

# PATRISTIC THEOLOGY AND THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN SCIENCE AND RELIGION



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For many of the philosophers of science, both the relation of continuity and the equivalence of cognitive status are the defining characteristics of the dialogue between science and theology. Things are different, however, when viewed from the perspective of patristic theology: the Holy Fathers speak of discontinuity and make a clear-cut hierarchical distinction between the human autonomous wisdom (that is, rational scientific knowledge) and the wisdom coming from the Holy Spirit (knowledge through faith).

## **Abstract**

*The past few decades have brought to the fore a growing interest on the part of both scientists and theologians towards the relationship between rational autonomous knowledge (science) and knowledge through faith (theology). During this period a significant number of contributions have suggested some relevant typologies of the various approaches that concern the relations between, and the goals and aims for the interaction between scientific and religious knowledge. In any case, it is generally considered that among the different ways of relating them, the "dialogue"- type approach offers the most promising potential.*

*As far as the particular nature of the dialogue-type relation between science and theology is concerned, the widespread view on the matter is that the two do not reject each other, but are drawn closer to one another. More specifically, they attract, suppose one another, being in a relationship of continuity and gnoseological parity.*

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*The teaching of the Holy Fathers shows, however, that things are different. In our paper, we emphasize that St. Gregory Palamas, in particular, makes a clear-cut hierarchical distinction between the human autonomous wisdom (that is, rational scientific knowledge) and the wisdom coming from the Holy Spirit (knowledge through faith).*

*In the final section of our paper it is emphasized that, according to the teachings of St. Gregory Palamas, human wisdom (rational scientific knowledge) can also be part of this ascending path to the truth of Creation only if the scientist enters such a spiritual ascension and opens to his own transfiguration under the work of grace.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 1980s, there has been a significant increase in the interest of scientists towards the relationship between science and religion. This is the period when a large number of typologies have been suggested to classify the various ways of relating science and religion. Robert J. Russel offers a brief and highly suggestive appraisal in this respect: *“In some cases, these ways are meant as mutually exclusive, such as ‘conflict’ versus ‘two worlds’; in other cases, one way might lead to and become incorporated within another, such as ‘dialogue’ and ‘integration’.* In some cases, each way is meant as a characterization of the relation between science per se and religion per se; in other cases, they only apply to specific topics in science and in religion” (Russel, 2002, p. 8).

The pioneering work belongs to Ian Barbour (Barbour, 1988, pp.21-48) and it is worth mentioning that his typology remains to this day the most widely used in the field. Barbour considers four types of relations: “conflict” (favored by the existence of the scientific or materialistic ideology in the scientific field); “independence” (the emphasis is on contrasting methods and differing languages); “dialogue” (problems are addressed from an interdisciplinary perspective, while preserving the specific skills); and “integration” (it is considered possible to systematically integrate scientific and religious knowledge). Barbour’s subsequent studies consolidate and develop his paradigm for construing the relationship between science and religion.

In addition to Barbour's initial contributions, the 1980s offered some other typologies. For instance, Arthur Peacocke published in 1981 an eightfold typology (Peacocke, 1981, pp. XIII-XV), where he advocated "*for the integration of science and religion and also for science to generate a metaphysics in which theology can be formulated*". Later on, Russel reformulated Peacocke's typology as a four-dimensional model which allows for a continuum between opposite positions (Russel, 1985, pp. 48-51).

In 1985, Nancey Murphy "imported" H. Richard Niebuhr's classic fivefold typology of relations between Christianity and culture and applied it to science and religion. According to Murphy, "theology could be a transformer not only of culture in general but even of science in particular" (Murphy, 1985, pp. 16-23, apud Russel, 2002).

In the 1990s, new typologies were proposed, some of them making direct reference to Barbour's contributions. Prominent among them is John Haught's book of 1995. In our opinion, his fourfold typology - which includes conflict, contrast, contact, and confirmation - is one of the most consistent and articulate in the literature. Haught's first three types of relating science and religion (that is conflict, contrast, and contact) parallel those of Barbour, while the fourth (confirmation) describes theology as providing some key philosophical assumptions underlying science.

Trying to be more specific in analyzing Haught's contributions, we emphasize that according to him, the "conflict" has its source in the widespread opinion of scientists that religion is based on "a priori" assumptions or on "faith", whereas science takes nothing for granted. In addition, religion attaches much value to emotion, affective commitment and subjectivity, while science strives to stay disinterested, realist and unbiased (Haught, 1995). As to the "contrast", Haught considers that the scientists who support it as a viable way of relating science and religion focus on the idea that each of the two forms of knowledge is perfectly valid, but only in their own, well defined, sphere of research. As such, religion must not be judged by the standards of science, or vice versa; their inquiries are completely different and the content of their

responses is also different; and, as a result, the comparison between them does not make sense.

With reference to the “contact”-type of relating science and religion, its supporters claim that, while science and religion are indeed distinct ways of knowing, however in the real world they cannot easily be separated. “Contact” allows for interaction, dialogue, and mutual impact, it prohibits both combining and separating, insists on keeping differences, but at the same time develops mutual (interdisciplinary) relations between science and religion.

Finally, let us note that in Haught’s (somewhat misleading) formulation, the term “confirmation” is not used to mean that science confirms theology. The idea is that the disinterested desire to know (specific to scientific knowledge) finds confirmation in the religious interpretation of the world. In other words, the basic assertion of religion (the universe is a finite, coherent, rational and orderly entirety) is replicated by the status of science (which cannot develop without the a priori “belief” that the universe is a totality of sensibly ordered things). Haught considers that the promoters of this type of relationship between science and religion have in mind that scientists have always held the tacit belief that: there is a real world, intelligibly structured; the human mind is able to understand at least some of the intelligibility of the world; no matter how much people explore they will find more and more comprehensibility to decipher; without this kind of faith there could be no incentive for scientific research.

Haught’s analyses were followed by those of Willem Drees (Drees, 1996) and Mikael Stenmark (Stenmark, 1997). The first one offered a ninefold typology generated as three new realities (new scientific knowledge, new ideas in the philosophy of science, and new attitudes towards nature) which influence three distinct areas (religious cognitive claims, experiences, and traditions). As far as Stenmark’s contribution are concerned, it is interesting to note that his initial ideas (1997) were later developed (2010) into a highly valuable approach to the field in question (Stenmark, 2010, pp. 278-295): he recast Barbour’s notion of “conflict” with

“irreconcilability”, and combined two of Barbour’s categories – “dialogue” and “integration” – with a highly nuanced alternative: a reconciliation model. Assuming that the reconciliation between science and religion is possible, Stenmark claims however that the grounds for reconciliation have to be described in subtle and distinctive ways (e.g., reformative or supportive modes of reconciliation; strong or weak versions of reconciliation; religion-priority reconciliation or science-priority reconciliation; conservative, traditional, liberal or constructivist approaches to reconciliation).

By the end of the decade, Ted Peters’ 1998 eightfold typology also included several refinements to Barbour’s scheme: *“He first distinguishes between ‘scientific materialists’, who claim that science supports atheism, and ‘scientific imperialists’, who claim that science offers a path to God but, like scientific materialists, argue that science alone produces genuine knowledge. He also distinguishes between Roman Catholic ‘ecclesiastical authoritarianism’, which stretched from the nineteenth century until Vatican II and sought clerical control over secular knowledge, and twentieth century ‘scientific creationism’, a form of Protestant fundamentalism which sees itself as genuine science though it is based on a literal reading of Genesis”* (cf. Russel, 2002).

No doubt, there are many other contributions that suggest relevant typologies of the approaches to, the relations between, and the goals and aims for the interaction between science and religion. In any case, as a conclusive comment to the previous discussion, it seems that among the different ways of relating science and religion, the “dialogue” – type one offers the most promising potential.

## 2. ON THE NATURE OF THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE

There is, among the philosophers of science who systematically studied the methodological status of the dialogue between science and theology, a widespread view that the two

fields of knowledge operate with distinct methods based on specific key concepts (experiment, model, theory, or paradigm - for the scientific method; and revelation, dogma, faith, or prayer - for the theological one).

However, it must be immediately noted that the most reputed scholars in the field consider that this distinctive and specific character of the methodological status does not operate in a register of opposition and conflict but in one of cooperation and convergence. In other words, science and theology are not rejecting, but coming closer to one another. More specifically, they attract, suppose one another, being in a relationship of continuity and sharing the same gnoseological status.

An epistemological continuity, for example, in John Breck's opinion (who is a reputed researcher in the field): "*It is therefore necessary to overcome the long accepted dichotomy between theology and science in order to obtain **a new epistemology** based on an in-depth relationship of the two fields (...) Science and theology **can complement** each other adequately (...) If science deals with the description of the nature of the world and its mode of operation, theology offers an interpretation of this information in light of divine revelation*" [emphasis added] (in Ionescu and Lemeni, 2006, pp. 5-6).

Or, an ontological continuity, in the opinion of another well-known researcher in the field: "*... the essence and goal of establishing a relationship between science and theology is **the connection** of two different types of experience to the same human subjectivity (...) The process of restoring **the unity** of what was done to be united in man, that is, the unity of the scientific vision and the experience of God has the ultimate goal of returning humanity to God and bringing it together with God by removing all divisions existing within creation (...) This restoration is not a cultural or academic necessity, but an ascetic and spiritual imperative that drives of the present human condition and is planted in the teleology of the human spirit*" [emphasis added] (Nesteruk, 2009, p. 75).

As far as the Orthodox theology is concerned, we consider that the problem has to be treated, however, more nuanced: not in the terms of continuity (be it epistemological or ontological) nor in those of equality ofgnoseological status does the Orthodox theology come at the meeting with science. It comes within the terms of agnoseological status characterized by discontinuity, namely a discontinuity accomplished by hierarchical harmony with science. This is what we shall discuss in the following sections, firstly addressing the question of *discontinuity* in the knowledge acquired through scientific reasoning and the divinely revealed one, and then drawing our attention to the *hierarchical* harmony relationship that makes the encounter between the two.

### 3. THE DISCONTINUITY BETWEEN "AUTONOMOUS" KNOWLEDGE AND THE KNOWLEDGE "POWERED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT"

Speaking of the divinely revealed knowledge, the Apostle Paul says, "... and my message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but **with a demonstration of the Spirit's power**" (1 Corinthians 2: 4)[emphasis added], while St. Gregory Palamas comes and witnesses the testimony of the Apostle: "... not by the relent words of human wisdom, but divinely we seek the divine ones, by the power of the God-speaking Fathers **inspired by the Holy Spirit**" [emphasis added] (St. Gregory Palamas, 2013, p. 165).

St. Gregory also points out: "*We do not regard knowledge based on reasoning and syllogism as being true, but the one demonstrated by facts and life, which is not only true, but also secure and unspoiled [through logical arguments]*". And then, strengthening his testimony of the divine source of theological knowledge through faith, St. Gregory says: "*Not from the seemed-to-be principles do we proceed to theologize, but we are unshaken in these [our principles], **by God being taught them***" [emphasis added] (St. Gregory Palama, 2013, pp. 5, 81).

One can see here the deep discontinuity between the two distinct ways of knowing: the scientist is engaged in an autonomous, "on his own" knowledge, based exclusively on his own cognitive powers, while the theologian's knowledge has as the source and propelling force the inspirational power of God.

And this proves to be crucial in relation to the truth shared by each of the two ways of knowing as long as:

⇒ "*He who gathered his way of thinking from **outside wisdom** [through scientific autonomous knowledge], even if he shared some truth, however, by arguing only by word - which, word being, always beats the word - he became aware of a feeble wisdom, sometimes contradicting himself (...)*" [emphasis added] (St. Gregory Palamas, 2015, pp. 287, 289).

⇒ while, "*He who seeks **the wisdom of God**, is the one who seeks and acts in the will of God, is the one whose thinking testifies to his life, is the one who acts according to what he says and speaks according to what he does (...)*" [emphasis added] (St. Gregory Palamas, 2015, *ibidem*).

#### 4. HIERARCHICAL HARMONY AS A BINDER OF THE ORTHODOX THEOLOGY-SCIENCE DIALOGUE

Provided the previously developed arguments are correct, it means that one of the defining dimensions of the dialogue between the Orthodox theology and science is given by its discontinuity. We will further try to argue, in accordance with the teaching of St. Gregory Palamas, that another defining dimension consists in the *hierarchical harmony relationship* that mediates the encounter between the two, thus transgressing the discontinuity and making possible and viable the dialogue.

The "hierarchy" to which we refer here does not take into account the generally known meaning of the notion, namely a system of consecutive subordination of the lower degrees or steps to the higher ones. In etymological terms, the "hierarchy" considered

here comes from the *ieros* = saint and *arche* = principle, that is *the principle of holiness*, the hierarchy meaning, in our context, ordination (settlement) after holiness. Says Saint Dionysius the Areopagite in this respect: "*The hierarchy is, in my view, a holy ordinance, a science and a work of a similar kind, as much as possible, to the divine model, and elevated to the imitation of God through the enlightenments given to it by God, to the extent of its power*".

In line with the above, we can say that the hierarchical relationship through which the Orthodox theology meets science derives, on the one hand, from the fact that the revealed truth is divine, while the scientific truth is from God. As such, the dialogue that can take place between knowledge through religious belief and knowledge through scientific reason implies that the latter, by opening itself to humble thinking, to let himself be enveloped, edifying and enlightening, by the former.

On the other hand, the hierarchical relationship can also be highlighted in terms of the different cognitive benefit brought by the two ways of attaining knowledge. Saint Basil the Great says in this respect: "*So, if there is any connection between these two kinds of teachings, their knowledge may be of use to us; and if it is no kinship, let us know the difference between them, putting them face to face; and it's not that much to find out who's better*" (St. Basil the Great, 1986, p.568).

And the same saint also points out: "*But some people have despised the doctrine of divine words and have dealt with geometry ... or astrology. Many were concerned about poetics, rhetoric, and the discovery of sophistry. So, because **many have neglected the knowledge of God**, in their zeal after acquiring this knowledge, aging in the research of the futile teachings, it is necessary to know the teaching (given to us by the divine Revelation), in order to choose the useful one and avoid the other, which is vain and harmful*" [emphasis added] (St. Basil the Great, *op.cit.*, pp. 473-474).

In his turn, St. Gregory Palamas shows that the occupation with science during one's youth is good, as it practices the mind to

become more penetrating in discerning things, but also warns that: "(...) *to remain attached to them all the time, it's bad ... Of course, I would not stop from dealing with the sciences those who want to do it, those who have not chosen the monastic life. But I do not advise anyone to attach themselves definitively*

*to them. More than that, I urge them categorically not to expect anything specific about God from them (sciences)"* (see Father Dumitru Stăniloae, 1993, p. 27).

All this, however, do not imply that scientific knowledge is implacably bad: "(...) *on the one hand, it is good to be concerned about them (sciences), as these activities practice the agility of the soul's eye, but on the other hand it is bad to devote them up to the old age. It would be good if, after someone had practiced them, would shift the efforts to the better and more enduring (spiritual) works, disregarding of the discursive sciences bringing much reward from God*" [emphasis added] (St. Gregory Palamas, 2015, p. 53).

In this lies, in our opinion, the essence of the hierarchy-in-harmony relationship between the theological and scientific knowledge. Says the same wonderful Saint Gregory Palamas: "*The outside practice (scientific knowledge) can never be spiritual if it is not combined at the same time, besides faith, with the love of God - better said if it is not reborn by love and by the grace that comes from it, and becomes another than the first (in the sense that other than the original one, the scientific knowledge), a new one ... as one which is spiritual because it is subject to the wisdom of the Spirit, and it knows, and receives charisma of the Holy Spirit*" [emphasis added] (St. Gregory Palamas, 2015, pp. 61, 63.).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

For St. Gregory Palamas, the Orthodox theological knowledge is based on the apodictic method of knowing and understanding the revealed truths. The apodictic method is not in words, but in

work, it is not based on abstract notions, reasoning and syllogisms, but on life, on the reality of man's encounter with God, on the reality of Christ's life in the Church, on the experience of ecclesial life, the only unbroken foundation. So the foundation of the patristic theologizing is the confirmation from the Holy Spirit, His shared power to the Fathers: we accede to the knowledge of God not by the common notions processed autonomously by our intellect, but by the grace of God. As such, the starting point in the knowledge of God is the power that is given to us by the Holy Spirit.

According to the teachings of St. Gregory Palamas, human wisdom (rational scientific knowledge) can also be part of this ascending path to the truth of Creation only if the scientist enters such a spiritual ascension and opens to his own transfiguration under the work of grace.

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