

THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Tribute to William Stoeger, S.J. (1943–2014)
Convener: Gloria L. Schaab, Barry University
Moderator: Catherine Wright, Wingate University
Presenters: Robert John Russell, Center for Theology and the Natural
Sciences/Graduate Theological Union
Julia Feder, University of Notre Dame
Stephen Pope, Boston College

The 2016 Theology and Science Session honored the life and work of William R. Stoeger, S.J. (1943–2014), astrophysicist, theologian, and principal for many years in the Theology and Science topic area. Robert John Russell, Director of the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences and the Ian G. Barbour Professor of Theology and Science at the Graduate Theological Union began the session with his presentation, “William R. Stoeger, S.J.: His Vision of and Legacy to Theology and Science.” Dr. Russell met Stoeger in 1968, which began a 46-year journey together in the field of theology, science, and religion. According to Russell, as a priest and scientist, Stoeger “was committed to the view that God is the primary cause of the existence of the universe *ex nihilo* and its rationality as reflected in the laws of nature which science discovers and which point to nature’s intrinsic secondary causality.” This perspective guided Stoeger’s academic career in physics, philosophy, and theology at the University of Arizona, the University of San Francisco, and the Vatican Observatory, as well as many of Stoeger’s scientific and interdisciplinary publications, such as three co-edited volumes in the series on “Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action” and *Physics, Philosophy and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding*. Russell emphasized Stoeger’s commitment to the “institutionalization of theology and science” because of its contribution to the academy, its moderation and mutual respect in science, its educational impact for the church, and its outreach to the public. Russell concluded with his personal reflections on William Stoeger and the impact of his loss on the field, on several academic institutions, and on Russell personally.

The paper by Julia Feder, Research Fellow at the Center for Theology, Science, and Human Flourishing at the University of Notre Dame entitled “Directed toward Relationship: William Stoeger’s Immanent Directionality and Edward Schillebeeckx’s Mystical Eschatology” explored Stoeger’s contention that evolutionary processes manifest directionality toward increasing complexification and diversification in dialogue with the work of Edward Schillebeeckx. In this paper, presented by her colleague Megan McCabe in her absence, Feder argued that a more explicit emphasis upon relationality in the natural order would align Stoeger’s arguments with recent developments in evolutionary theory, namely, the “extended evolutionary synthesis” (EES) as well as with mystical strains of the eschatological Christian tradition. EES echoes Stoeger’s insights that genetic information is context-dependent and that analysis of the laws of nature must consider how organism-environment relationships direct apparently random outcomes. This relationality of evolutionary processes points toward the relational nature of creation’s ultimate end, i.e., full intimacy with God. Here Feder notes the correlation with Edward Schillebeeckx’s claim “God is the future of man,” which articulates the relational

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destiny of humanity and all creation. Her paper concluded that Schillebeeckx's mystical eschatological orientation could help fill out Stoeger's claim that contingency is the condition for the possibility of free intimacy with God.

Stephen Pope, Professor of Theological Ethics at Boston College, presented his paper "The Immanent Directionality of Nature and the Moral Elevation of *Homo sapiens*" which examined the implications of William Stoeger's account of the immanent directionality of nature for the understanding of justice and mercy. This directionality is suggested in scientific discoveries regarding the emergence of physical and biological structures, complexity, life, and mind. While Stoeger's work focused on the cosmic scale, this paper indicated how Stoeger's account of cosmic directionality can be complemented by an account of the directionality evidenced in the evolution of intelligent social species. Pope explored ways in which Stoeger's account of directionality can be complemented by both scientific accounts of the structure of human moral capacities and a virtue ethical approach to justice and mercy. He proposed that the evolution of human reciprocity made it possible for cultures to develop norms of justice, while the evolution of human empathy made it possible for cultures to develop norms of mercy, ultimately extending such norms beyond in-group members toward out-group members as well.

The discussion which ensued highlighted William Stoeger's considerable contributions to both the theology and science dialogue and to the Theology and Science topic area of the CTSA. In addition, participants engaged the notion of relationality as constitutive of human nature, questioning how that reality might interact with Stoeger's concept of immanent directionality in the development of justice and mercy, as well as toward one's end in God.

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