

**Fifty Years In Science and Religion:  
Ian Barbour and His Legacy**

**CTNS Book Launch  
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My remarks this evening begin with three “thank you’s.” First, I want to thank everyone at CTNS who has been responsible for planning and hosting this wonderful event. You all have made it possible for us to gather together to celebrate the ongoing importance of Ian Barbour’s corpus of work and for this evening I am grateful. Then, a particular “thank you” to Bob Russell for his fine work in the volume we launch tonight, as well as for introducing me both to the field of science and religion, and to the work of Ian Barbour. Bob and I worked together on a GTU Newhall fellowship developing and teaching a course focused on Barbour’s writings concerning the importance of thinking clearly about the relationships between technology, environmental science, and human values. Thank you, Bob, for helping to “launch” my own interest in science and religion. My final word of thanks goes to Dr. Barbour himself, for his always insightful and creative work in theology and science, of course, and also for his kind encouragement of my own scholarly work every time we have had the opportunity to meet.

The remainder of my remarks will offer an assessment of section “D” of the present volume. This section addresses Barbour’s important contributions just how we might understand the complicated interrelationships that exist at the intersection of technological development, environmental scientific understanding, and the social, religious, and personal values that underlie them both. As this section makes clear, it is Barbour’s work that has brought to the forefront both the fundamental interconnectedness of inquiry at this intersection on the one hand, as well as the real differences of orientation at this intersection on the other. Moreover, it was also Barbour who first insisted that these interrelations and differences were crucial subject matter for the field of science and religion. As Judith Scoville rightly points out, Ian Barbour’s work

is the only comprehensive set of writings that connects Christian theology and its engagement with the natural sciences, on the one hand, and Christian ethics and its concerns over technology and the environment on the other. ... [H]is inclusion of the environment distinguishes his writings from most works on Christian ethics and technology, which largely focus on medical and reproductive technologies.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> p. 225.

And as Roger Shinn observes, Barbour addresses both difference and relation in these disciplines without falling into the trap of either worshipping technology or demonizing it. In addition, Shinn admires Barbour's scholarly method which he says, "takes up controversial issues, surveying proposed options with remarkable fairness, then gives his own opinions and offers his readers the opportunity to agree or disagree."<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, there is much to admire about Barbour's method of inquiry. First is his insight into both the fundamental relations and real differences that exist at the intersection of technology, environmental science and human values; as well as his recognition that these represent crucial subject matter for the discipline of religion and science. Second is the way in which Barbour's own careful discussion of this crucial subject matter proceeds in a way that listens before it speaks as well as invites wider conversation among practitioners in these disciplines. Lastly Barbour's method of inquiry is to be admired for rejecting "both the messianism that expects a 'technological fix' to make everybody happy and the demonizing of technology as an alien force that overrides conscious purpose."<sup>3</sup>

However, as each of the authors also admits, these very strengths of Barbour's method of inquiry also point toward what has increasingly proven to be a frustrating limitation contained in this approach as well. Barbour's method of careful analysis, listening and speaking from a variety of points of view, and the invitation to responsible decision-making based upon this process – while admirable and perhaps preferable to other possible approaches – rests on some assumptions which we can no longer simply take for granted. As Christopher Southgate reminds us,

the science-religion debate has constantly to engage with the sheer brute fact of the success of the sciences – in progressively describing in greater and greater depth the apparent character of the world, and in enabling technologists to design more and more intricate devices with which to interact with it. Reflection on ecosystems and modern human impact upon them has rather to reckon with a *failure* – human culture has seemed to develop in ways which are profoundly unsustainable and deeply damaging. The grand narratives of the West seem to have failed to give rise to understandings of nature that lead to sound ethical practice.<sup>4</sup>

And, Soutgate again,

Barbour's fervent but compassionate tone ... speaks to us from a time when there was greater hope that these issues would really be addressed. It was the time before what I believe will be seen in the future as the last great smash-and-grab raid on the

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<sup>2</sup> p. 214.

<sup>3</sup> P. 216.

<sup>4</sup> p. 243

Earth – the era inaugurated by the election of Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the U.K., and era in which environmental protection has tended to be sidelined in the zeal for economic growth.<sup>5</sup>

My purpose here is not to “pick on” Ian Barbour, or on his chosen method of inquiry. Neither is it to pull the plug on the hope of Barbour and others writing in this volume that, “it is still possible to achieve a more just, participatory, and sustainable society on planet earth.”<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, I do wish to put before us – as the present volume itself does so well – the perduring and perplexing problem, namely that at the intersection of technology, environmental science, and human values, our recognition that planet Earth is an interdependent world with a common future<sup>7</sup> presently fails to persuade politically influential persons and powerful nations toward embracing responsible ethical decision making and environmentally sustainable practices. Barbour’s method assumes, it seems to me, that dedication to increasing our scientific knowledge, whereby we can develop more effective technological applications of this knowledge, while continuing to refine our analysis of the values operative in the process of inquiry can *and should* result in our making responsible ethical decisions and engaging in environmentally sustainable activities. Sadly, however, Barbour’s method, which “should work” presently fails to achieve these desired results. Of course, this is not Barbour’s fault, nor is it necessarily a flaw in his method of inquiry per se. Rather the realization, which Barbour himself knows all too well, that what “should work” to help create a just and sustainable society on planet Earth is not yet working brings into sharp focus an apparently intractable impasse we face in this field of inquiry as it is currently defined.

As Martin Heidegger suggested already in the 1940s and 50s, the essence of the technological, environmental and scientific impasse I am trying to describe is not at its root just the latest in a series of problems to be fixed whether by more sophisticated scientific inquiry, or by more advanced applications of technique, or even by more incisive ethical reflection.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, our very tendency to try to understand the impasse as comprised of a series of fixable problems itself reveals the intractable nature of this impasse. The impasse we face – an impasse revealed to us by the inability of our best methods of inquiry to

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<sup>5</sup> p. 241

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> see pp. 253-54.

<sup>8</sup> See Heidegger, Martin, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*.

produce the desired ethical and environmental results – is therefore likely not the result of a scientific, technological, or ethical lack of knowledge. Nor is this impasse merely the result of muddy philosophical thinking. Given our tendency as 21<sup>st</sup> century human beings to regard an impasse of any kind as something to be overcome cognitively and/or instrumentally, the inability of our best methodological instruments to produce the desired ethical and environmental results will remain a “problem we cannot fix.”

Now, in a very real way, this intractable impasse is nothing new. As a Lutheran systematic theologian I have come to recognize in it the essence of what the tradition calls “sin” – what Martin Luther describes as the *cor in curvatus in se*, that is “the soul curved in on itself” and what St. Paul recognizes when he laments, “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”<sup>9</sup> Of course, neither Luther nor St. Paul were facing the impasse as it exists for us today as we seek to help create a just, participatory and sustainable society on planet Earth. Addressing our present day incarnation of the impasse of cognitive and ethical limitation will not be accomplished simply by seeking and finding just the right intellectual or affective set of tools. Nevertheless, the recognition of this impasse and the faith to envision its eventual overcoming is the deep concern of many of the scholars who have contributed to the present volume, Ian Barbour himself chief among them. For this we owe both him and this book a debt of gratitude. Barbour is not afraid to keep asking the question – what next, beyond this ethical and environmental impasse we cannot seem to overcome? How shall we continue to work toward that which we cannot yet understand how to achieve? As a theologian, I take to heart the example of his courage and his insight as a scholar in the face of such questions. And I look forward to seeing just where his scholarly passion for inquiry and his compassionate heart for the future of planet Earth will take him next!

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<sup>9</sup> Romans 7:19 (NRSV).