

THEOLOGY AND THE NATURAL SCIENCES

- Topic: Aesthetics and Theology and Science
Convener: William R. Stoeger, Vatican Observatory Research Group,
University of Arizona
Presenter: Alex R. Garcia-Rivera, Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley
Respondent: Zachary Hayes, Catholic Theological Union

Garcia-Rivera presented a strong case for developing Beauty and its reception in the beautiful as a basis for dialogue between science and theology, complementing those centering on the True and the Good. Such an aesthetic focus involves the recognition that the *light* (the beauty, harmony and intricacy) of nature is perceived and appreciated by the light of poetic sensitivity and imagination, which perceives much more than just the physics, chemistry and biology of the data. It takes *sensual delight* in, and is moved to wonder by, them—by their beauty. The experience of a crimson cloud at sunset is much more than the perception of vapor reflecting red light. Such an approach demands an anthropology—the inclusion of the human creature who both senses and theorizes, who brings not just observation to the data but also imagination, meaning and *inner light* to them—felt vision, intimate, free, sensitive participation in, and contemplation of, the wonders which surround us. This opens a space for theological reflection—the contemplation of the pluriform beauty that is so richly manifest in nature—establishes “the conditions for Christian faith” and discloses the supreme form of beauty in Christ. Han Urs von Balthasar provides a key recent resource in this regard. Theology needs to recapture “the wonder and beauty of creation as an intrinsic component of Revelation.” At the same time science is being called to rediscover the beautiful and thus appreciate anew the human person who is inspired and moved by beauty as part of the essence of his or her existence. Key to all this both in theology and in science is the recognition that human beings possess an aesthetic dimension, “a capacity for divine beauty which reveals nature and the Glory of the Lord.”

Garcia-Rivera's proposal to deepen the dialogue between theology and the sciences by exploiting the aesthetic link was endorsed by Zachary Hayes, the respondent, and by all those who participated in the discussion. Hayes emphasized the importance of Bonaventure's thought in the development of von Balthasar's argument (already acknowledged by Garcia-Rivera) and beautifully summarized Bonaventure's portrayal of Christ as the *Ars Patris* and creation as “the first external book of revelation,” which Scripture helps us read. He then stressed Bonaventure's appeal to mathematics and number as the essence of what is beautiful and delightful, and rooted in the divine—as the fundamental exemplar of God in creation. Thus, in some way “number” in the radical sense, as the source of inner harmony and order, suggests a relation between physics and theology. This is realized in nature in innumerable ways—in the proportions and the contrasts exhibited in music, for example. Beauty and elegance seem primary also in the motivation and inspiration which drive so many scientists—an impression that was

reinforced in the discussion. At the same time Hayes indicated the need to reject all simplistically reductionistic approaches, which almost always eliminate the aesthetic dimension from consideration.

Garcia-Rivera agreed with Hayes' stress on number, but added—in a remark reflecting Hayes' caution regarding reductionisms—that it must be “felt number,” which takes us beyond just the mathematics of number or proportion. Recovering a symbiosis between art and science and a theology of aesthetic sensibility are essential in achieving this focus. In the discussion two people suggested that Whitehead's philosophy may be a significant help in linking the true and the beautiful, fact and value. Considerable discussion on the very “slippery” notion of beauty followed. Is it simply in “the mind of the beholder”? What is its relationship with “the sublime”? In agreement with the thesis of the presentation, all recognized that both objective and subjective elements are involved, but it is difficult to characterize adequately their interaction. Garcia-Rivera asked the origin of the recognition of the beauty of the crucified Lord, and strongly suggested that it is rooted in the growing theologically attuned aesthetic sensitivity of the early Christian community, which began to appreciate this form as a crucial sign of life and hope. Finally, there was general agreement that the gap between the emphases of “traditional” theological thinking and the cosmic context represented by scientifically objectifiable knowledge requires new bridges, as has been emphasized in recent CTSA meetings. Renewed and careful development of the aesthetic dimension underlying both may be one key way of doing that.

WILLIAM R. STOEGER

*Vatican Observatory Research Group
University of Arizona, Tucson*