Remembering the Future: Science Fiction and the Emerging Art of Dialogue Theology

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Introduction

To "remember the future" appears an odd phrase and an odder concept. Yet from the moment Dr. Tom Sherwood of Carleton University uttered this apparent oxymoron, it seemed to offer a comprehensive strategy for exploring the unknown territory of the future. It is an ideal description for the enterprises of science and religion. These "overlapping but discreet *magisteria*", in the words of the late, great biologist and science popularize, Stephen J. Gould, are firmly grounded in human experience and in the perennial human fascination with the unknowable, that is to say, the future.

The eminent physicist, Freeman Dyson, in his *Jerusalem-Harvard Lectures* of 1997, observed:

> *Who in the modern age still has dreams that extend beyond the lifetimes of our grandchildren? Two voices speak for the future, the voice of science and the voice of religion. Science and religion are two great human enterprises that endure through the centuries and link us with our descendants. I am a scientist, and as I attempt to look to the future in this book, I speak with the voice of science. I describe the past and future from the scientific viewpoint which is familiar to me. But I do not claim that the voice of science speaks with unique authority. Religion has at least an equal claim to authority in defining human destiny. Religion lies closer to the heart of human nature and has a wider currency than science. Like the human nature that it reflects, religion is often cruel and perverted. When science achieved power to equal the power of religion, science often became cruel and perverted, too. The poet, W.H. Auden, who was a Christian, wrote of the importance of Christianity to the birth of modern literature in late antiquity: 'One may like or dislike Christianity, but no one can deny that it was Christianity and the Bible which raised Western literature from the dead. A faith which held that the Son of God was born in a manger, associated himself with persons of humble station in an unimportant province, and died a slave's death, yet did this to redeem all (people), rich and poor, (free) and slaves, citizens and barbarians, required a completely new way of looking at human beings; if all are children of God and equally capable of salvation, then all, irrespective of status of talent, vice or virtue, merit the serious attention of the poet, the novelist and the historian.' (Imagined Worlds,* Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 6)

Let us humour one another and take Dyson at his word. If science and religion are the two voices which speak to the future, then science and religion ought surely to be in dialogue. Both

science and religion engage themselves in discreet but converging ways in the question of what it means to be human. We might do well to recall the words of philosopher Hannah Arendt: "*We are most human when we are in dialogue.*" Within that dialogue, both science and religion must reach back into what each has learned in this precious and precarious project we label civilization to imagine, to *re-member,* where humanity is going on our journey to an unknown future; or where we *want* to go.

In June, 2012, the University of Winnipeg Senate recognized the significance of dialogue in human affairs by accepting a stream of study within the theological programmes of the Faculty of Graduate Studies. The definition originated from a response to a patronizing comment from a columnist in the *Ottawa Citizen.* I defined Dialogue Theology as "*the art and discipline of bringing Christian theology into intentional conversation with other religions and world views for the sake of 'mending the world.'* (*tikkun olam* in the Hebrew)

Let us sketch something of the journey to the future in which science fiction and dialogue theology, especially as illustrated in the work of Robert J. Sawyer, may proceed if not exactly in communion, then at least in mutually beneficial conversation.

On our blank canvass, I shall pencil in some principles of dialogue; add a stroke or two of confession on the part of the Western Christian tradition; splash some random conclusions and stipple the whole with dabs of insight from Robert J. Sawyer.

First, a disclaimer: this paper is not a defense of any religious worldview, general or particularist. The author is a Christian leader, but one who holds the scientific enterprise in the highest regard, and who has thrived on science fiction since Tom Corbett, Space Cadet, thrilled across the radio universe; and from the first reading of Verne's *20,000 Leagues under the Sea.* It is written in the conviction that Professor Dyson was right in his assessment of the voices which speak to the future, and pivotally right at that.

On Dialogue and Being Human in the Work of Robert J. Sawyer

Let us recall once more Hannah Arendt's conviction that "*We are most human when we are in dialogue.*" Let it further be understood that this position is foundational: *a priori* in all that follows.

Robert J. Sawyer's science fiction is distinguished by a number of factors, recognized by his peers through an extraordinary *inventory* of awards: fourteen Auroras (at last count); the Hugo; the Nebula; and the Campbell – the latter three comprising the Triple Crown of Science

Fiction Awards. He specializes in meticulously researched hard science content, demonstrating his own background, expertise and continuing interest in anthropology.

His prose is at once spare and elegant. His story lines are credible, tightly constructed, and respectful of his reader's intelligence.

But above all, the characteristic that renders Robert J. Sawyer among the best potential and actual interlocutors in the dialogue between science and religion is his paramount attention to the question, "*What does it mean to be human?*"

It cannot be reiterated too often: the question of the nature of humanity is the premier and intersecting theme of both science and religion.

A cursory review of but a few of Sawyer's novels will serve to illustrate his creative pre-occupation with this convergent conviction.

To a greater or lesser degree, all of Sawyer's novels touch upon the various attributes of humanity; five novels (or trilogies) are particularly illustrative: *The Neanderthal Parallax (Humans, Hominids, Hybrids); Mindscan; Rollback; Triggers; and Wake; Watch; Wonder* (the last three comprehending the Webmind trilogy).

In the first trilogy noted, an alternate universe with a parallel earth is posited, one in which the evolutionary sweeps were won by Neanderthals. In this world, a physics experiment goes seriously awry, transporting a Neanderthal into the neutrino collecting pool in Sudbury, Ontario. The trilogy is richly plotted and highly provocative addressing tensions between contentious and contending understandings of values between very diverse human communities.

Mindscan and the 2013 *Red Planet Blues* comprise Sawyer's explorations as to whether body or mind makes us human. The conceit of each is built upon the premise that it will be possible to "download" human memory and personality into an artificial construct which is far more than human in every material way – virtually indestructible and for all intents and purposes, immortal.   The theological discourse which might be gleaned from these two novels alone would prove fertile enough ground from which to harvest many a graduate seminar.

Triggers, the only Sawyer novel to be located entirely in the United States, is built upon the premise of a failed assassination attempt upon an American President in the very near future. The President is gravely wounded. While undergoing surgery, a power surge, the result of a Whitehouse bombing on the heels of the President's shooting, radically disrupts the experimental treatment of PTSD related memories in an Iraqi war veteran. Instantly, pairs of individuals find that they share each other's' memories: in graphic detail. Alarums abound. Is

this sharing of memories but a passing anomaly? Or does it betoken a new step in human evolution? Will the very human need for security trump the equally human desire for individuality? What might be the price for a genuine and lasting peace? What, ultimately, is the ground for what sociologist Jeremy Rifkin described as an *Empathic Civilization?*

In *Rollback,* the standard science fiction fare of bodily rejuvenation to extend the human lifespan is given a spicy new recipe, including a fascinating twist on "first contact", and the nature and depths of altruism. Can an android be so "human" as to sacrifice itself for the sake of a principle held by those who use him as a tool? Is love the defining element of being – and becoming – human?

In the justly highly acclaimed Webmind trilogy, *Wake, Watch,* and *Wonder,* the emergence of conscious intelligence within the World Wide Web is the predominant theme, but it is gracefully and engagingly entwined with the immediate questions of humanities' relationship to other life forms, notably our close cousins among the great apes. Self and mutual understandings are recurring emphases. How do physical and mental challenges affect both those afflicted and those who love them in the complex dance of acceptance, resistance to fate and compassion?

If these themes are not at once human and theological, it is difficult to imagine what might be. The case for an ongoing dialogue between science and religion might be stamped "closed" even after this cursory assessment.

And yet it cannot be denied that all too often since the so-called Enlightenment of the late eighteenth century, science and religion have often been locked in seemingly mortal combat, or, at best, to be speaking, if at all, to cross purpose.

A.N. Wilson's *tour de force, God's Funeral,* (Norton & Co., London, 1999) chronicles brilliantly the antipathy between science and in particular Christian tradition, which was roused to a crescendo throughout the 19th century. Wilson, novelist, biographer and former editor of *The Times Literary Supplement,* turns his hand to critical social history, employing crisp and engaging narrative and tight yet comprehensive biographical sketches to argue that many great thinkers in Western Europe were dragged from their religious communities kicking and screaming by the smug intransigence of the Christian establishment. Charles Darwin is, of course, a case in point.

Wilson contends that this divide was neither necessary nor inevitable. Nor was it. In Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas' *A Child's Christmas in Wales,* the narrator of Christmases past recalls

among his childhood gifts *"a book that told me everything about the wasp, but why."* A metaphor which illustrates Gould's point: *"discreet but overlapping magisteria."*

Our world might well be a different place if the voices of both science and religion had pursued dialogue rather than debate.

Sawyer's work promotes dialogue, even among the most conservative of religious adherents and practitioners. Four particular elements of Sawyer's work bear mention:

He writes from a base of solid science.

Though not himself religious, he demonstrates a respect for spirituality.

He engenders hope. So does healthy religion. If one were to label Sawyer utopian, it would be a dynamic rather than a static utopia, more compatible with the notion of the "reign of God" than the aberration which was Oliver Cromwell's 17th century English Commonwealth.

Sawyer writes prophetically in the manner of the Abrahamic faiths. Biblical prophecy bears no resemblance to Nostradamic sooth saying. Rather it employs solid, careful, critical analysis of present realities to project what may come about, to borrow from Robert A. Heinlein, *"If this goes on . . ."*

Sawyer, then, provides a basis for dialogue. But dialogue is a demanding process, requiring a replicable template with agreed upon principles.

Here we turn to Professor Leonard Swidler and his *"Dialogue Decalogue: Ground Rules for Interreligious, Intercultural Dialogue."*

The Dialogue Decalogue

Leonard Swidler, of Temple University in Philadelphia, and long time editor of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, is the foremost Roman Catholic theologian of dialogue in the world, and a pioneer in every sense. His renown is global, and his influence incalculable, especially in his *Dialogue Decalogue* (1983)*.*

His ten "commandments" seem to be but rudimentary common sense. Yet in 1983, a year in advance of Hans Kung's *Global Responsibility,* was game changing.

First Commandment: The primary purpose of dialogue is to learn . . . to change and grow in the perception and understanding of reality, and then to act accordingly.

Second Commandment: Interreligious, interideological (interdisciplinary – author's addition) dialogue must be a two-sided project – within each religious or ideological community and between religious or ideological communities.

Third Commandment: Each participant must come to the dialogue with complete honesty and sincerity.

Fourth Commandment: In interreligious, interideological dialogue we must not compare our ideals with our partner's practice, but rather our ideals with our partner's ideals, our practice with our partner's practice.

Fifth Commandment: Each participant must define himself. It is mandatory that each dialogue partner define what it means to be an authentic member of his own tradition.

Sixth Commandment: Each participant must come to the dialogue with no hard and fast assumptions as to where the points of disagreement are.

Seventh Commandment: Dialogue can take place only between equals.

Eighth Commandment: Dialogue can only take place on the basis of mutual trust.

Ninth Commandment: Persons entering into interreligious, interideological dialogue must be at least minimally self-critical of both themselves and their own religious or ideological traditions.

Tenth Commandment: Each participant must eventually attempt to experience the partner's religion or ideology from "the inside."

The Decalogue's applicability is hardly restricted to conversations between and among religions and philosophies. Simple extrapolation and but a little imagination suggest that a dialogue between science and religion – or, by analogy, science-fiction and theology – is an entirely reasonable employment of Swidler's principles.

***Wake, Watch, Wonder* as a Focus for Dialogue between Science Fiction and Theology**

Recalling Hannah Arendt's dictum that *"we are most human when we are in dialogue,"* let us consider for a moment what becoming human entails in theological terms:

- awareness of the other;
- a critical understanding of "self';
- the establishment of relationships of trust;

- the foundational necessity of dialogue.

Unlike Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum* – "*I think, therefore I am*" – we are enjoined to consider Desmond Tutu's African perspective: "*We are, therefore I am.*"

These elements in the process of becoming human are hardly restricted to the theological project; in fact they are brilliantly interwoven throughout Sawyer's Webmind trilogy*.*

The plethora of theological values, the analogies between the trilogy as it unfolds and Christian theology, though not Christian theology alone, are far more comprehensive than the four noted above. In the trilogy we see the theological values of:

- unity in diversity through the very nature of the emerging and evolving Webmind;
- Trinity, community and relationship in the evolution of self-awareness in Webmind;
- justice and compassion as core and preeminent values;
- transparency and truth, as declaimed by Webmind regularly;
- the preciousness of person, exemplified in both Hobo and Webmind;
- the interrelatedness of all creation;
- the joy of study, knowledge and wisdom;
- mystery – an overarching "theological" principal of all faith traditions.

That Sawyer's trilogy, indeed all his work, provides such engaging grist for the dialogue mill should come as no surprise. It has long been the declared conviction of this author that, "*Story is to religion as math is to science: foundational.*"

Wake, Watch and *Wonder* form a three volume parable, incomparable as a dialogue vehicle, especially with Christian theology, for the trilogy is an extended tribute to relationship. The complex, nearly incomprehensible Christian doctrine of the Trinity is, in essence, a symbolic statement that relationship is at the heart of all that is: so much so, that the very nature of the Creator Godhead is community in relationship: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

One might say, theologically, that God is in the spaces between and among partners in dialogue. The Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, thus locates God between "I and Thou." In Asian art, meaning is most expressed in the spaces between the forms. A fire's flame is present between the logs.

Could there be a better expression of this than in Sawyer's depiction of Webmind?

A Brief Word of Confession

It may well be, as some historians argue, that Constantine's co-option of Christianity in the early 4th century of the Common Era prolonged the life of the Roman Empire for a further century and a half, permitting the creation of an infrastructure that would, throughout the Dark Ages, keep the possibility of Renaissance alive. It could be; there are strong arguments in support of such a thesis. It is certain that Constantine's cynically transformed the Gospel into an imperial bureaucracy with a spiritual veneer which has rather a lot to answer for.

In consequence, for 1700 years, the Christian church has, in the words of my colleague Dr. Greg Glatz, pursued a theology which is attractional, propositional and colonial. In other words, "we have the truth, or all that matters; come join us; if you don't, there is no place for you in civilized society." I paraphrase.

This is hardly an attitude conducive to dialogue.

But, when Christians "remember the future," by returning to our operative story, we see that in the 3rd Millenium, a "renewed "Christianity is emerging, one which is missional, relational, incarnational. Again, in other words, "we believe we have a contribution to make to the future of the human enterprise, can we talk and perhaps become partners, and, if we do, perhaps we'll discover together what God has in mind."

Even Webmind might agree that here we have a model for science and religion re-membering the future together as a good place to which to journey. Sawyer, like a Telus ad, is convinced that "the future is friendly."

Conclusions for Two Voices

Sawyer's work is so rich, and the field of Dialogue Theology so new, that far more than this brief paper is required to do their intersection justice. But let it be noted that even such a cursory overview suggests a number of conclusions which might occupy the ongoing conversation between science and religion, or more precisely, once again, science-fiction and theology, for some time to come:

- "Artificial Intelligence" is a meaningless term;
- the meaning of "human" in religious and theological terms is convergent with the meaning of "human" in scientific terms;
- transparency is a foundational value in both science and religion;
- pluralism is the foundation of unity;
- dialogue in community is the essence of interpreting reality;
- story is to religion as math is to science: foundational;
- thanksgiving, whether specific or diffuse, is the proper posture for both science and religion;
- theology can learn from science;
- science can learn from theology;
- "God" expresses artistry and hope through evolution.

Back to the Present; on to the Future

If humanity is to move into a future which is any way positive, even redemptive, then the collaboration of science and religion is paramount. Perhaps Sri Jawaharlal Nehru captured that vision rather more gracefully in 1961 at the opening of the Sri Lankan Academy of Science: *"The time has passed for politics and religion; the time has come for science and spirituality."*

To bring such a future to pass will require the two voices of science and religion to engage in dialogue one with the other, and, in so doing "wake, watch – and share the wonder." For, as the later Sir Arthur C. Clarke observed, "*the universe is not only stranger than we imagine, it's stranger than we can imagine."*

Thank whoever you wish for that, but slip in a good word for Robert J. Sawyer when you do.