1997

Introduction

Smith-Moran, Barbara
Boston Theological Institute


Boston University
The Student Essay Contest

The time seemed right, in 1997, to present to seminarians and theological students a substantive extracurricular opportunity to think and write innovatively about one of the modes in which science and religion interact: the contribution of the sciences to the “knowledge base” of theology. How might the methodology, worldview, paradigms, and language of the sciences lead fruitfully to progress in learning information about God, the sacred, or the spiritual?

The time seemed right for three reasons. First of all, the Religion and Science Program of The Boston Theological Institute (BTI) has been expanding and maturing, gaining national recognition. Organized in 1990 by the Center for Faith and Science Exchange (FASE), the purpose of the Program has been to create forums in which current and future religious leaders can carry on dialogue with the shapers of the wider techno-scientific culture--the culture where the churches, synagogues and mosques carry on their ministries. Secondly, for three or four years, science-and-religion courses have been offered on a regular basis at BTI schools. Several faculty members of its nine member schools are recipients of Science and Religion Course Awards, given through a vigorous project of the John Templeton Foundation; and students now experience this topic as a regularized part of theological study. And thirdly, by now, the academic landscape worldwide has changed to the degree that it has become possible for BTI graduates to find an advanced study concentration in this area at more than just a few institutions. Concurrently, faculty positions are beginning to open up for specialists.

Given these circumstances, FASE proposed to administer an Essay Contest for all interested students of the BTI. Through a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation, this first year of the Contest, entitled “Learning More about God: Sources of Information Beyond the Scriptures,” solicited essays concerning how the natural, medical, behavioral, and social sciences might contribute to this endeavor.

In not limiting the contest to those currently enrolled in one of the science-and-religion courses, the invitation was extended to others who might be thinking creatively along lines different from the recognized scholarship. This strategy proved to be very successful, as the breadth of themes witnesses.

It was an important aspect of the contest that the schools were not in competition with each other. Each school had the opportunity to produce award-winners in each category. Only at the last stage were the top essays judged against each other for originality of thinking.

The winning essays, published for the first time in this Journal, have passed a two-tier review system: (1) a panel of BTI faculty members and other Boston-area experts picked the finalists from an entry pool of nearly 100 essays; (2) a panel of internationally recognized scholars wrote commentary to each finalist and selected the sixteen Prize winners. Finally, the Reverend Dr. Arthur Peacocke, S.O.Sc., of Oxford University, wrote comments to each of the First Prize winners, and selected from their number the recipient of a Grand Prize.
Progress in theology through the sciences

Theology is often perceived by those outside the field to be resistant to innovation, concerned as it is with eternal truths about eternal subjects. Progress in theology seems to be regarded as a novelty by many who have come to expect frequent reports of progress in other fields, the sciences in particular. Part of this perception is attributable to the news media, of course, which feature daily briefs and features about progress in medicine and the other sciences.

However, theologically trained persons have often found innovative approaches to problems in other fields, including scientific research and application. Likewise, we might expect that men and women trained in disciplines other than theology could bring innovative thinking to that field, as well. The contemporary work of Robert Russell, John Polkinghorne, Paul Davies and Herbert Benson comes to mind, to name just a few of a growing number of such cross-disciplinary scholars.

As most professors will attest, one of their most valuable intellectual resources is a student’s ability to stimulate new ideas on a given topic. They have the advantage of not yet being fully trained in the philosophy, discipline, and--importantly--the biases of their field of study. The 3000 seminarians and graduate theology students at the BTI schools represent a pool of fresh thinkers in theology. Some of them have the potential to contribute genuinely innovative thinking to the field, as will be seen in the essays that follow here.

An important fact to recognize when considering progress in religion is its probable non-universality. What is seen to be progress in one tradition ought not be expected to translate as such to other traditions. For this reason, those selected to assay the originality of the submitted essays matched the traditions from which the students were writing.

With this program, we at FASE and the BTI intend to help to “launch,” with prize and publication, progressive thinkers and writers into leadership in American religious life.