

Towards a Bolder Engagement between Theology and Science: Learning from the Epiphany Philosophers

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1966 was a key year for science and religion. Ian Barbour's *Issues in Science and Religion* set an agenda for the field which dominated it for decades. It also saw the launch of two Journals: *Zygon*, the subject's longest-running journal, and *Theoria to Theory*, a less well-known journal produced by the Epiphany Philosophers. I will focus here on the latter, because it offers an interesting alternative to much conventional work in science and religion.

The Epiphany Philosophers deserve to be better known. Their approach to science and religion was very distinctive and I believe they got some things right that are often not got right. They were bold and path-breaking and, at their best, were intellectually brilliant. The story begins with their inaugural conference in 1951. Their most public output was the journal they edited, *Theoria to Theory*, which ran from 1966 to 1981. Their last output was the Whiteheadian 'Pardshaw Dialogues' in 1987.

It is arguable that most work on the interface of science and theology has been timid about both; the Epiphany Philosophers were bolder. Few have been so willing to question the scientific orthodoxies of the day; the rigorous philosophy of the Epiphany Philosophers gave them the confidence to challenge the metaphysical assumptions which often go unchallenged in conventional science. They also had a distinctive focus on contemplative religion, which offers one of the most experiential and empirical approaches to theology, and has some similarities to science. It is suggested that their radical approach to both science and religion is what is needed now to reinvigorate work on the interface of the two disciplines.

Leadership

They were led by a trio of philosophers. The genius of the group was Margaret Masterman. She had been a pupil of Wittgenstein, and had been in the seminar group that resulted in the Blue Book. She did not publish much pure philosophy, but she is known for her brilliant paper on 'The Nature of a Paradigm', in which she criticised the many different ways in which Thomas Kuhn uses that concept in the *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. She was a scientist as well as a philosopher, and a founding figure in the emerging field of computational linguistics and machine translation, in which she took a distinctive approach, now recognized as being ahead of her time. For twenty years she led a free-standing research outfit, the Cambridge Language Research Unit, which did important and influential work. Some of her key

papers in that field have recently been edited by Yorick Wilks under the title, 'Language, Cohesion and Form'.

Another key figure was Dorothy Emmet who founded and, for many years, led the Philosophy Department at the University of Manchester. Dorothy was broad in her philosophical sympathies at a time when that was unfashionable. She led the way in the post-war rehabilitation of metaphysics with her 1946 book 'The Nature of Metaphysical Thinking'. She also had strong interdisciplinary interests and published several books on the interface of philosophy and social anthropology. One of her PhD pupils at Manchester was Alastair McIntyre, with whom she co-edited *Sociological Theory and Philosophical Analysis*. Whitehead was a significant influence on her, but she was not narrow or doctrinaire process philosopher. She edited *Theoria to Theory*, from start to finish. Her output was huge, and she continued to publish regularly into her 90s, including 'Philosophers and Friends: Reminiscences of Seventy Years in Philosophy'.

The third figure in the group was Margaret's husband, Richard Braithwaite, Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge. He is best known for his 1953 book on *Scientific Explanation*, and his Eddington Memorial Lecture 'An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief', which demythologised religious belief. Richard was never quite on message with the rest of the Epiphany Philosophers on such matters, but he was a constant presence, both supportive and critical. No muddled thinking could survive his scathing critique.

Contemplative Religion

The Epiphany Philosophers' focus on contemplative religion is unusual in work on science and religion. For one thing it is unusually specific. Much theology in the science and religion dialogue, for example in work on divine action, is what might be called 'lowest common denominator' theism, and seldom goes beyond rather basic ideas about creation and providence. Compared to that, the Epiphany Philosophers were much more focused in their religious and theological interests.

The choice of contemplative religion is significant in the context of the dialogue with science, because it is one of the points at which theology becomes most directly empirical. Contemplative religion is both a tool for personal transformation and a gateway into a different mode of experience in which the spiritual aspects of reality are experienced more directly than is usually the case. It is worth noting that this doesn't need to be formulated in dualist terms, as though there was a spiritual world that was disconnected from the everyday world, rather than a spiritual aspect of one world.

Contemplative religion is primarily a matter of practice but, in as far as it is possible for experienced contemplatives to report on what they experience, it is also a mode of enquiry. That makes it analogous to scientific enquiry. There are approaches to enquiry within alternative or romantic science that are actually quite close to contemplative practice. The later volumes of *Theoria to Theory* say that it is

concerned with 'how imaginative insight can become working theory'. Goethe's approach to science can be seen as pioneering the use of meditative experience to scientific enquiry, and it is something that Rudolf Steiner tried to develop in the early twentieth century.

Note that this is very different from the way of relating science and religion that arises when natural theology is dominant. Then science becomes a source of data on the basis of which arguments can be mounted that lead to theological conclusions. With contemplative religion, theology becomes a kind of systematisation of religious experience. Nancey Murphy has suggested in 'Theology in an Age of Scientific Reasoning' that that is true of theology generally. That does not seem to me to accord well with how much theology is conducted, but it does seem to capture the relationship between mystical theology and contemplative practice.

The experiential focus on contemplative religion had far-reaching implications for how they approached work on the interface of science and religion. It made psychology, which is in part the scientific study of human experience, an important scientific partner, and that is reflected in the role that Michael Argyle and Robert Thouless played in their opening conference. It also led then, in *Theoria to Theory*, to be interested in topics such as stress, which are not normally part of the science and religion canon. The basic idea was that the psychology of stress may help in understanding the unusual experiences produced by contemplative practice.

The Epiphany Philosophers didn't just take an intellectual interest in contemplative religion, they practised it. They were more than an academic society; they were also a contemplative Christian community. They were known as the Epiphany Philosophers, not for some arcane theological reason, but simply because they operated from an ashram built at the bottom of the garden of the Cambridge house then run by the Sisters of the Epiphany. Their community life together was organised around quarterly residential and quasi-monastic meetings at a Mill in Norfolk. Religious offices were an important part of their life together; they wore albs and sang plainsong. Being rather anti-clerical they found it difficult to find an acceptable priest to celebrate the Eucharist but, in their last years, Rowan Williams, then Dean of Clare, did that for them

Radical Science

It is also possible to discern something distinctive in the Epiphany Philosophers' approach to science. The predominant approach of recent decades, reflected in the work of founding fathers of science and religion as Ian Barbour, Arthur Peacocke and John Polkinghorne, has been an eagerness to accept current scientific orthodoxy as a given and to work within it. There seems an anxiety to dispel any suspicion of being maverick about science. The Epiphany Philosophers had a less timid approach to current science, and did not hesitate to challenge it where they saw that as justified. They had no problem about embracing radical approaches to science.

It has been widely accepted that scientific theories are not logical deductions from scientific data, something that Karl Popper and others argued very effectively. Science seems to be shaped as much by metaphysical assumptions as by empirical data, a point that was very much in the philosophical air when Theoria to Theory was launched in 1966. Though this would be widely accepted by philosophers, the implications have been always been seen clearly by those doing substantive work on the interface of science and religion

Once you see that scientific theory is shaped by metaphysical assumptions it follows that different background assumptions will often lead to different interpretations of data. Science usually makes naturalistic assumptions that religious people do not make. Indeed, for some, it is part of the definition of science that it should make naturalistic assumptions, but that is clearly unconvincing when applied historically, as it means, for example, that Isaac Newton cannot be regarded as a scientist as he was not a philosophical naturalist.

The Epiphany Philosophers were sympathetic to the view that naturalistic assumptions, far from being a prerequisite of science, constrained and distorted it. They saw science as unnecessarily constrained by current orthodoxies. That was a general point of principle, and was carried through to every topic they looked at. Their programme was, in effect, to liberate science from unnecessary constraints, and to free it up to become a more genuinely open-minded enquiry. So liberated, they thought it would become more consonant with contemplative religion. Indeed, they also thought that contemplative experience could provide an additional source of informal data that could usefully feed into scientific theorising.

One area of science that was a particular focus of interest from this point of view was biology. At the time of Theoria to Theory, biology was going through a very reductionist period, influenced by the success of biochemistry. Of course, that was not true of all biologists. Brian Goodwin was one notable exception in taking a more holistic, organismal approach, and he contributed to Theoria to Theory. Rupert Sheldrake, then a young member of the Epiphany Philosophers, played a key role in this developing critique of biology, and found expression in his 'A New Science of Life' in 1981.

The Epiphany Philosophers were also more open to parapsychology than most people working in science and religion, suspecting that its rejection by scientific orthodoxy was not empirically based but a matter of prejudice. It is something on which Margaret and Richard disagreed, and there is a hilarious account of an argument about in Theoria to Theory. Margaret wanted to invite Uri Geller to see if he could bend their spoons. Richard objection on two grounds, that he didn't believe in that sort of thing, and anyway they had Georgian silver. Margaret lambasted him for the incoherence of his position in advancing both objections simultaneously; she would allow him one or other, but not both.

Philosophy

That leaves the role of philosophy to be considered. Philosophy was the primary discipline of the trio of people who led the Epiphany Philosophers, and they were probably the most distinguished set of philosophers to have taken a close and sustained interest in science and religion. There is no doubt that philosophy played a key role in their work, but it is harder to characterise quite what that role was.

History and philosophy are so often said to be 'mediating' disciplines in work on the interface of science and religion. However that seems to imply that there is no direct connection between science and religion and, for the Epiphany Philosophers, that doesn't seem quite right. They assumed that contemplation could feed into science quite directly. The role of philosophy was rather to ensure that everything, in both religion and science, was subject to rigorous philosophical scrutiny. All concepts and arguments were subjected to the most searching examination.

Margaret published an influential series of articles in *Theoria to Theory* on 'Theism as a Scientific Hypothesis', which both argues for the relevance of theism to scientific theorising, and draws attention to the formal similarities between scientific theory and Christian doctrine. One article focuses on the intriguing claim that an early diagrammatic depiction of the Trinity on a font is, in fact, a Boolean lattice, and that theologians in fact discovered some aspects of Boolean thinking long before mathematicians formalised them.

The long-term significance of the Epiphany Philosophers is that they approached dauntingly difficult questions with courage and cheerful confidence. They argued fiercely, and often seemed eccentric. But their objectives were bolder than any other group of people working on science and religion I have known.

They were deeply dissatisfied with the state of both science and religion. Often both are treated respectfully, with a view to brokering a convincing harmonisation between them. The Epiphany Philosophers thought both were in need of radical reform, and that each could be used to reform the other. Contemplative religion could be used to inform and emancipate science, and the empirical approach of science could be used to usher in a mode of religious life that was more grounded in actual religious experience and less constrained by arbitrary doctrine and authority. Their contribution to work on the interface of science and religion deserves to be celebrated.

Dear All,

I have done less than I had hoped by this stage towards making the Epiphany Philosophers better known. However, I am giving a conference paper about them at the annual conference of the Science and Religion Forum in Durham, early next month, and I attach a draft of that. I would be interested in whatever comments any of you might have. It is brief, as I have only 20 minutes, but I hope makes some of the key points about why

the EPs matter.

There is usually a book arising from SRF conferences, and I may be invited to expand the paper for publication in that.

I am pleased to see that there is now a basic stub of an article on Wikipedia about the EPs, put up last February. Yorick, I am sure we have you to thank for that, so thank you. I hope we can gradually expand it. As we said when we met, that will need to be done by those of us who remember the EPs. Yorick, if you need money for web-editing at any stage, just ask.

I still hope to organise an anniversary event for next year, though I have done nothing further about that than mention it to Rowan Williams. I hope to get down to it in the autumn.

Dear Fraser,

Thanks for this. I'm so glad you are doing this article for conference and hope it finds its way into a book. It's good to make sure that credit is giving to the EPs where its due and I think you give a very fair summary. Of course it had to leave a lot out because it's so brief. But if you do an expanded version, it might be worth mentioning that there was a priest who was a member of the group for many years, Geoffrey Keable so finding a priest for the mass was not so difficult most of the time. It might also be worth mentioning that the format of the retreats at the mills with the morning and evening offices, the morning seminars and the afternoon walks. Also, it might be good to point out that there was a strong emphasis on the philosophy and problems of quantum physics, both through Ted Bastin and Chris Clark. Anyway, this conference paper is a very good start and I hope it leads you into a more expanded treatment.

I'm on an island of the West Coast of Canada at present, not back in Britain till the later part of September.

All best wishes

Rupert
All best wishes,

