

THEOLOGY AND THE NATURAL SCIENCES

- Topic: Evolution and the Human Spirit
Convener: William R. Stoeger, Vatican Observatory Research Group,
University of Arizona
Moderator: James R. Pambrun, St. Paul University, Ottawa, Ontario
Presenter: William R. Stoeger

Our meeting surveyed scientific research on human consciousness and explored the philosophical and theological implications of recent findings which probe its material basis in the brain. Bill Stoeger presented some of the major findings and emerging questions in this area.

He identified what is distinctive of human awareness and what it has in common with the consciousness manifested by animals. He summarized the empirical basis of these differences and similarities and referred to experiments which have shown how some animals demonstrate a capacity to learn and, in limited ways, an awareness of self. While he explained that from a neurological perspective the human brain is qualitatively more complex, and while he identified the differences in animal and human social environments and their roles in shaping consciousness, he drew attention to the question whether any other basis of human consciousness is required than that of the complex neural functions of the brain.

In his talk, Bill also referred to different philosophical options (e.g., vitalism, ontological reductionism, etc.) and how these are sharpened given two orders of questions: soft questions which refer to the function and operations of the brain, and the hard questions which involve a notion of experience itself. In light of these recent developments, theologians are once again called upon to develop a more critical understanding of the relationship and unity between the spiritual and corporeal dimension of human life and the kinds of theological approaches best suited to engage recent scientific findings.

In the discussion period the philosophical issues quickly surfaced, issues which dealt not only with the results of scientific findings but also the operative presuppositions at work in the sciences themselves. For example, several participants spoke of the need to clarify such basic terms as matter and law of nature, notions of soul (as a spiritual principle of life), the notion of consciousness itself (a philosophical term, noted Bill, adopted by scientists but oftentimes unattended to by them as a philosophical notion), the nature of the heuristic and

methodological tools (e.g., mathematical) used by science in the formulations of their hypotheses.

Some discussion referred to the attempts in earlier theological traditions, given their own philosophical frameworks, to account for the unity of human existence and its distinct place in the order of created life. Finally, there was some consideration of how the issues would be opened up anew were we to approach them more from an eschatological perspective than from that of the origins and evolution of life.

The session concluded with discussion of future topics. There appeared to be a marked interest in exploring eschatological dimensions further by inviting both a scientist and a theologian to address a common topic. Another idea would be to consider how, within a contemporary scientific world view, one might go about developing a more coherent systematic formulation of a theological doctrine or notion as had been done in an earlier theological period (one person mentioned that it might be interesting to reassess whether whiteheadian thought continues to stand up to the knowledge of reality given by contemporary science).

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TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

- Topic: Holy Spirit: Presence, Power, Person
Convener: Joseph A. Bracken, Xavier University
Presenter: Ralph g. DelColle, Marquette University
Respondent: Donald L. Gelpi, Jesuit School of Theology, Berkeley

In his presentation, Del Colle chose to work from Biblical affirmations of God as Spirit (e.g., John 4:24) to a systematic understanding of the Holy Spirit as presence, power and person within salvation history and the immanent Trinity. With reference to Spirit as presence, Del Colle suggests that the gracious self-presentation of God as Spirit is "neither innate to the creature nor already there by virtue of creaturely being or being in general." With respect to Spirit as power, he notes that sanctification and mission are closely linked in the Scriptures and carry both Christological and pneumatological overtones. One is, in other words, conformed to Christ for the sake of mission in the power of the Spirit. Finally, with respect to Spirit as person, Del Colle proposes that Christ