The Relationship Between Theology, Philosophy and Science: an Eastern Christian Perspective

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On the Orthodox contribution to the dialogue between theology, philosophy and science

The last fifteen years’ experience allows us to assert the continuity of a dialogue between theology, philosophy and science in Romania. This dialogue has been actively supported and encouraged by the Romanian Orthodox Church. Cooperation between the Church and the major Universities in Romania engaging in the dialogue between theology, philosophy and science has unfolded through many activities, of which we mention:

– A number of international research projects [notably Știință și Ortodoxie. Cercetare și Educație – Science and Orthodoxy. Research and Education (2007-2009)], carried out by a group of scholars and professors who conduct research into this area;

– Training programs attended by persons working in the ecclesial and educational fields [in particular, the program Cursuri despre relația dintre religie, filosofie și știință din perspectivă creștin-ortodoxă – Courses on the relationship between religion, philosophy and science (2010-2012)];

– Enhanced collaboration between the Orthodox Church and the academic circles, including the institutional level through the cooperation protocol signed by the Romanian Patriarchate, the University of Bucharest and Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași;

– Cooperation and dialogue fostered in the academic milieu, through the activity carried out by the Center for Dialogue and Research in Theology, Philosophy and Science – the University of Bucharest, as well as the Center for Interdisciplinary Research in Religion, Philosophy and Science – Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași;

– Works on this topic issued by Basilica Publishing House of the Romanian Patriarchate;

– Constant media promotion by the Romanian Patriarchate through its TV programs, radio programs and publications centred on the dialogue between theology, philosophy and science;
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– The Conference of the European Association for the Study of Science and Technology organized in 2006 at Iași, and attended by over 100 participants from Europe, USA and Canada;
– Seven editions of the National Symposium on the dialogue between theology, philosophy and science. The first edition was organized by the Metropolis of Moldavia and Bukovina at Durău, on 15-16 May 2007; the following four editions were organized by the Romanian Patriarchate, while the last two editions were jointly organized by the Church and the Universities, involving several Metropoles in the country, with the last edition held at Cluj-Napoca, between 17-20 October 2019. The addresses delivered during these events were included in the section entitled The dialogue between theology, philosophy and science – shedding light on the meaning of life in the volume Biserica binecuvintează Universitatea – The Church Blesses the University, Basilica Publishing House, 2019, pp. 183-227.

The volume The Relationship Between Theology, Philosophy and Science: an Eastern Christian Perspective, edited by Adrian Lemeni, director of the Center for Dialogue and Research in Theology, Philosophy and Science – the University of Bucharest, and Deacon Sorin Mihalache, director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Research in Religion, Philosophy and Science – Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, both constantly involved over the years in the unfolding of the dialogue between theology, philosophy and science in Romania, contains important studies contributed by renowned professors and specialists, experts in various areas of research who maintain a long-standing interest in the dialogue between theology, philosophy and science. The studies collected in this volume cover many interrelated aspects of the relationship between theology, philosophy and science in various areas of research, all approached from a unitary perspective in this dialogue which capitalizes on the Orthodox Tradition.

Orthodox theology engages in this dialogue with science and philosophy not only with a view to the exchange of information, but also in pursuit of the missionary and social responsibilities of the Church. This perspective underscores the relevance of ecclesial knowledge in the dialogue between theology, philosophy and science. Such understanding of this dialogue is predicated on faith as a living relationship between man and God. The writings of the Holy Church Fathers attest to the importance of faith in the process
of knowledge acquisition. Faith is not grounded on ignorance or on hostility towards scientific or philosophical inquiry, conducted by reason, but it is a superior mode of knowledge expressing communion with the Truth – Creator of the universe and giver of eternal life, which transcends any demonstration.

Saint Maximus the Confessor states: “Faith is true knowledge, based on principles that can not be demonstrated; it accounts for things beyond mind and reason”1.

We bless the publication of the volume *The Relationship Between Theology, Philosophy and Science: an Eastern Christian Perspective* and congratulate its authors, hoping that this work will contribute to a fruitful development of the dialogue between theology, philosophy and science.

† DANIEL

Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church

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I. The topicality and relevance of the dialogue between theology, philosophy and science

I.1. Perceptions of the relationship between science and theology today (Adrian Lemeni)

I.1.1. The theology-science relationship in the current context: topicality, relevance, perspectives

The paradigm of contemporary science has undergone, in various areas of research, significant changes by which it has departed from the outdated self-sufficient, exclusivist view postulating that science is able to provide completely satisfying answers for the knowledge and life of today’s society. Fields such as physics, mathematics, neurosciences, cosmology, artificial intelligence, now acknowledge the structural limitations of the scientific approach based on analytical investigation and experiment. Several scholars of great renown in their respective fields of research, agree that today’s science is described by a so-called paradigm of incompleteness, expressing the awareness that science is unable to provide an exhaustive answer based exclusively on scientific investigation into the various aspects of the reality under scrutiny.

The option for meaning and for result interpretation requires a methodology that goes beyond formulas and experiments, rather than being circumscribed by them.

“The methodology of today’s science is no longer informed by pragmatism only, but it is also driven by the scientist’s desire to comprehend the world. Understanding is more than explaining and describing the physical phenomena. Often, understanding is tantamount to accepting the mystery of the world, of life which is beautiful precisely because it cannot be (de)cyphered exclusively by means of the algorithms of discursive, analytical
inquiry. Actually, the option for a type of knowledge exclusively based on pragmatism and analysis, impoverishes the scientific undertakings. We deny ourselves perspectives which could broaden our cognitive horizon. Polany’s often reiterated assertion that we actually know more than we are able to express in words, points to the personal scientific epistemology where the scholar’s insight and intuition is fully exercised. This insight is acquired by transcending the simple logic of axioms and formulas”\(^2\).

Based on the specific status of theology and science, respectively, Ian Barbour – an American scholar investigating the relationship between religion and science, proposed a fourfold typology to describe it: conflict, independence, dialogue and integration. Conflict derives mainly from adherence to ideological positions characterized by reductionism. Independence insists on the specificity of methods. Dialogue, based on the acknowledgement of distinct areas of expertise, accepts the possibility of effective, constructive interaction. The existence of limit-problems in scientific research can provide an interface in the dialogue between theology and science. The integrative model proposes a synthesis which, however, risks putting forth conjectures that may lead to confusions or to far-fetched interpretations\(^3\).

The paradigm of contemporary science provides a generous framework for a possible dialogue between theology and science, whereby the specific aspects of scientific knowledge and religious knowledge, respectively, meet in a unifying perspective. It is a perspective that does not abolish distinctions, but highlights the complementarity of theology and science. Unilateral, radical positions are thus overcome. Any shallow, simplistic approach, prejudiced either in favour of forced concord, or of the absolute separation between science and theology – is overcome by encouraging a dialogue that acknowledges and validates their specific competencies.


\(^3\) For further details on these models, see A. Lemeni, “Tipologia relației teologie – știință în contextul actual” [“The typology of theology-science relationship in today’s context”], in Teologie ortodoxă și știință [Orthodox Theology vs. Science], A. Lemeni, Fr. Răzvan Ionescu, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, pp. 85-92.
Given the significant openness now evinced by science, it is incumbent on theology to embrace the sincere, honest search of those who pursue the profound truth of the reality they investigate. Therefore, the dialogue between theology and science does not derive from intellectualist curiosity, it is not an artificial search for novelty or a display of erudition, but it necessarily has an existential stake. The dialogue between theology and science cannot be exhausted by means of a speculative, abstract approach.

As an existential act, this dialogue is not conducted in the sphere of abstract ideas, but presupposes a particular concrete attitude entailing a particular conduct.

“Scientific knowledge can come in conjunction with theological knowledge, only inasmuch as it acknowledges the epistemological value of wisdom as a lifestyle implying the search for the Truth. Wisdom cannot be reduced to operational intelligence, able to identify factual interconnections, based on formal accuracy and rigor. Wisdom actually presupposes the search for existential meaning, and the human effort to conform to the Truth of the world. The preeminence of the Truth presupposes sincerity and honesty in the epistemological undertakings. The context of contemporary science facilitates such development of knowledge that enables it to transcend the unilaterality of discursive reasoning. Thus, reductionism can be overcome in the discourse of both science and theology, by pointing out that the Truth can be reached only in the act of living, in the experience of life”\(^4\).

\(^4\) A. Lemeni, “‘Tipologia relației teologie – știință în contextul actual’ [‘The typology of theology-science relationship in today’s context’], in *Teologie ortodoxă și știință [Orthodox Theology vs. Science]*, p. 92. In addition to the above-mentioned studies, further reflections on the topicality of theology-science relationship, are provided by the studies “Știință și contemporaneitate: mutații în paradigma științei contemporane” [‘Science and contemporaneity: mutations in the paradigm of today’s science’], in *Teologie ortodoxă și știință*, pp. 53-64; “Asumarea dimensiunii cuprinzătoare a Tradiției în dialogul dintre teologie și știință” [‘Acknowledging the comprehensive dimension of Tradition in the dialogue between theology and science’], in *Teologie ortodoxă și știință [Orthodox Theology vs. Science]*, pp. 92-96; “Relația dintre cunoașterea teologică și cea științifică ilustrată din perspectiva teologiei protestante contemporane” [‘Theological vs. scientific knowledge: their relationship according to contemporary Protestant theology’], in *Aspec te apologetice contemporane [Aspects of Contemporary Apologetics]*, pp. 210-229; “Fundamentele cunoașterii în știință, filosofie și teologie” [‘The foundations of knowledge, in science, philosophy and theology’], in *Teologie, Filosofie, Știință-perspective interdisciplinare [Theology, Philosophy, Science – Interdisciplinary Approaches]*, A. Lemeni, Ștefan Afloroaei, Deacon Sorin Mihalache (eds), Al.I. Cuza University Press, Iași, pp. 7-19.
I.1.2. Ideologization – a determining factor in the misappropriation of the dialogue between theology and science

a) Scientism

The relationship between theology and science has been hijacked and distorted by various ideological movements, which misinterpreted scientific investigation or theology, by imposing and fostering erroneous perceptions of the dialogue between theology and science. These movements aim to legitimize and validate certain ideological positions, by misappropriating the scientific or theological argument, through propagandistic persuasion cultivating certain thought patterns, marked by the intrusion of certain ideologies. One such major movement, with a negative influence on the construction of a correct relationship between theology and science, is scientism.

Scientism is the ideology which, in the name of science, asserts the latter’s self-sufficiency, cultivating a stance that gives exclusive authority to science in the realm of knowledge; any fact or occurrence can be thoroughly investigated via scientific inquiry. According to this logic, science is deemed able to solve any problem, including the social issues. Where solutions have not yet been found, this is only a matter of time. Scientism emerged from Enlightenment and positivism. Despite the stance taken by 18th-19th century scholars in various fields – important due to both their number and their intellectual prowess – who explicitly described themselves as practicing believers, the public opinion of the times was shaped by the ideological direction postulating an artificial antagonism between religion and science, between religious faith and reason.

The communist ideology, championing militant atheism, viewed the entire corpus of science as dialectical-materialist and in the name of scientific truths opposed the religious doctrine, which it regarded as obscurantist. Unfortunately, although the paradigm of contemporary science offers numerous and significant instances of openness towards the theological perspective, acknowledging the structural limitations of the scientific approach, scientism still remains one of its major ideological components. In the secularized society today, science is used as a tool in fostering belief in human self-sufficiency.

In today’s society, scientism is present in subtler form than the past ones (Enlightenment, positivism, communism). Pierre Thuillier, a French sociologist, summarizes this ideology by three tenets:
science is the only authentic type of knowledge;
- science is able to answer all questions, and solve all practical problems, provided they are formulated in rational terms;
- it is right and advisable to give scientists the task of managing activities in various fields.

These postulates are rarely explicit; they are propagated by circulating slogans which assert the utility and the vital importance of science placed in the service of man, thus dissimulating the ideological discourse. By creating a true myth of the science, today’s society often lends religious attributes to science. Contemporary scientism disregards the rigorousness of truly scientific inquiry, but seeks to impose a materialist approach and a reductionist methodology.

The ideological discourse aims to persuade, to legitimate a particular outlook, while the scientific one is descriptive. The goal of any ideology, including the one informing the views on theology-science relationship, is not to analyse, to explain the reality it scrutinizes, but to generate and reinforce the social cohesion of particular groups of people, in order to manipulate community and control it via ideology. The overlapping of ideological discourse with the scientific one is dangerous especially when concepts that have been rigorously explained, are extrapolated and applied to more general circumstances, in order to introduce and reinforce ideological positions5.

b) Contemporary atheism’s claims to scientific grounds

Atheism is not a novelty. Both, theoretical atheism, based on speculative arguments, and practical atheism, instantiated in a particular, concrete lifestyle, are historical facts. However, the new atheism developed in today’s secularized, globalized society is not a mere reiteration of the notions, preformed ideas and clichés disseminated in the past by various atheistic attitudes and ideologies. The new atheism claims to be the only plausible paradigm able to explain and

5 For details on the distortion and misappropriation of the dialogue between theology and science by scientism, see the study “Ideologizarea științei” (“Ideologizing Science”) in Știință și teologie [Science and Theology] Fr. Dumitru Popescu (ed.), Eonul Dogmatic Publishing House, Bucharest, 2001, pp. 61-80; the study “Deturnarea dialogului dintre teologie și știință prin ideologizarea științei sau a teologiei” (“Distorting the dialogue between theology and science by ideologizing either science or theology”) in vol. Teologie ortodoxă și știință [Orthodox Theology vs. Science], pp. 96-112.
account for both world and life. Any mention of the transcendence is regarded as unreasonable.

Consequently, the new atheism acquires totalitarian traits, in a generalizing, all-encompassing, integrative approach that turns the denial of faith into the very legitimate grounds of human life. The new atheism is totalitarian because it is not just one option among the many postmodern concepts and practices. Today’s atheism claims to be the only reasonable option. This exclusivism generates a simplistic thinking, lacking in nuances and subtlety, entrapping the mind in the patterns and prejudices of strict political correctness. To validate and justify itself, this type of atheism invokes science, freedom of thought and expression, as well as reason, massively distorting the respective realities. The profile of today’s freethinking atheist reveals a significant inadequacy and deficit in both freedom and thinking. Actually, this type of atheist persons is not as free, or as great thinkers, as they claim to be. Their freedom is seriously eroded and restricted by their adherence to political correctness, to the ideologies of secularist humanism, and often by a mercenary attitude that diminishes their credibility. Also, their thinking is not as substantial as they claim, but is frequently confined to reiterating clichés and prejudiced ideas, expressed in a stereotypical, wooden, ideologized language. This ideological atheism differs from the philosophical or speculative atheism of the past, which employed arguments to support its position.

The new atheism, with its totalizing approach, sees in religious faith the source of fanaticism, ignorance and obscurantism, perceiving believers as potentially dangerous fundamentalists. Thus, the real conflict is not generated by the differences between various religious traditions, but by the irreconcilable positions ultimately assumed by believers and non-believers. Whoever accepts the postulate of transcendence (whether a Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu or an adherent to any other religious belief) becomes a potential threat due to the difficulty of integrating them into the system of atheist civilization.

The promoters of the new atheism – such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, publish best-selling books with strong impact on the general public. They receive great media coverage, are cultivated by the academic milieux, and their works are constantly reviewed (for instance, by the New York Times). What they publish are not specialized studies, but literature intended to popularize the new atheism as widely as possible. The ambitions of these champions of contemporary atheism are high, since they
claim to have science on their side, while religion is the source of violence and fanaticism; ultimately, atheism will free human conscience, so oppressed by religious obscurantism.

Daniel Dennet (born in 1942, in Boston) is a philosopher and cognitive scientist, focusing his research on the nature of mind and conscience. His works attempt to demonstrate that evolution can account for consciousness (in *Consciousness Explained*, New York, Penguin, 1993). In this work, along the lines of mechanical philosophy, Dennett reduces human consciousness to a mechanistic, computer-like structure (similar to the algorithms performed under a computer program), considered in naturalistic perspective. According to Dennett, evolution explains everything. Evolutionism has the strongest impact of all theories, providing the key for a comprehensive understanding of reality. The Luciferian spirit is thus at work in the claim to explain everything in a naturalistic perspective, based on the evolutionist theory (these ideas are put forth in his work *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1996).

In 2007, Dennett published *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York, Penguin, 2007) providing an exclusively naturalistic view on religion. Religion is the product of the human mind, considered as a neurological mechanism developed in the evolutionary process.

Sam Harris, born in 1967 to a Jewish mother and a Quaker father, displayed since adolescence a rebellious, hostile attitude towards any theistic belief. He attended Stanford University, but was expelled for a while because of an incident caused by his experimenting with Ecstasy. He returned to Stanford, with a PhD in neuroscience. In 2004, Harris published *The End of Faith* (New York, Norton, 2004), a book in which he launches aggressive attacks against theism, considering belief in God as a mental disorder that generates various problems with social consequences. To Harris, religious faith irremediably corrupts the human being. He notes that “Religious belief is a disgraceful weakening of our mind, a perverse manifestation of cultural singularity”\(^6\).

In 2006, Harris published a booklet entitled *Letter to a Christian Nation*. He mentioned that it addressed conservative Christians, but it actually is a manifesto for a secularist agenda, arguing in favour of eliminating religion from

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the public space. Harris insisted that atheism is less widespread or publicly assumed in the USA, than in Western Europe.

Christopher Hitchens was born in 1949. Originally, he was a sympathizer of Marxism, along the lines advocated by Trotsky. Later on, after the events of 11th September 2001, he became a critic of Islamic fundamentalism (considered a risk factor in the proliferation of violence and terrorism). He saw any kind of belief in God as a fundamental threat against civilization. In 2007, Hitchens published his book God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything (New York, Twelve, 2007). Hitchens asserts that religion stifles freethinking.

These proponents of the new atheism put forth a number of common tenets, such as: belief in God is a source of trouble, both personal and social; religious faith impedes freedom of thought as well as critical thinking, by promoting obscurantism and fundamentalism; monotheistic Traditions, especially Christianity, are met with hostility and ridiculed; atheism is legitimized and justified by invoking the authority of science (actually, by reiterating the scientist position).

Faced with these challenges, specific to today’s new atheism, Christian apologetics should provide a response confessing and asserting the Truth incarnate in the Person of Jesus Christ, Who is the Light and Life of the world, fulfilling man’s profound aspirations in an edifying way.

c) The syncretic gnosis promoted under the pretext of a dialogue between theology and science

In today’s context, however, a much greater threat than scientism and atheism, is posed by the emergence of a syncretic gnosis, employing the dialogue between theology and science simply as a pretext for achieving a unified, totalizing knowledge, understood as all-redemptive gnosis. This trend is much more dangerous than the scientist and atheist ideology, as it is more diffuse, more insidious and more deceptive. It is the deceptive whisper which, in the name of generous values promoting the dialogue, and of an all-embracing attitude, induces the Luciferian spirit, characteristic to gnosis and magic. Syncretic gnosis is also much more fascinating, more attractive from the intellectual standpoint.

In the context of today’s holistic thinking, both materialism and idealism are perceived as mere unilateralities. Christianity itself is regarded as just one possible option among the many religions or philosophies, while it is necessary to integrate
all religions, philosophies and sciences into a new, all-encompassing gnosis. To Gnostics, salvation is knowledge, illumination. We are no longer saved in Christ, but we save ourselves – which generates boundless confidence in human abilities.

In order to establish a genuine, honest dialogue between theology and science in the current context, we need to achieve and cultivate such discernment that enables us to overcome syncrétic attitudes.

“The postmodern option for open, permeable science, willing to embrace manifold types of knowledge and inquiry, entails the risk of generating syncretisms. Embarking on a dialogue between theology and science, presupposes as an essential prerequisite the conscious exercise of discernment in order to avoid syncrétic or neognostic positions, which propose the fascinating but deceptive perspective of unified, unitary knowledge that includes any type of experience. This synthesis aims to unify everything – from mathematics to politics, from physics to Oriental mysticism, from ecology to feminist theories”7.

The new gnosis, which is likely to generate syncretism by taking advantage of, and employing as its instrument the dialogue between theology, philosophy and science, engenders a kind of neopaganism, much more dangerous than the paganism preceding Christ. The vision of today’s Gnostics is cunning and extremely insidious, appealing mostly to the intellectuals. By integrating theology, philosophy and science into a unitary synthesis, distinctions are obscured to the point of being abolished altogether, and a syncretic mentality

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7 A. Lemeni, “Deturnarea dialogului dintre teologie și știință prin ideologizarea științei sau teologiei” [“Distorting the dialogue between theology and science by ideologizing either science or theology”], in Teologie ortodoxă și știință [Orthodox Theology vs. Science], p. 109. This gnostic syncretism distorts the identity of science. “In the amalgamation of this diffuse knowledge, putting together various theories from various domains, science loses its consecrated identity, becoming one narrative among others. This is due to the increasing difficulty in distinguishing between fact and fiction, between real and fictitious events. Under these circumstances, the scientific discourse is constructed as a social discourse, often overlapping the political realm. Scientific accuracy and rigorousness are replaced by ideological clichés, generating what Kimball termed the new form of academic barbarism”. A. Lemeni, “Deturnarea dialogului dintre teologie și știință prin ideologizarea științei sau teologiei” [“Distorting the dialogue between theology and science by ideologizing either science or theology”], p. 110.
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