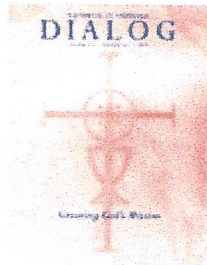


A JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

# DIALOG

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**Summer 2015**

**Volume 54, Issue 2**  
**Pages 111–208**

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## Science in Seminary? Really?

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"Science in seminary? No way!"

"Why not?"

"Because our curriculum is too full as it is. Every vested interest wants to add their pet subject to our curriculum. We can't add anything more!"

"But, but, but... this is important."

"Well, then, let's hire one professor to teach the dialogue between science and faith on a half-time basis. Leave all other courses as they are."

"No, that's not good enough. We need to see science included in every branch of seminary education because our future pastors and church leaders need to anticipate and understand how their ministries relate to the present global context."

"What you're asking for is impossible."

"Impossible? Was it impossible for God to part the Red Sea so the Hebrew slaves in Egypt could escape to freedom? Was it impossible for God to raise the crucified Jesus on the first Easter? Was it impossible...?"

"Changing the seminary curriculum is more impossible. Even God can't do it."

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## Educating Future Church Leaders

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Educating future church leaders to understand their ministry in light of contemporary science is long overdue. We must acknowledge, of course, that our existing divinity curricula are overloaded; so it seems that one more addition might cause any curriculum to crash like an outdated computer. Nevertheless, this is important.

For half of a millennium now we have lived in a world that modern science has constructed, that technology has transformed, and that industry, along with weapons, has contaminated. Gradually yet ineluctably science has reconstructed our worldview, our picture of reality, our self-understanding. No longer do biblical concepts or theological notions make immediate sense. Our religious roots

need fertilization and pruning if they are to flower in our scientized and technologized garden.

Introducing science into seminary studies could be valuable in three ways. First, science is intrinsically fascinating. Well, not exactly. It's nature that is intrinsically fascinating; and the scientist simply uncovers nature so we can better see it. Science interprets nature like the exegete interprets the Bible. Nature is wondrous, beautiful, elegant. It speaks of God the creator. We have two books to read to understand God: the book of nature for general revelation and the Bible for special revelation.

Second, science so frames the modern worldview that it floods our contemporary context. To understand ourselves, we must do so contextually. Karl Barth once said the preacher should enter the pulpit with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. I wonder if we might substitute for the newspaper a chart of the human genome or a photograph of Andromeda or a textbook in neuroscience. That pulpit may start to look cluttered. But, at least the preacher will be ready to deliver a contextually meaningful message.

Third, the younger generation sitting in our pews needs to have access to the best science and be encouraged to celebrate the best science. Oh yes, it is the responsibility of the school, not the church, to teach the best science. Yet, the church can make a supporting contribution. We can't allow our youth to be sidetracked by creationism or intelligent design or other diversions, even if piously touted. Rather, if our youth are to succeed as engineers, nurses, doctors, chemists, educators, and such they must be schooled in the best our society offers.

What makes this challenging is a rumor. The problem is that a rumor is going around, a rumor that says Christians are anti-science. According to this rumor, virtually all Christians are fundamentalistic, atavistic, dogmatic, luddite, and combative. We must dispel this rumor. Our clergy must encourage if not inspire today's youth to become tomorrow's scientists, or at least to become scientifically informed. With the priest's or pastor's encouraging demeanor within the congregation a young person might become more receptive to a calling—a vocation—that may involve employing science to make this a better world.

Now, what might a seminary curriculum interpolate into its course offerings that could move us in this direction? Let me offer some suggestions.

## Science in the Seminary Curriculum

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### *Hebrew Scriptures/Old Testament*

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The science of archaeology is already at home in biblical studies. We consider biblical criticism to be *Wissenschaftlich*, scientific. Yet, might we ponder still more?

Genesis 1–11 and Psalm 8 are not merely the literature of an ancient people living in Israel. These are living and breathing texts which pulsate through the worldview of today's committed Christians. Yet, today, understanding God's relationship to the world as creator and sustainer must be carried out in relationship to four of the most intriguing and exciting domains of contemporary science: Big Bang cosmology, evolutionary biology, genetics, and neuroscience. The secular story of creation now playing in Big History courses in our universities and as entertainment on the History Channel of our televisions is Big Bang. Just how do we understand Genesis 1:1–2:4a in light of Big Bang and its 13.82-billion year history? How do we arm our future pastors for the battle they will inevitably face over Darwinian evolution? When it comes to Adam and Eve, the *imago Dei*, the fall into sin, and human nature in general, recent developments in genetics and neuroscience are almost daily exposing us to new knowledge about who we are as human beings.

### *New Testament*

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The Gospel of John tells us that what became incarnate in Jesus was the divine *Logos*, the divine mind that orders all of reality. Both secular and religious scientists continue to believe that the universe is organized rationally—that is, organized mathematically—and that the same laws we

formulate from our observations here on Earth obtain everywhere in this giant cosmos, even those galaxies we can see 11 billion light years away. This is because God made the creation to mirror God's mind. Even atheist cosmologists such as Stephen Hawking describe the amazing understandability of the universe as the "mind of God." That this very mind of the creating God has become incarnate among us, full of grace and truth, is the New Testament claim. How might we interpret the divine mind in light of the scientific mind?

## Church History

We already trace the history of controversies, creeds, confessions, and confusions. Why not add what was happening contextually, not just in philosophy, but also in science? What our students will learn might surprise them. Beginning with Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, theology became empirical and included study of the world. Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and Newton pursued their revolutionary science as an expression of the *Two Books*: the book of nature complementing the book of Scripture. Science thrived within the church, not outside of it. The portraits on the walls for the first centuries of the Royal Society in London depict the great scientists of the time: clergy. Science did not become secularized until early in the nineteenth century. Isn't this a part of the church's history?

The idea of a perpetual warfare between science and religion was an invention of the late nineteenth century. To say that science and religion were in conflict before Darwin is revisionist history perpetrated by William Draper and A.D. White. There is no need for church historians to be intimidated by these myth-makers. Church history courses in seminary could undo the damage of pseudo-history.

## Systematic Theology

Systematic theology is a field encompassing field. Because it tackles the hermeneutical problem of interpreting ancient scripture in light of the modern context, systematic theology must study the

understanding of reality presupposed in our contemporary context. That understanding of reality is predominantly, though not exclusively, determined by science.

The controversy over evolutionary biology and Social Darwinism continues to rock public education in both the United States and Turkey. In the U.S., the fire is fueled by combative Christians. In Turkey, the blaze is fueled by Muslims disenchanted with Darwinism taught in the public schools. What our future church leaders need is knowledge, understanding, and empathy for the competing positions. What our future pastors and educators need to know is this: just who is fighting with whom about what? If they do not learn this in seminary, our graduates will be thrown to the snarling wolves.

## Ethics

Science is allegedly value-free. But don't be fooled. Science provokes ethical evaluation and moral responsibility. The very question—can climate change be documented scientifically?—is by implication an ethical as well as a political question.

More moral questions arise from today's biological sciences. Should prenatal diagnosis of genetic predispositions to an expensive disease justify one's insurance company mandating abortion? Does genetic determinism make one's homosexual predisposition natural, and therefore, remove it from the list of immoral behaviors? Would the same moral logic apply to one's heterosexual predisposition?

Or, how do principles such as nonmalificence, beneficence, justice, and autonomy illuminate genetic research, human embryonic stem cell research, reproductive and therapeutic cloning, genetic counseling, global distribution of expensive therapies, distribution of preventative medicine in the world's poorer regions, and such? Only a scientifically informed church leader will be able to conduct moral deliberation over issues our congregants and the entire society must wrestle with.

## *Homiletics*

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I once asked a behavioral geneticist, who is a devout Anglican, what he expected when listening to a sermon in his church. "Well," he said, "the preacher doesn't have to know the details of science. But, he or she had better not sound like the west end of a horse traveling east." Our future preachers need not provide science lessons in their sermons, to be sure; but when they allude to the natural world they must avoid making noises that cause scientifically informed listeners in the pew to squirm, cringe, and frown.

## *Christian Education*

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I recently spoke with a medical doctor, a family practitioner. She said that what she learned about evolution she learned in her church, where the pastor was trying to update the congregation. She did not learn evolution in medical school, but rather at her church. Need I say more?

Actually, I would like to say something more. Educated persons in our congregations like to explore tantalizing ideas. They want to put their complicated worlds together in integrated fashion. To build a world of meaning, they seek out an exchange of ideas in an honest and non-judgmental setting. And, most importantly, they want to avoid dogmatic trump cards played against them. One of the best services our pastors and educators can offer is a space. By space I mean an open forum for exchange of important thoughts. This exchange should avoid dogmatic evaluation, negative judgment, and threats of excommunication. Once this space to explore is opened in a congregational setting, it will soon be filled by inquiring minds.

Science in Seminary? Yes, indeed. We can't wait much longer.

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