

The EPs approach to relating science and religion What was Distinctive?

Fraser Watts

Many people would recognize that there was something distinctive in how the EPs related science and religion. However it is harder than you might think to say what the EP approach was. That is the question I want to address here.

- What kind of religion were they concerned with?
- And what kind of science?
- And how did they want to relate them?
- And what was the role of philosophy?

First I want to make a distinction between

- those who take a static view of science and religion, and simply want to reconcile them at that point in time (the reconcilers), and
- those who want science and/or religion to be changed by exploring the dynamic relationship between them (the changers)

Once you make that distinction it is clear that the EPs were in the latter camp. They were not complacent about the state of either science or religion, and wanted to see improvements in both. I think they thought each could benefit from coming into contact with the other.

There was, I believe, quite a significant shift in the relative balance between reconcilers and changers through the 20th century. Very roughly, the changers held more sway between the wars than they did afterwards. There is not much literature on the science and religion in the inter-war period, but Peter J. Bowler's *Reconciling science and religion: the debate in early twentieth-century Britain* gives much the best account of it.

WWII might not actually be exactly the time where the division ought to be drawn. The dividing point might actually be drawn in the 60s, perhaps with Ian Barbour's hugely influential book, *Issues in Science and Religion*, published in 1966, the year when *Theoria to Theory* was launched. I suggest that the EPs were a continuation of a way of relating science and religion that was common in the inter-war years, but less common in the latter decades of the 20th century.

The inter-war years were characterised by an attempted synthesis of non-materialist science with modernist theology. The non-materialist science was influenced by theology, and the modernist theology was influenced by science. Both were changed by coming into contact with the other.

The EPs continued this tradition of both science and religion being revised by mutual contact. However, they continued one half of the inter-war synthesis more than the other. They certainly wanted a more emancipated, less materialist science, but they did not really continue with modernist theological revisionism. That half of the inter-war synthesis has generally survived widely more than the

non-materialist approach to science, though modernist theology has also been in retreat.

John Polkinghorne in what I think is one of his most interesting books, *Scientists as Theologians*, argues that Ian Barbour, and to some extent Arthur Peacocke, are in that tradition of liberal theological revisionism much more than he himself is. He saw no need for theological revision driven by constraints imposed by science; neither did the EPs. On this, Polkinghorne and the EPs would have agreed.

Radical Science

Theological revisionism often comes from an excessive veneration of science. The EPs did not have an excessive awe of science; indeed they were often scathing about its limitations. I think there are implicitly two rather different points here.

One is about the provisionality of science. Scientism is often supported by the implicit idea that current science has got most things sorted out, with just a few little issues to finish off. I think the EPs were very aware of how much science still does not understand, what huge gaps there were. I share that view. It undermines the right of science to tell theology what it can and can't think.

The other point is about the role of metaphysics in science. As philosophy of science emerged in the 60s from the grip of logical positivism there was increasing emphasis on how metaphysical assumptions shaped scientific theorising. Mary Hesse and Rom Harre were key figures in that new philosophy of science in the UK, along with our own Dorothy Emmet played a role in rehabilitating metaphysics.

I think this is very important for the relationship between science and religion. It is arguable that, in as far as there are tensions between science and religion at all, they do not come from empirical observations, but from a naturalistic metaphysics that shapes the theoretical interpretation of those observations. The EPs were not afraid to critique the assumptions of what Richard Braithwaite called a 'materialist metaphysics'. They wanted an emancipated science that could think in ways that conventional science could not tolerate, but which were perfectly consistent with empirical observations.

A key issue here was the paranormal. The scientific establishment largely regards the paranormal as beyond the pale but, I believe, that view is held more on metaphysical than empirical grounds. The strength of feeling about this is very puzzling and shows science often to be a less open-minded enterprise than the prevailing rhetoric about science would have us think.

The evidence for the paranormal is much stronger than most people are willing to accept, as Rupert Sheldrake has often bravely pointed out. Interestingly, Hans Eysenck, no friend of convictions that lack empirical support, was surprisingly positive about the paranormal; but then he prided himself on going where evidence led, without fear or favour.

So, in one way or another, the EPs took a radical approach to science, and were unwilling to be constrained by arbitrary materialist assumptions. As I have argued, their approach was very unlike most work on the interface between science and religion of the last 50 years, but better aligned with the approach of the inter-war years.

Here in Cambridge Professor Sarah Coakley continues in that tradition, complaining particularly about the how naturalistic metaphysics has shaped views about the evolution of altruism, but she has developed the general point about the role of metaphysics more broadly. Perhaps the EPs radical approach to science is due for a revival.

I wouldn't say that the EPs approach to science was particularly empirical; their contribution was conceptual more than empirical. I also wouldn't say that they extended empirical enquiry into areas where it had not previously been used; empirical investigation of religion and the paranormal were already well established.

I think their contribution lay rather in clearing away unnecessary constraints on scientific theorising. That may have allowed the empirical facts to speak for themselves in an unfettered way, but I would still say that the EPs contribution to science was primarily a conceptual one (I am thinking here of the EPs themselves rather than the CLRU). It primarily brought conceptual liberation.

Contemplative Religion

The EPs wanted a different kind of religion. The report of the inaugural conference in 1951 laments how the point of view of people such of themselves has no influence on the Church of England, and they suggest that what looks like the 'apathy of the laity' is really 'the exasperated despair of people who feel they can no longer go on in this system'.

How does science help with this? It is, at best, a bottom-up, data-driven enterprise. It is rational, and is at least supposed to be open-minded. I think the EPs not only wanted a religion that engaged better with science. It was also, in some important ways, more like science than most aspects of religion.

The EPs approach to religion was also highly distinctive. It was neither an exercise in integrating orthodox theology with orthodox science, which is what much work in the last 50 years has tried to do. Neither was it an exercise in revising theology to be better aligned with science, as the modernist and liberal traditions have done.

The EPs emphasis on contemplative religion was one of their most distinctive features. Why this emphasis? In part I think it was because it was an aspect of religious practice that many of the EPs valued in its own right. The EPs reflected the turn to spirituality that has become increasingly pronounced.

They were quite religious, with their albs and their plainsong and so on, but it was a contemplative kind of religion, such as might be practiced by monks and nuns. I think many EPs would have said that contemplative practice was one of the most transformative aspects of religion.

It is worth noting that the EPs were a contemplative community, not just a collection of people who were each following a contemplative life separately and individually. The quarterly 'Mills' were an important aspect of that life, though they had lapsed before I joined. This communal aspect of their contemplative life enabled them to support each other in it, but also helped them to take stock together of the implications of their collective contemplative experience.

The contemplative emphasis also had implications for how they related science and religion. Contemplative is one of the most empirical and experiential aspects of religion. In that it is quite scientific, it is what people in the Rudolf Steiner tradition call 'spiritual science'. It is experiential rather than a matter of abstract formulations. It is right-brain more than left-brain.

It is a kind of science, and that makes it easier to link it with natural science. But it is a different kind of science, an alternative science, with resemblances to natural science, but many other significant differences. In some ways it is more like romantic science than it is like conventional natural science, akin to how Goethe studied the shape of leaves through a kind of meditation.

The focus on contemplative religion changes the nature of the relationship between science and religion. The relationship between scientific theory and theology is about the relationship between two bodies of ideas, but contemplative religion is about practice and experience.

Theology can be brought into *dialogue* with science, but I suggest that spiritual practice actually contributes to science. It provides part of the corpus of data that a broad and integrated scientific worldview needs to make sense of. To put it another way, science need not be restricted to natural science. A broad and integrated science will include both natural and spiritual science.

I think something of this is captured in the Journal title, *Theoria to Theory*, ie. from contemplation to theory. I would love to have been present at the discussions that led to that title. It makes clear that there is a pathway that goes from contemplative religion to theory. That is quite different from bringing two bodies of ideas (theology and science) into dialogue with each other. Contemplative experience is a key source of data for science.

Some might object to this, on the grounds that contemplatives are special people and what they claim to be their observations can't be checked by others, and that they have a special, committed viewpoint. But in areas of science, observations can only be made by experts, and committed experts at that. I don't think there is anything radically different about contemplatives.

I have said that I think the EPs wanted to change both science and religion, and wanted to use each one to help change the other. They wanted a more emancipated science, one less constrained by arbitrary naturalistic assumptions. Theology provides an intellectual challenge to those constraining assumptions, but contemplative religion brings to the table phenomena that require a broader science, if science is to be able to accommodate them.

The Role of Philosophy

It remains for me to say something about the role of philosophy. It was clearly the primary discipline of Dorothy and Richard, and to some extent of Margaret too, though she was also a linguist. My memory of conversation with the EPs was that it was primarily oral, philosophical disputation. They engaged with both science and religion, but I think their mode of exploration was always primarily a philosophical one. I think philosophy had two roles.

First, the common ground of science and religion, the place where there was traction between them, was philosophical. More specifically, I suggest that it was metaphysical and involved key basis assumptions about the nature or reality. One of the key insights of the EPs was that the prevailing metaphysical assumptions of our time were contingent, even gratuitous, and that you really didn't have to make the prevailing naturalistic assumptions. They saw that there was an alternative metaphysical starting point that opened up a more radical, emancipated science, and which was not only consistent with religion, but to which contemplative religion could make a really useful contribution.

Philosophy was also used as a tool. The integration of science and mysticism with which the EPs were engaged has often been done badly, and the EPs were utterly determined not to follow in the tradition of sloppy thinking that had marred so much previous work of a similar kind. That was why they had to be so merciless about loose thinking, both amongst themselves and with any hapless strangers who might stray in. It wasn't *just* rude and eccentric (though it was). It was an indispensable tool for the kind of work they wanted to do.

The atmosphere it created was invigorating. The EPs were involved in a project that was bold, innovative, exciting and important. They were ushering in an alternative worldview, with a new, more open-minded science and a new approach to religion. They were creating a new worldview in which both science and religion, in refashioned form, would co-exist harmoniously and to their mutual benefit. It was, and remains, an exciting project.