

Published

Louis Caruana, 'Dialogue between Science and Theology: some new Developments',  
Review article in: *Gregorianum* 83, 4 (2002), pp. 773-777.

## **DIALOGUE BETWEEN SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY: SOME NEW DEVELOPMENTS**

The psalmist proposes: 'commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act' (Ps. 37). How can we understand God's action in the world when we recall that, in today's understanding, the world is seen in terms of particles, forces and fields? What is the relationship between scientific and religious language usage? These are the main questions dealt with in a recent book by Christopher C. Knight entitled *Wrestling with the Divine, Religion, Science and Revelation*.<sup>1</sup>

In the first two chapters, one finds an introductory survey of the issues often dealt with by scholars intent on bringing science and theology peacefully together in dialogue. Cohabitation of this kind hasn't always been easy. Since the birth of natural science in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, a certain distance has established itself between the two disciplines. Knight is aware that nowadays a lot of the so-called dialogue is nothing more than personal reflections of some individuals with a scientific background who attempt to combine their expert scientific knowledge with some aspect of their religious beliefs. More valuable results have come from a systematic approach, like that of Thomas Torrance, which starts from the premise that there is a necessary link between revelation and the nature of the cosmos. The very

---

<sup>1</sup> CHRISTOPHER C. KNIGHT, *Wrestling with the Divine, Religion, Science and Revelation* (Theology and the Sciences). Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001; cm 22,8 × 15,2, pp. XIV + 146. US \$ 19.00. ISBN 0-8006-3298-2.

idea of revelation is to be understood in conjunction with the understanding of God's action in the world.

The temptation here is to succumb to a quick, superficial application of recent scientific theories about the world. If the theory of biological evolution, for instance, is used to explain revelation, the normal outcome is a form of pantheism. At best, revelation comes out as a kind of discovery on the part of one particular evolved biological species. This may be acceptable to those who have no real interest in genuine theology, in other words those who cannot engage in the intellectual journey of *fides quaerens intellectum* because they have no faith in the first place. Those who do have faith need to highlight some fundamental, essential features of the concept of revelation, such as the fact that it is a free gift from God. Science makes its constraints, and so does theology. To respect these conditions, Knight calls his position sacramental pantheism or pansacramentalism, by which he apparently wants to give a central role to the idea that every natural thing can be the locus of God's initiative as regards self-communication. The Easter experience is rightly chosen by Knight as the paradigm example of revelation. His position of pansacramental naturalism emphasises the importance of the psychological component of the Easter visions of the resurrected Lord. This component has been analysed by Louis Bouyer, Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, and other theologians. Knight's specific contribution can be summarised in four points.

The first one concerns revelation and psychology. With his scientific background, Knight wants to highlight the need to go beyond a shallow form of naturalism according to which these events were nothing but chemistry. One needs to learn from science itself how to handle reductionistic attitudes. In biology, reductionism is refuted by acknowledging the specific autonomous character of biological theory. So also with religion: reductionism in an account of revelation is countered by acknowledging the specific features of religious experiences that cannot be deduced from the merely psychological explanation, such as the meaning of the revealed doctrine itself. The role of the psychological component in the understanding

of revelatory experience is not to devalue revelation, but on the contrary to promote an aspect of our created being to a far higher status than usually conceded by secular views of nature. The term 'special revelation' is to be retained to highlight precisely this aspect of revelation as a gift.

The second significant contribution in Knight's overall argument deals with revelation, reference and rationality. Knight applies his familiarity with the development of scientific theories to the realm of theology. The coherence criterion in the search for truth is given considerable importance here. In other words, what is emphasised is the need to become aware, in theology just as much as in science, of the coherence criterion: to be acceptable, a theory needs to be consistent with other accepted theories. The view he calls pansacramental naturalism seeks to operate with this criterion in view. Revelation and providence are therefore described with a special concern for consistency with our understanding of creation. Such a concern for consistency helps us avoid a kind of collective multiple-personality disorder with various views added one on top of the other in the pile of human intellectual endeavours without any concern for unity. Some readers may find it strange that the key doctrine of *analogia fidei*, which deals precisely with the need to retain an overall coherence in our understanding of the faith, remains sadly unmentioned by the author.

The third point concerns revelation as 'data'. Knight compares the starting points of science with those of theology. According to him, what corresponds to scientific data are revelatory phenomena. Some readers may find this parallelism rather superficial, and will be sad to learn that he doesn't offer any detailed justification. One cannot just assume that one discipline must have the same method as another. On reading the Church Fathers, one gets the impression that sometimes theology can be as different from experimental science as poetry is from long division. Knight leaves such questions unanswered. What he deals with rather is the problem of revelatory locality. He introduces this by a simple assertion: 'nor should we necessarily assume that revelatory phenomena are in principle unique' (p. 60). For him, the challenge of revelatory locality seems difficult to accept. There seems to be a

kind of scandal in the claim that there is one Lord, who revealed Himself in one particular man, at one particular place during one particular period of time — in other words, that there is one locus of special revelation, one point of unique significance for all other points. Knight seems to want to tone this down by an assumption similar to the astrophysicists' cosmological principle according to which our position in the universe has nothing special about it. For those who want to defend the uniqueness of Christ and the full significance of his *kenosis*, this evasion of what may be called the scandal of locality is a weakness in the overall approach.

As regards the content of revelation, Knight recalls the precious insight of Aquinas when he speaks of the three periods of revelation: the period of the law, of grace, of glory. Referring to Yves Congar's historical approach to truth, he explains the idea that revelation should not be described as a once-and-for-all data-bank of propositions but a dynamic reality. It is not meant primarily to impart propositional knowledge of God, as if God were some particular *thing* to be discovered, grasped, conquered, by our minds, but to effect a true relationship with God. Having made this fundamentally valuable observation, however, Knight seems to want to water it down. Consider, for instance, the way he understands the passage relating the ascension of Christ. He disagrees with those commentators who claim that 'gazing intently into the sky' (*Acts* 1: 10) can have no historical basis. He disagrees because 'what can be experienced in visionary encounters depends not on what is objectively possible but on what is assumed possible in the prevailing culture' (p. 67). His tendency, in line with what he calls 'a psychological-referential model of revelatory experience', seems to be to naturalise, to look for what 'really happened' behind the somewhat intriguing descriptions in some Bible passages. One wonders, however, whether his hermeneutic methods are fully in line with standard practice. Major scholars are aware that the Bible is not meant primarily to convey historical or scientific details, but primarily to convey a way of life, virtue, wisdom. In spite of his good intentions of endorsing a dynamic view of revelation, Knight seems to be getting close to missing the point of

the narrative. He sometimes seems to be looking, as it were, at the colours rather than at the painting.

The next significant point he discusses is the allegedly puzzle-solving nature of theological language use. His aim here is to transport some major terminology from the philosophy of science to theology. As in the previous case, he does not seem aware that some justification may be needed for the claim that acceptable themes in the philosophy of science, such as the analysis of Thomas S. Kuhn, are relevant for the understanding of theology. The hidden assumption may perhaps be the Cartesian one of retaining one univocal meaning of the word 'science', and limiting it to natural science. In fact, considering theology a puzzle-solving activity seems to deform the discipline to a considerable extent. It deforms the activity of *fides quaerens intellectum* by uprooting it from the context of life and making it look like a dry collection of propositions.

The fourth and most daring point developed by Knight takes the reader to the intimidating realm of the theology of religions. Here he applies to theology some insights from another debate in the philosophy of science, this time from the discussion on structural realism. The term 'structural realism' is used in general to indicate the philosophical position according to which the feature of a theory that can be said to refer to mind-independent reality is the structure of the theory rather than the postulated objects used in the explanation. Hence, as regards our explanation of electricity, for instance, what corresponds to reality are the equations describing relationships between measurable quantities rather than the term 'electron'. When this structural realism is applied to theology, what becomes evident is a certain doubt as regards our ability to discover the deeper nature of reality. Ontology is seen as an exercise in filling in the blanks left by natural science, and, as everyone knows, blanks can often be filled in various ways. Knight states that there is a need for 'a greater recognition of the metaphysical assumptions that are both essential to the development of theological language and yet also essentially arbitrary as far as that language's claims to realism are concerned – in that they are susceptible to radical

change as that language develops' (p. 105). This ontological relativity is quite far from the kind of optimism favoured by those courageous enough to admit that the human mind is indeed capable of attaining truth, even on the metaphysical level (e.g. *Romans* 1: 19-20; *Fides et Ratio*, § 106).

The consequences of endorsing this view become evident when the centre of attention is shifted towards the theology of religions. Any adequate theology of the world's faiths needs to confront the following problem. If the languages of the various faiths in the world are taken to be straightforwardly referential, they are simply incompatible with one another. The only way out therefore seems to be to regard revelation as entirely non-referential.

To solve this problem, Knight's proposal is to apply his psychological referential model of revelatory experience. All revelatory experiences show two components, the referential component and the culturally conditioned component. Any referential content is often 'hidden' within the culturally influenced expectations in and through which that experience is psychologically appropriated. This means two things. It means firstly that the same reference made available to one religious tradition through one particular culturally influenced expectation can be made available to another religious tradition through a completely different culturally influenced expectation. For instance, the Resurrection, which for Christians is revealed through the biblical narratives, could, according to this proposal, be revealed in other cultural contexts through other means. It means also that two different culturally influenced expectations may both harbour genuinely referential content that is different but complementary. For example, the Resurrection emerged as a revelation from within the Judaistic culture of the first century not by chance but because it was precisely that Judaistic culture that made such a revelation possible. The culture of the Far East, on the contrary, was not the type of setting that favours such a revelation. It was a cultural setting that favours another aspect of the self-revelation of the Divine. Knight here borrows terms from evolutionary biology to make his point. He says that culture is to revelation as ecological niches are to the

evolution of biological species. In both cases, the former offers space for the particular appearances of the latter, that is for some possibilities and not others.

The use of this analogy from evolutionary biology, although stimulating, seems to be inappropriate in at least one significant sense. It gives the impression that religious faith and its linguistic expression are essentially a bottom-up affair, a somewhat random process, sprouting up, as it were, in various ways where conditions are favourable. What is neglected is the genuine aspect of revelation as a gift, the one Lord reaching out to us, not randomly, but intelligently and lovingly.

The author claims that his book is meant for a large audience. There is certainly an effort to avoid technicalities, both scientific and theological, but this does not make the book a simple introduction. The tightly knit arguments often need a high degree of concentration to be unravelled and fully appreciated. In the vast area of literature on science and theology, which is fast becoming an enormous supermarket offering all kinds of goods certainly not all of high quality, this book stands out by its scholarly quality and stimulating arguments. To appreciate it from the right perspective, one may profit by recalling that there can certainly be dialogue between science and theology. Nevertheless, a dialogue that wants to sacrifice the identity of each discipline for the sake of a kind of peace at any price will most probably prove to be counter productive in the long run. Moreover, there are millions of people who are suffering from poverty, disease, and hunger brought about by the unjust distribution of wealth and by racial, social and political discrimination. The world is increasingly interdependent, yet tragically divided by injustice. Any dialogue between peoples, between believers and non-believers, between scientists and theologians, needs to be based upon a shared commitment to action for human development and liberation.