

Science in the Service of the Eschaton: Religion and Science, Conflict and Collaboration

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Introduction

Let me begin with a quote from Lonergan's *Insight*.

If one is not to affirm reason at the expense of faith or faith at the expense of reason, one is called upon both to produce a synthesis that unites two orders of truth and to give evidence of a successful symbiosis of two principles of knowledge... But if [we] have endeavoured to establish the synthesis of the objects and the symbiosis of the principles of reason and faith, it also is true that [our] effort has been embarrassed continually by the instability of the pronouncements of scientific reason. From the nature of the case the initiative seemed permanently in the hands of those who invoked science against religion, and... the defenders were left in the unenviable position of always arriving on the scene a little breathlessly and a little late. (Bernard Lonergan Insight, p.754-55)

In wake of the triumph of science and its manifest achievements, we, the people who are awed by the *Mystery* at the heart of the cosmos, always find ourselves arriving 'a little breathlessly and a little late' as we seek to integrate the discoveries of science and their implications for who we are or want to be, for our understanding of this *Mystery* and, for the realisation of that unknown future, the eschaton, i.e. the unknown destiny of humanity/the universe, within which we are seeking our role.

Religion, conflict and progress

Most of the world's population now and in the past have had some religious affiliation. Many people have suffered persecution and torture for their religious beliefs. Religious motivation is one of the basic drivers for human rights, for the eradication of hunger and poverty and for the creation of better societies etc.

On the other hand, in history, many, indeed most, major conflicts have been attributed to religious differences. You can think of your own examples but off the top of my head we could recall that the ongoing conflict between India and Pakistan with its roots in the conflict between Hinduism and Islam. Or, we could recall the long history of conflict between Islam and Christianity and the Christian crusades. Or, we could recall the internecine conflicts between different branches of Islam, between different Christian traditions –the religious wars of 16th and 17th century Europe, the Inquisition and the more recent troubles in Ireland. You get the picture and you can probably think of more pertinent examples.

If we are to understand the source of these ongoing conflicts and the ongoing conflict between religion and science, I think it important that we understand what religion is and it is not. Similarly, with science – it is important to understand what science is and it is not. In the popular imagination, religion and science are in opposition to one another. The history of the relationship between religion and science is littered with misunderstanding and misconceptions as to what is science and what is religion. Often the problem is what has become associated with religion and with science rather than what they are.

You will note that the title of my presentation suggests that there is something beyond the simplistic and popular view of an ongoing conflict between science and religion. Indeed, I'm suggesting that science has an important role in religion.

Eschaton

Let me now go back to that word in the title, eschaton. It is a religious word and each of the major religions - Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, Taoist or Zoroastrian – has an eschatology. Each uses different terms. Each has a different understanding of the unknown destiny of humanity/the universe.

It is not something peculiar to religious traditions. We all dream of some future or other. We may even think about the future of humanity, dream about some future utopia or have nightmares about some dystopia.

So, when I talk about the eschaton, I am taking you out of our present day concerns and asking you to place yourself within the stream of the 20 billion years, so far, of the history of the universe and the short history of humankind within it to ask you three questions: What do you think is the ultimate destiny of humankind and the universe? where do you think the universe is heading? What do you hope for? What role do you play within this stream of universal history? And, when you try and answer these questions, do your answers come out of a feeling of optimism and pessimism, do you have grounds for your answer, are you just speculating, do have any evidence for your view?

Maybe that is all too much to take in at once. Let me ask you are a more existential question, a question of the moment: do you view humanity as possibly maturing – in some serious way - or just messing along between good and evil, whatever you think they are?

The eschaton is our ongoing answer to these sorts of questions. These are fundamentally questions of identity – of who I am or will be; of who we are or will be. We live and act in view of this answer seeking to realise or bring about this eschaton.

Religion and belief

One common myth contrasts science based on reason with religion based on irrational belief. Yet, belief is a fundamental condition for human collaboration and for progress.

Our technology, our economy, our ways of making decisions, our institutions, our cultural meanings and values depend upon our working with others. Belief enables us to learn from the accumulated knowledge of others through history. It provides a foundation upon which we can further build. Indeed, “to appropriate one’s social, cultural, religious heritage is largely a matter of belief”.

Science is also a collaborative affair. Not only is belief a fundamental condition for society, it is fundamental to the scientific enterprise. The education of students in science presupposes the passing on of important doctrines whether that is a division of the sciences, the core understandings of a particular science (such as the periodic table in chemistry or general relativity in physics) and how to go about investigating some phenomena or question, i.e. scientific method. Without some system of belief, scientists would be forever re-inventing the wheel. A scientist does not check everything they use or every belief passed down from others. Rather, it is when they prove inadequate in a new context that these beliefs are questioned and open up a shift to a new scientific paradigm.

What is religion?

Being-in-love

The starting point for religion is the discovery of oneself as being-in-love and a decision to act on this discovery. This is a personal discovery; I have to make this discovery for myself. It is a discovery that I am loved and in love with the *Mystery* that is at the centre of the world. It is a discovery based on evidence but not the usual evidence that the natural sciences appeal to.

Yet it is also a discovery made in the face of incomprehensible and inexplicable evil and in the face of bad things happening to good people.

Faith as knowledge born of love

Faith is knowledge born of this love. It is knowledge of the *Mystery* at the centre of the universe, knowledge that emerges as we try to understand the meaning of this love and its ramifications for our living.

This knowledge finds different expressions in different religious traditions. In his 1969 paper, 'The Future of Christianity', Lonergan draws on the work of Friedrich Heiler who pointed to seven areas which are common to the world's religions – Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Zoroastrian Mazdism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. I don't have the time here to go into these seven areas of commonality but Lonergan went on to note that they implicitly draw on this personal discovery of being-in-love. It is this discovery that not only provides the basis for dialogue between different religions but also provide a more fundamental understanding of what is meant by religion.

Just as discovering that I am in love with another person is transformative of my life, my relationships, my values and my activities, my understanding of who I am and who others are and my understanding of the world, so too the discovery of myself as being-in-love is transformative – it involves a conversion into a new way of living. It transforms how we live and how we express ourselves. While originating in a common experience, each religion differentiates itself from others by highlighting particular aspects of this common experience. To identify religion with its various expressions - beliefs, rituals, prayers, dress, songs, chants, etc - is to miss the centrality of religion; faith born of love.

At the same time, we can shield ourselves against this discovery. We can reject it, skew its meaning. It can be an awesome, terrifying and intense event that demands a radical change. It can overflow into myth, magic and superstition as we seek to maintain control or some semblance of control over our lives. It can overflow in dominant self-righteous.

If religion tradition is to sort out what is authentic in its various expressions and distinguish itself from myth, magic and superstition, it requires critical reflection. The problem a religious tradition continually faces is working out the best expression of being-in-love, working out its implications for our human living. A critical appropriation of our religious heritage requires theology as a science. Such a theology inquires into the meaning of our current religious practices, seeks to trace these meanings through history, seeks to critically appreciate the past and seeks to propose new ways in which to express new discoveries about being-in-love.

It is not enough for us to study Christian theology. If we do so, then we can continue to live with the It is not enough for us to study other faiths from a distance without letting them challenge our beliefs and practices, without drawing on the best of the past from all religions, without facing the challenge of integrating new discoveries about my myself and my tradition.

While theologians restrict themselves to their own religion with its particular economic, social, political, cultural and historical contexts, they can more easily live with the illusion that their

methods and theoretical frameworks are adequate to the task of understanding their own religious practices and beliefs. However, by moving beyond a particular religious tradition, in becoming aware of differences particularly ones that confound us, we are forced to confront the inadequacies of our tradition. As Raimon Panikkar noted: "In order to understand who I am, I have to ask who you are. And in order to know my God I have to ask about your God." Confronted with an alien environment where things are no longer as they seem, where taken-for-granted assumptions are no longer adequate, we are forced to critically appropriate our tradition in a new way, to work out and appreciate what is worthwhile, to integrate the best of the past, to move into deeper level of conversion and to find new ways of expressing our being-in-love. And, in the process, to cast off what is not relevant, essential and significant.

What is science?

The challenge of science to religion

While religion in the West has been the fostering ground for science, science has continually presented a challenge to religion.

So, the discoveries of Copernicus, Kepler, Brahe and others in astronomy, moved us out of our own world into a solar system, a galaxy and a universe beyond. The discoveries of Newton and Einstein, Mendeleev and Meyer, Watson and Crick gave us a new appreciation of the world of physics, chemistry and biology and, of the basic structures of our bodies. The discoveries of Lamarck, Darwin and others in biology moved us out of a static world into an evolutionary world. The discoveries of Bohr, Heisenberg and others moved us out of determinist world into the world of probability. The discoveries of new worlds with different kinship systems, with different economies, politics, cultures and religion brought a new sense of culture as empirical, as historically evolving.

Any new discovery in any area of science is also a deeper discovery of who we are, about our capacity to understand, about our capacity to create a worthwhile technology, economy, society and culture and about our capacity to love and be loved. Thus, science (as indeed many other aspects of our lives) challenges our current understanding of who I am and who I want to be, who we are and who we want to be and how we live out that discovery.

Science - discovering our capacity to understand and transform the world

Our understanding of science is a developing one. Indeed, the history of science is the history of discovering our capacity to understand and transform the world. Through the discoveries of science, we have discovered our capacity to control natural processes and to transform the world. At the same time, however, it has been accompanied by attempts to control and dominate other persons and social processes and to remake society; the discoveries of science are now threatening the very sub-stratum of our world as our natural and human resources are being mindlessly exploited. We now face some major environmental, economic, political and cultural crises which are ongoing, complex, global and difficult to resolve. While different sciences are very good at analysing and discovering new things about our world and how it works and, can propose ways forward and solutions for particular problems, these solutions are piecemeal, unrelated, unco-ordinated and even contradictory. We are being hampered by notions of science that are largely dominated by the natural and formal sciences.

Here I want to suggest that instead of thinking about science in terms of scientific disciplines, their products and their particular methods, we think about the starting point of all science, asking and answering questions, and distinguish (i) the types of questions that emerge spontaneously from

a curious and inquiring mind, (ii) the types of answers these questions anticipate and, (iii) the different methods by which we reach answers to these questions. Such questions will be common across the whole range of sciences.

If we think about the process of moving from our current situation to implementing something new, we can identify and distinguish eight different types of questions that emerge at different stages of that process: an empirical question, a definitional question, an historical question, an evaluative/critical question, a transformative/visionary question, a policy question, a strategic question and a practical question. This is complete set of inter-related questions. Together with their respective methods, they constitute science and are inclusive of both the natural sciences and the social sciences. Such an approach would also make theology a science.

Religion, Science and the eschaton

Let me now go back to the notion of eschaton I talked about earlier. I want to suggest that in some way we all have some answer to questions such as what do you think is the ultimate destiny of humankind and the universe? what do you hope for? what role do you play within the stream of universal history? Do you view humanity as possibly maturing – in some serious way - or just messing along between good and evil, whatever you think they are? Our answer is already embedded in what we do.

The social sciences tend to distinguish different domains of activities – psychology, technology, economics, politics, cultural studies and personal identity studies. However, our activities are not easily broken down into different domains. Indeed, they cannot be separated in this way. Even the most economic activities have technological, political, cultural and religious dimensions. Even the most religious activities have physical, chemical, biological, technological, economic, political, cultural and personal dimensions.

The religious dimension, then, inescapably plays a role in all our activities.

At the same time, we cannot reduce the eschaton to a single dimension, the religious dimension. Each of us has a role in bringing about the eschaton. So, it will involve a synthesis of all dimensions of human living. To bring about the eschaton, we need to find solutions to some of our most profound and complex current problems such as climate change, global economic breakdown, poverty and inequality, religious persecution etc. No one science has the answer to these complex problems. Each science can contribute to our understanding of a dimension of human living and, in this way, can contribute something to bringing about the eschaton. One-dimensional solutions are not adequate. What we need is framework which integrates these dimensions. Science as an inter-related set of eight questions together with their respective methods provides such a framework.

Conclusion

Science is integral to our understanding of the world and our common humanity, to maintaining our environment, to creating a better society, to human living, to personal relations, to finding ways in which to express our love for one another and for the *Mystery* at the heart of the cosmos and, to bringing about the ultimate destiny of humanity/the universe, the eschaton. It seeks to provide us with a developing understanding of the conditions for each of these by explicating what constitutes each. It seeks to understand the current dynamic movements in history, to evaluate these movements so that we can learn from the best of the past, to provide a foundation for the future and to create a better future.