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Resource Guide 2: Cooperation with Science: Case Studies of Good and Evil

In the 21st c., it is easy for us to assume that it is generally advisable for the church to cooperate with the latest in technology and the findings of science, especially the medical community. In another guide, I have traced the evolution of thought among Pentecostal and Charismatic advocates of miraculous healing with regard to the use of medicine and doctors. By and large, most would now see medicine as one of the ways God heals the sick and few would champion a prohibition against medicine. Christian universities have invested in STEM (i.e., science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), pre-med, and nursing programs; and some have even established medical schools. Other than a few controversial issues, the findings of science are highly regarded by conservative and progressive Christians, Protestant and Catholic and inform, even if indirectly, programs, practices, and theological discussions if not doctrine.

Still, there are case studies from the past where the cooperation of the church and science yielded regrettable results and provide lessons for us in discernment. The tendency among conservatives of all faiths and persuasions is to translate our preference for certainty and finality into a belief in the finality and certainty of all bodies of knowledge. But sciences are, by nature, experimental and always developing. While there are certain “fundamentals”—the law of gravity, for instance—new research and experiments produce new findings. As technology and knowledge expand, previously held laws and certainties are often challenged, making revision necessary.

Further, because scientists are human, their work is influenced by politics, ideology, and economic realities. Therefore, science is always influenced by the context and climate of the scientists performing the experiments. This lack of neutrality is explored by Steven Shapin in the book Never Pure. Often, the best science is the work of joint cooperation across geographic and political spectrums and, in this way, produces a more “neutral” result.

This political and ideological prejudice is nowhere more obvious and tragic than in the alliance between science (or so-called science), the evil state and, worst of all, the church. Two cases, both involving the “science of racism” are instructive.

The first involves the way the church and political (and business) leaders used “science” to shore up the colonial enterprise that resulted in the slave trade. Sujit Sivasundaram documents this relationship in a chapter titled “Race, Empire, and Biology before Darwinism” in Biology and Ideology from Descartes to Darwin. Succinctly describing the mutually beneficial relationship described above, he writes:

Because the sciences led to an identification of racial and national types they were an important part of the framework that upheld empire, both at home, amongst the populace in Europe, and abroad, amongst those who found themselves governing
the colonies. Biology neutralized the question of whether empire was moral, by showing how races and peoples could be “improved,” and so a justification was provided for rule by the supposedly superior colonizers. At the same time, empire provided the raw materials for science and helped to define the stereotypes.
Sivasundarum situates the roots of this relationship in the early modern era and in its theology. He describes a theological pursuit of the origins of humanity involving biblical interpretation, biblical geography, natural history, and geology. Peter Harrison describes a similar pursuit in which the two books, the Bible and the natural world, were read side by side in pursuit of “replanting the garden” lost in the Fall. In his careful analysis of European and American sources, he concludes that on both sides of the Atlantic, the slavery enterprise conditioned the science, whether written from an abolitionist perspective or pro-slavery one. The rise of the now deemed pseudo-science, phrenology, is discussed in relationship to the study of racial origins and the hierarchical arrangement of the races, necessary for the political and economic stability of early 19th c. Europe and America. Gender differences were also considered in this “new science.”

A second and more recent case, related in some ways, is that of the “science” of eugenics (from a Greek term meaning “well born”). Edward J. Larson documents the history of the eugenics movement beginning with the cousin of Charles Darwin, “gentleman scientist” Francis Galton who believed in the superiority of some gene lines over others. Race clearly figured into this hierarchy but Galton went on to identify other inferior traits. He proposed a proactive application of Darwin’s natural selection that prescribed marriage of the fittest. Of course, adherents went on to prescribe measures such as segregation and sterilization that would insure the demise of the unfit. Paul Weindling, in the same volume, goes on to explore this tragic application in “Genetics, Eugenics, and the Holocaust.” The relationship of biblical scholars to Nazi anti-semitism, fueled by the “science” has been thoroughly documented. (See Anders and Ericksen).

This movement gained traction, sadly, among liberal American clergy from Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish churches and universities. John M. Bozeman documents the contributions of these clergy in “Eugenics and the Clergy in the Early Twentieth-Century United States.” It is with relief that one reads of the gradual diminishment of the influence of these clergy and the movement, even within liberal circles, with the rise of neo-orthodoxy. Bozeman claims, “Christian neo-orthodoxy seems to have tacitly assumed value-neutrality of science and technology, while still allowing criticism of the political uses of certain applications of the same science.”

As stated at the onset, this tension between what of science can be used for good or for evil is a matter of discernment for the Christian. Clearly, it is incumbent upon the church, its leaders and members to not only be aware of the science but to engage the scientific community in conversation. Finally, it would seem prudent that the church, in conversation and in prayer,

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should seek the guidance of the Spirit in making decisions about the benefits and application of this other body of knowledge.

**Selected Bibliography**


