

A Very, Very Modest Proposal

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More and more, I have begun to feel unhappy with the direction of “mainstream” science/theology work. It seems to me (maybe I’m just getting old and crabby) that the work is abandoning some (or much?) of its Christian roots. It could be that I am simply out of step with the whole direction of the movement and time may be closing in on me. I am certainly of the twentieth century even though I want to look beyond it and see the outline of the twenty-first century.

I am referring in the first instance to the proliferation of what I call a “Creator theology.” In this, God is referred to as Creator (so far so good) but I wait in vain for the next words. There is never any following sentence which also calls God Redeemer or Sanctifier. It would seem as if the Creator is alone, a “god of the philosophers.” It seems to me what we’re doing is talking about a Creator (and maybe Sustainer) who is absolutely alone. What is not being talked about is the “Christian God,” a Trinity of divine Persons.

We Christians believe in a Trinitarian God, a Trinity of Divine Persons. We should always promote such a God, if He needs promotion from the likes of us. He will do His work anyway, whether or not we acknowledge or praise Him. But if we are really serious as Christians, we cannot help acknowledging and praising Him as He exists. Otherwise, it would seem that we are falling into the same abyss which claimed Sir Isaac Newton and others before us. If we do not promote a Trinitarian God, we are settling for a “god of the philosophers,” a pale and ghostly God indeed. In philosophy, while studying Natural Theology, I made the remark that I could never bend the knee to the God we were learning about. That’s still the case. I cannot personally worship such a monochromatic, “bloodless” God.

Our theology must be centered on the Redeemer God so I propose. Even in the very writing of the Bible, the first encounter is with the God who saves us. The God who created us and the entire cosmos is a later addition. [Genesis is not the first book of the Hebrew Testament which was given us.] We are indeed to serve and praise the Creator but in the context of the Redeemer. As the narrative of the liberation grew and developed into Christian times it has become “obvious” that God himself has not, indeed, created us and then walked away from his work. In His Son, by the power of the Spirit, he has stayed with us in our development, leading us back to Him. By way of the Revelation that is really the message sent by God Himself about Himself he is fulfilling us in our journey which will lead to our sharing in the divine nature.

Christ came to us, but more, He came to lead us into our becoming a “part of God,” created as we are. He did not come so much to bring God into human life as He did to bring human life into God. As Peter says: he came to give us a share in the divine nature (2 Peter). He came, became one of us in the body of Mary, then, for a further purpose, one of utmost importance: that we might become one with God in our resurrection. He gave us the Spirit of God to remain with us and sanctify us, make us more worthy of the promises of Christ.

For ecumenical purposes we can speak of the Creator God, always remembering, of course, that this is far from the full story. But let us never forget that, talking solely of the Creator God leads to a “natural theology,” not to a revelational theology. The message is sorely truncated in the process and becomes debilitated. It seems to me that true ecumenical dialogue should insist on our putting forth the truth as we know it. We should do this humbly and without arrogance, but we should do it. We have something to give the world, indeed the most precious of gifts. We should not be reluctant to give it to anyone who will listen. Unless our position is in the mix, the mix will be poisonous indeed.

Having said all of this, where does it leave us? Science as well as “theology” or “faith” is not all of one piece. There is no “Theory of Everything” that comprehends all of reality. What we have is physics, chemistry, biology, anthropology and all the rest. There is no unified method of experiment, much less an integrated approach to reality. Perhaps we will in time come to such an integrated approach. In the meantime, these all remain separate disciplines, more or less related to each other.

While many other science/theology groups are concentrating on the bestiary of astrophysics and a philosophical science of one sort or another, I would propose that ITEST consider concentrating on biology (more generally,

the life sciences) and faith. Certainly, in the theological (revelational) scheme of things, the human is more important (and of vastly more interest) than the quantum world. That world is important, but not really so important for our salvation as the world of the biology to come. I say this as an erstwhile physicist. Mankind is more important than an atom at least so say I. I am, then, proposing that at least some of us more or less concentrate on faith/life sciences in our thinking and praying. Perhaps, God willing, we might build a base on which the future can erect the house or whatever else that will might desire. It is a case of interpreting the course of salvation and the discoveries of the life sciences.

I realize that I am far from competent enough to do this on my own. I can possibly lend a hand here or there, but together, ITEST women and men may be able to make a significant contribution to the Church. We have a revelational base that is not yet complete. It won't be complete, in fact, until the human race arrives at the "fullness of truth," which will not occur before the Lord returns to us for good. As Pope John Paul says in *Fides et Ratio* (11): "For the People of God, therefore, history becomes a path to be followed to the end, so that by the unceasing action of the Holy Spirit the contents of revealed truth may find their full expression. This is the teaching of the Constitution *Dei Verbum* when it states that 'as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly progresses towards the fullness of divine truth, until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her.'" (No. 8)

But what about the life sciences and the history of humankind? What can we learn from the scientific approach to the human? Vast amounts of information on our makeup! From a further knowledge of the genes, proteins, drives, etc., we can learn a great deal. But how are we to learn it? We are not looking to build a science-based theology of man. We are searching for a "science-open" theology. But even a science-open theology is only part of our task. This theology must somehow fit in with, be in conformity with, our revelation-based, faith-based, notion of humanity. But, again, will a life science/faith be satisfied with using biology as a "water-boy," pouring out information only? Will we be taking the life sciences seriously enough if we look to them *only* for more and better information?

It [biology and the other sciences] has the competence to provide us with very much information, but I suspect we have the right to expect much more, though it may be difficult for us right now to articulate what that something more might be.

We have St. Augustine's assurance that the book of revelation and the book of nature have the same author. But these two entities should be mutually helpful, assisting each other in probing the secret designs of God. Our understanding of Revelation is far from complete. We have, in the fallout from the Galileo case, changed our interpretation of the Scripture with regard to the physical centrality of the earth in the cosmos. It may well be true that work in biology/faith will lead to other and better interpretations of what Revelation teaches us about humanity. With the assistance of the "sciences dealing with our bodies and with human interaction" we may come to a fuller and better understanding of that humanity. Again, we are talking about interpretation.

In his work, *In Genesi ad Litteram*, St. Augustine remarks: "Whatever they (we can substitute 'scientist' for 'they') can really demonstrate to be true of physical nature, let us show to be capable of reconciliation with our Scriptures." We do have continually to keep our interpretation of Scripture in line with what we know to be true from other sources.

We can grow in our understanding of how Christ was conceived and how he developed in Mary's body. We can learn, too, how we are conceived and develop in our mother's body and later. We can begin to envision deliberately changing our physical destiny either in the womb or later. The future seems to be radically open-ended. Whether it will work out this way, though, is anybody's guess. One way or the other, it will be a moral issue how we in fact pursue these types of "progress."

A case in point is our physical lineage. How important is it to us as human beings? Seemingly, it is very important if we judge from the number of people interested in genealogy and/or knowing who their 'birth-

mother' was or is. When the substitution of genes becomes regular or commonplace, what will this do to our notion of physical lineage? Will we acquiesce in the notion that we are basically "atoms in the void" or will we demand that sense of community expressed by and in physical lineage? Will that continuity with the past and future be lost or will we demand to know "where we came from"?

A quarter of a century ago I was quite willing to set up a sharp distinction between the therapeutic use of genetics and the enhancement of the human composite. Now I am not so certain as I used to be. The thought continually haunts me that a judicious enhancement of the human composite is necessary for the final "transfiguration of our wretched bodies into copies of his glorious body." I don't know how far such a concept can or should be pushed. But I don't think it should be totally ignored either. It offers, for one thing, an avenue along which biologists and theologians can develop a "theology of man" or maybe a "biotheology of man."

I am not so sure as I once was that all "enhancement" of the human composite should be avoided. First of all, it will be attempted although that by itself does not make it seemly or right. Secondly, although the thought has been slow to come, it may be that Christ will not return to bring the world to himself until mankind has reached a "state of physical perfection" that will enable it as a group to be "transfigured." That that could come in many ways, including final rebellion, seems to be a commonplace. The return of Christ to judge the race could be a "sweep up to the eschaton," as Teilhard would have it or a "sweep down to the eschaton," as I see it. Rebellion against God (remember Satan's challenge to God) is as likely a scenario. We don't know which it will be. It could be either one or the other. Like so many other things, we'll know more later.

Where does all this leave us? Almost back where we started, namely that biology (the life sciences in general) must assume an importance it (they) hitherto has (have) not been given in Christian thought. It seems to me at present that it is imperative that there be a pre-theological level of faith in all who dialogue on these matters. We must develop a common vocabulary of some kind. Otherwise we will not be able even to talk about the issues. Some kind of discourse is needed if we are to build an edifice of reason and faith. That is why Pope John Paul's letter on faith and reason, *Fides et Ratio*, is so important right now and into the twenty-first century. [The Introduction to that letter is re-printed in this issue of the *Bulletin*.

First, in the area of a pre-theological level of faith, we have to confess to some sort of realism. We are, and can only be, interested in the world as it is, not as we would like it to be or may think that it is. We must "follow the rules" of biological construction. We cannot, just by willing it, create a being with twelve legs and built very low to the ground, to handle the increased gravity of a planet like Jupiter. We have to work with "givens," biological and others. We can, or soon will be able, to make small changes in the construction of biological things, but we cannot create life. We have to conform to the "natural law" of things, at least for the foreseeable future. Nor can we treat things solely as they "should be." Science and theology have this much in common: they must, to be genuine, treat reality (truth) as it is found. Nothing else has or will work.

This may be saying no more than biological entities have a truth that must be respected and conformed to. Pilate asked what truth is; he was answered that I (the Redeemer) am truth. This truth will always elude us in its fullness, being much, much more, much bigger, than we are. But it is appropriate to us insofar as we can reach out to it and perhaps grasp its hem. Slowly we can assimilate it and make it ours. But it will not be until the end (or the beginning) that we shall begin to comprehend the beauty of that truth. It is what gives meaning to the facts of biology truth. It is this truth, unattainable in its fullness, that we must seek step by halting step. The Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist is an indispensable element in this process of growth into God.

More, this is a task for all Christians all have something (even much) to contribute to the search, even if it defies articulation. Women as well as men and children have all caught some aspect of the goodness of God that no one else has caught so well. It may be built into us. Women certainly see a different aspect of reality from men. It cannot be classified as logic or a lack of logic, knowledge or a lack of knowledge, emotion or a lack of emotion. I know too many women who are more logical than I, too many women who are more knowledgeable than I, and so on. In fact, in Genesis we read that God created man, male and female he created them. That is

why a man must leave his family and cling to his wife and the two shall become one. Mankind is both female and male and each has as much as the other to contribute to, for instance, the life sciences and faith, as the other. We must incorporate it all into the message of the human. Women and men, we need the significant contribution of each to approach the fullness of humanity.

The same is true of how we treat other living beings. We rely on them for food and drink, for clothing and many other necessities. We rely on them for companionship and even sometimes for affection. But we cannot rely on them for wisdom and love. These are human capacities. Although we can and must readjust our treatment of animals, they are not human; they must occupy a lower place in the “great chain of being.” Sentimentality a la Disney has no place in scientific or Christian appreciation of reality.

We must develop a “philosophy” to express the concepts we treat and the conclusions we must draw a kind of anthropology. I hesitate to say what it would look like and what words in which it would be expressed. That should come, I would think, out of the process of honest dialogue honest and sincere listening to the thoughts and words of each participant. It is far too early to dialogue with those in opposition to God, those who declare that “mankind is alone, always has been and always will be.” What we need first is a dialogue among Christians in science, philosophers, theologians and whoever else feels she or he has anything to say. Moreover, it must be a dialogue between men and women who see the “body” and its relation to the “soul” in different ways.

We must, indeed, articulate an “anthropology” to begin to gather together all the strands of the human. But we should learn from the past that it must contain a serious biology. The human person is both physical and spiritual; it is neither only one nor the other. Faith tells us that God creates the “individual” soul. But what does this mean? It means, I think, that God creates a unity, a particular body and a particular soul. He creates a person, a “matched set” as it were. God refers to the body in creating a soul and refers to the soul in creating a body. Otherwise, why would he bother with “the work” of creating each soul for each body? If the soul had no qualities that conformed to quantity, why wouldn’t he create souls by the millions and get ahead in his work?

The soul is only a principle of being; it is not a being. Does God create principles of being rather than beings? Can it be this is only a thought that the “soul” together with the “body” is a person? Does God create “half” of the person and man and woman create the other “half?” These are truly wonderments. Maybe I just don’t understand, but I am not comfortable either with the medieval synthesis or my own questions. All I want to do with this line of thought is emphasize the unity, the oneness of the human being.

We must work out ways of discussing such aspects of the human as “body” and “soul.” Although we may all use that language I am confident that it does not carry the same nuance for each of us. I would be quite surprised (and disheartened) if that distinction meant exactly the same thing to each of us. In many ways it is too intimate a distinction to be considered the same by each and every one of us. Moreover, there is a distinction between “time” and “eternity” that must be worked out with regard to the human. And further, we must consider each others views of the difference between mankind and animals and plants. This is merely part of the agenda I can foresee right now stuck as we are in time.

Having worried this around a good deal, much more than is evident in these scribblings, I would like to propose that ITEST as a group begin to work on such issues as these. It is evident from the above that I am more or less lost in the speculation of how these two entities can effectively interact. I am pretty sure that the “biological” cannot present all the facts and theology (or faith) cannot provide the meaning. That would do nothing for the integration of the two of them, or anything else really. We need real integration, not a spurious listing of traits and an equally spurious understanding of those traits. We are working ultimately towards the both of them becoming “one” in our understanding of our faith. We need real coming together, real commingling, not pseudo wisdom.

With this short article, born out of a sense of unease with much of the dialogue being pursued, I propose that ITEST (all of its members) *begin* the process of working out the relationship between biology (all of the

biologies) and the faith. I am not too concerned with theology not yet, though even in our expressions of faith theology is present. I am more interested in a Scriptural faith, a Scriptural understanding of the things we believe, than I am in the philosophical, abstract faith of many theologies, at least as they have historically been presented to us.

I have not put my finger on the key--- nor did I expect to---to the integrative and integrating meaning of things. I strongly suspect that the Eucharist may ultimately provide the key. What does the fact that Christ remains in the world Eucharistically mean in all of this? Will it unlock the mystery for us? But maybe that is looking too far ahead. Or is it? I do ask each member of ITEST, if possible, to begin to think and to pray along the lines indicated. More than thinking, prayer is absolutely necessary, that prayer to God to provide the wisdom needed to make a start in the direction indicated. The heart, after all, has reasons that are unavailable to the mind to paraphrase Pascal.

Don't, please, give in to the temptation that urges one to be silent because he or she is not smart enough to contribute anything of substance. Don't surrender to the temptation that says I only have a tiny idea that will get lost in the grand designs of others. In other words, give what you have, even if you don't think it's worthwhile or even if you think your idea will solve all or many of the problems.

ITEST will provide space in the *ITEST Bulletin* to print what material we will receive. We can in that way all share in the thoughts of each. Moreover, we are looking to begin this process with our 31st Anniversary Convocation at Loyola University - Chicago in August. Much interesting material should come from the "experts" we have gathered together to present papers to us.

Maybe I have concocted the problem in my own mind. If so, I am sorry. If I have not, if this is a real work to be done for the sake of Christ and his Church, I wholeheartedly commend it to your consideration. I think, suspect, believe, whatever word you want to use, the body is far more important in every way than we generally believe. It may not be so, but I strongly think it is. The question of the meaning and importance of the body is worth thoughtful, serious consideration.