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A THEOLOGIAN'S PERSPECTIVE ON SCIENCE-ENGAGED THEOLOGY

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What we talk about when we talk about 'science'

Peter Harrison's 2011 Gifford Lectures, published under the title *The Territories of Science and Religion*, surely count as the single most helpful intervention in the field of 'religion and science' since that conversation got seriously underway. Thanks to Harrison, interlocutors could look away from the quest for typologies and taxonomies and towards a scrutiny of the terms themselves. 'Religion' and 'science', Harrison argued, date in their current usage only to the nineteenth century. Using the terms to refer to timeless categories of knowledge makes no sense. Seeking to frame, in general terms, the relationship between something called 'religion' and something called 'science' is therefore a pursuit of questionable utility.

As the editors of this issue explain in their introduction, the Science-Engaged Theology project intends to take Harrison's argument as a point of departure. If we cannot ask about 'religion' (or 'theology') and 'science' in generic terms, then surely one helpful thing we can do is bring a new emphasis on specificity to the enquiry: how does *this* bit of science make a difference in *that* bit of theology? This granularity is potent. In turning away from the pursuit of a panoramic view of the whole, Science-Engaged Theology invites theologians to a patient attentiveness to specific aspects of how various sciences describe and analyse the world, and a willingness to hear and respond to the questions this raises for theology. The enquiries in this issue represent attempts to do just that. But does Science-Engaged Theology successfully follow through on the key content of Harrison's proposal: the effort to de-essentialise 'science' and 'religion'?

In this short response, I want to raise a concern about Science-Engaged Theology, but it is a fond concern, and its raising is meant appreciatively. The appreciation, with due qualification, comes below. First, I outline my worry: does Science-Engaged Theology make itself a hostage to the very circumstances which prompted Harrison to undertake his critique?

Science-Engaged Theology is still operating with the terms whose employment Harrison's historicisation has cast into question. The editors stipulate that

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Science-Engaged Theology is not in competition with what they, following Harrison himself, call Theology-Engaged Science, which seeks to disinter the theological and metaphysical dimensions of the practice of modern natural sciences. But the categories used in both these labels presuppose the very terms that Harrison problematises. To what extent is the editors' way of naming this family of enquiries begging the question, hiding the problem under cover of addressing it? Yes, the project invites us to move away from generalised meanings of these terms towards looking at how science and theology manifest as particular claims, approaches, and so on. But the same terms are still used: 'theology . . . and the natural and social sciences,' for example, as the editors' quote from Surin puts it. In each article, some logic operates which allows the identification of distinct partners in discourse, a theological and a scientific, so that a point of contention, question or illumination can be discovered in the space between. It is this 'space between' which is implied in Science-Engaged Theology's notion of 'entangled concepts'. Such concepts are entangled between, or across, what domains? Is there not a supposition here of territories *alongside* one another—as implied by the 'and' of Surin's quote? If we are trying to enter a post-essentialist age in relation to science and religion, this is a framing of the project that calls for question.

One may respond to this complaint that there are no obvious substitutes for the terms 'science' and 'religion'/'theology'; we must work with the language we have. It is true that there are no good substitutes. But the penultimacy of enquiry generated by the pending of more adequate terms, and the awkwardness of conversation in the meantime, is part of creative intellectual evolution.

But surely we can use the terms while trying to interrogate them, can we not? Only if we bring to light the rules guiding their use. A metaphor illuminates this. The terms 'religion' and 'science' in contemporary usage are pawns moved around on a chessboard that no-one sees. The way the squares are laid out on the board determines what can move where. That chessboard is the background understanding of 'world' or 'reality' by which we identify and categorise 'knowledge'. Theology, as explicit discourse about ultimacy, has the particular burden of bringing that chessboard to light. Not to prove it 'wrong'—whatever that would mean, for it is the rules which determine 'right' and 'wrong' that are here considered—but to *show* what rules are governing the game, what sort of moves this chessboard legislates for, so that they can be seen and evaluated. What moves can be made, by whom, with what significance, can then be understood.

Analysing the moves made by pieces discretely and by themselves does not allow us to focus on what is at stake in the way 'science' and 'religion' function in contemporary usage. Moves made by individual pieces need to be analysed as having been made possible by the board they are on. How useful is it to investigate what happens when the Queen moves against the Bishop *apart from* a consideration of how the functions and identities of those pieces are determined by a prior structure? It is, one might answer, useful within the terms of the game; but surely what is at stake in the intersection of issues in the field of 'religion and science' is really about *how the game of knowledge is played*? The knowledge-claims (the moves and functions of the pieces) only have sense, purchase and truth-value in that context.

For what is really at stake here is, simply, what the world is, and (therefore) what knowledge of that world consists in. It is here that the credibility of any kind of 'theological' account is saved or lost; it is here that the validity *at all* of God-talk—and therefore the existence of anything to engage 'science' *with*—is established or disestablished.

Given that a number of the articles in this issue have a clearly apologetic dimension, and Science-Engaged Theology is intending to express that 'new boldness' that Kathryn Tanner names and celebrates, this is not otiose to the project. It is in that space also that a framework for the *interpretation and adjudication* of the moves on the chessboard can successfully take place, an interpretation and adjudication which Science-Engaged Theology necessarily undertakes; it is this that the notion of 'engagement', among other things, identifies. Are we—those who attempt to think Christianly—not better off effortfully bringing the chessboard to light, so we understand what it means for the Queen to move against the Bishop in just *this* way? For example, when a notion of 'evolved dispositions' is brought against classical moral theologies of culpability (Pedersen)?

Seeing the chessboard is an eliminably historical enterprise, which is why an historian of science was, in the end, better able to make a decisive contribution to the field than many of us who work directly in it as theologians. But here again, Science-Engaged Theology may not be carrying this accent through adequately. Its 'theological puzzles', despite their specificity, do not escape being (albeit implicitly) normative, because of the lack of an explicitly historical framing. If we cannot ask about the relationship between religion and science except for particular people in a specific time and a place, with reference to particular concerns, then the relativisation of the terms by their histories must be a defining aspect of the way the conversation is conducted. The implied normativity, the lack of historicisation, in the use of these labels by Science-Engaged Theology perpetuates the binary which Harrison's work questions.

What is going on in the conversation about 'religion' and 'science' in the twenty-first century precedes specific engagements both conceptually and historically. Does Science-Engaged Theology lay out its pieces on a chessboard which so shapes the game that the moves made simply play out pre-established patterns? The project then reproduces the problem Harrison identifies: the essentialisation of 'religion' and 'science'.

'The Empirical'

Science-Engaged Theology takes its theological departure from Alvin Plantinga's remark: 'The world as God created it is full of contingencies. Therefore we do not merely think about it in our armchairs, trying to infer from first principles how many teeth there are in a horse's mouth; instead we take a look. The same should go for the question how God acts in the world.'[1] Science-Engaged Theology supposes, therefore, that theology rightly draws on empirical research, what we can learn from our senses, taking it as an authentic theological source.

The warrant for this assertion is hardly arguable. Christian thought starts from contingencies: creation, and the first and second covenants. It is a sign of how nettled Christian reflection has been by the force of modern 'natural sciences' that this needs to be stated in this way, as though expecting contestation. There is no sense in theology being shy of the deliverances of the senses, given that almost no theological tradition is interested in denying creation and history as a source of the knowledge of God. Science-Engaged Theology is right to draw emphatic attention to this and to ask us to take seriously the implications for theological enquiry. All our speaking of God is

[1] Alvin Plantinga, 'Methodological Naturalism?', *Origins and Design* 18 (1997). Online: https://www.arn.org/docs/odesign/od181/methnat181.htm.

from the vantage of creatures, and there is nothing especially surprising about this from any point of view. We know that language is, to an unknown extent, metaphorical, that we constantly speak by speaking of things other than what we are speaking of (can we ever speak 'literally'?). The effort by Science-Engaged Theology to explore the way in which (what we call) 'science' can become part of that rich store of image, metaphor and analogy is an important one: 'the stretching of words across different uses', as the editors, and Andrew Davison helpfully clarify. Inviting attention to this store is a worthy purpose, and the articles in this issue indicate its fruits.

If Science-Engaged Theology is merely saying this—that we should look at the world, touch it, feel it, sniff it, taste it, listen to it; and that we should expect such experiences to have some relation to the one behind, beneath, before and in the world—then it is a salutary truism, but a truism nevertheless. But Science-Engaged Theology is not quite saying this, or not only saying this. When it adds the rider 'research' to that apparently innocent word 'empirical', the issue at hand becomes clearer.

The question is not whether Christian reflection should take material things, experiences and happenings as grist to its mill. It cannot not do so. Why shouldn't 'scientific' terms and concepts enter the theological storehouse? Christian discourse is largely composed of images from mundane spheres: farming, war, family life, law, sport and so on. No, the question is what way of constructing 'the empirical' is at work in science, and how its 'findings' reflect that construction. For modern natural sciences are not just another domain of terms, concepts and sensory experience, indistinguishable in principle from farming, hunting, war and family life (which, as we know, also call for scrutiny as worlds of language use). The category of 'the empirical' expresses this difference.

What chessboard does the term 'empirical' move on? The category expresses a way of carving up the world that governs what we will find when we bring our senses to it. Does the term invisibly carry the supposition of a discretely identifiable, bounded domain? (This is a troublesome feature of the conceptualisation of theological *sources* altogether. The metaphor implies both externality and stability.) We know that what people experience with their senses is by no means secure or stable; what counts as sensible, as 'empirical', is contested.[2] As John Milbank has argued in this journal, even so confirmed an 'empiricist' as David Hume did not deliver a stable account of what 'the empirical' is.[3] On the contrary, he seemed at least as interested in mystifying it, and that in a salutary fashion. We cannot simply legitimise (what we call) science's 'findings', as they are put to theology, by re-naming them as 'empirical' and hoping that they magically gain clarity, availability and measurability. (These are the properties we associate with the word 'data', a word which after all means 'given', claiming an obviousness or non-contestability which should itself draw suspicion.)

This questionability of the category of 'the empirical' is hidden by the decision to take 'empirical research' as a 'source' for theology. Questioning the category does not mean that 'empirical research' should be ignored, but it does mean that when 'empirical research' is taken to 'put questions to theology', those questions need to be seen as generated by the chessboard on which the game is played. The Queen moves to D7 because D7 has been designated as moveable-into. A bishop moves to C5 because bishops are defined in this game as the sort of piece that can go to that square. The question of 'method' cannot be suspended. Modern natural science is not a set of facts that can be

[2] Daniel Everett, *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes* (London: Profile Books, 2010).

[3] John Milbank, 'Hume Versus Kant: Faith, Reason and Feeling', *Modern Theology* 27, no. 2 (April 2011): 276-97.

separated from their context and imported into other domains. It is a set of methods; and the methods *make* (*facere*) the facts (*facti*).[4]

Even were we to accept the term 'empirical' as a circumscribed and self-evident domain, (what we call) 'science' is not *merely* empirical. The phrase 'empirical *research*' as used in the project statements of Science-Engaged Theology is an implicit recognition of this; but 'research' is here hiding the term 'method'. 'Science' puts questions to theology, yes, just as experience puts questions to theology, just as history and events do. Paying attention to those questions is important. But what does (what we call) 'natural science' *add*, *beyond* simply 'the findings of the senses' (whatever they are)? For modern natural science is precisely not just the findings of the senses, nor is it simply their amplification, or extension. It is well known that 'science' routinely generates entirely counterintuitive conclusions, inviting people to consent to what their senses alone could never in any circumstances 'find'. Some sciences, like quantum physics, not only go beyond 'the findings of the senses', but flatly contradict them. Others, such as the claim that our galaxy is moving through space at 5.8 kilometres per second, may not offend our senses, but it is almost meaningless to them. None of us has ever seen the Milky Way 'from the outside', nor does any of us have the measure of the space 'through which' it is moving. (In)famously, no-one has actually *seen* a chimpanzee turn into a human.

The instruments that science uses, the procedures of analysis and the modes of explanation that it employs, do not neutrally extend what we sense, but interpret and shape it. The slipperiness of the term 'fact', which is in our time the currency of the empirical, is evidence of this. This is not in itself (at all) to question the legitimacy of scientific claims. (To what 'non-interpretive' mode of understanding could natural science be unfavourably compared in this regard?) It is simply to note that (what we call) science is *not* merely 'the findings of the senses', where 'findings' implies that we simply came upon whatever it is while casually looking, as a certain William Paley accidentally stumbled over a watch 'in crossing a heath'. Scientific theories and claims are synthesised through a complex process of theoretical construction, including the selection of topics for enquiry; the categorisation of phenomena into classes; the operation of axioms, some examined, some not; diverse modes of analysis; various means of turning experience into measurable units; and a set of (contested) criteria for what counts as a good explanation. This 'extra' that science adds to the senses, which qualifies, modulates or interprets them, is what the rider 'research' quietly adds to the troublesome 'empirical'.

So, the Science-Engaged Theologian responds: does not all this simply move the conversation back into the realm of the abstract, the conceptual, and the generic?—sacrificing in doing this the specificity, the granularity, that Science-Engaged Theology has (rightly) identified as one worthy response to the Harrison platform? No, or at least, not necessarily. Samir Okasha is not alone in observing that there is no single 'scientific method'.[5] Attending to method does not automatically entail panoramic thinking, with its potential for grandstanding, sweeping generalisations, too-vague categories, and the universals SCIENCE and RELIGION mincing seductively in again through the

[4] Plantinga's remark begs this question when he puts looking for a horse's teeth *alongside* looking for God's acts in the world, as though these were distinct acts of enquiry. The teeth in the horse's mouth *are* an act of God. Without wishing to short-circuit the old chestnut of special divine action, the fact that Plantinga distinguishes in this way makes clear the advantages of a more Thomist way of putting it: we know God in everything we know. There is no knowledge act that is not knowledge of God (though there are different types of knowledge).

[5] A position he states as uncontroversial in introducing the topic to newcomers. Samir Okasha, *Philosophy of Science: A Very Short Introduction*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), chap. 1.

backdoor. No, the granularity will not be lost, but it will have a different note: it will be *also* methodological; it will look at what is *making* knowledge 'knowledge' in any given instance, and it will bring that awareness into its reception of the discipline and the 'findings' under discussion. This attention to method allows the scholar to ask: what is it we are talking about when we are talking about science? A responsible theology will not let this question be external to the reception of 'science's' 'findings'. What does method look like in *this* 'science'? How does it generate these outcomes? What can be said about that, critically or affirmatively, from the point of view of one who sees a 'more' in reality intruding everywhere (God)?

Simply: there would be a way of doing Science-Engaged Theology that did not, *contra* the instructions of the editors to their writers in this issue, specifically shelve method.

Of course, there is no keeping science 'out of' theology. We cannot positivistically delimit certain kinds of knowledge as regulating all the others, because our speaking of God is taken from creatures, and it is God we know in everything we know. Isolation of the theological from the 'scientific' is impossible. The whole, as D.L. Schindler explained, intrudes into every part; the universal into every particular; the conceptualisation of the world as such into every conceptualisation of what is *in* the world.[6] We make a claim to knowing everything in any claim to know anything.

Ironically, the Science-Engaged Theology project, by attempting to bring science *in*to 'theology', cannot help generating the impression that it is, could be, has ever been, 'out' . But this is to mislocate what is problematic in our time. What needs defence now, for us (post)moderns, is not the proposal that 'science' be allowed *inside* 'theology'. It already is. What is needed is a cogent challenge to the innocent assumption that it is, could be, or has ever been, 'outside'.

[6] D.L. Schindler, 'The Given as Gift: Creation and Disciplinary Abstraction in Science', *Communio* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 52-102.