfying over religion, he does provide “a legitimate challenge to theology to clean up our language about God,” according to Russell. Hawking’s work challenges theologians to become more vocal proponents of a more sophisticated image of God and the relationship of God to the cosmos, both in the scientific

sphere, but also in the popular Christian mindset. Similarly Andrew Newberg's new book *The Principles of Neurotheology* gives us an integrated understanding of the human person, exploring the human brain and its functions and how the physiological processes in the human person influence our religious concepts and vice versa. Both Newberg and Hawking offer theologians a new frontier and a new set of questions for theology to engage. In this sense, they are saints; they are innovators. They offer us an opportunity to develop creative models of holiness relevant to our particular age.

The relationship between sanctity and the scientist was also addressed by Bill Durbin. An historian of science, Durbin tried to tease out the complex relationship between science and religion by focusing on the saintliness of the scientist. Using Charles Taylor's analysis of modernity and the rise of "spiritual stances" aspiring toward wholeness, he sought to explicate the relationship between science and religion as lived experience, particularly in the life of Henri Mogenau. Durbin began with the work of historian David Hollinger who traced the emergence of an "intellectual gospel" in the second half of the nineteenth century, a varied public discourse that marked a *transition* from a religious to a secular conception of intellectual virtue. He also discussed the main character of Sinclair Lewis' *Pilgrim's Progress* whose intellectual curiosity served as his effectual call and the scientific method became the "key" or promise of salvation. Lewis's novel suggests deep connections between a Puritan heritage, an American psyche and the secular spirit of science, a complex relationship expounded by Max Weber. Henri Mogenau, a renowned twentieth century physicist, challenged the intellectual gospel by describing science as a never-ending quest for the truth. The seeker after truth comes before God and is given a choice: either *possess* eternal truth immediately or accept the never-ending *search* for it. He challenged the dogma of scientific materialism and declared that acts of faith abound in science; indeed, progress at the intellectual frontier depends on them. Mogenau's effort "to amalgamate religion with science" reveals how profoundly this relationship hinges upon a virtue epistemology, that is, how one understands nature, the limits of knowledge and the intellectual virtue of humility, certainly an antidote to the hubris of scientism.

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