



Say It Ain't So

German nuclear and astrophysicist Carl Friedrich von Weizsacker has long been one of my personal heroes. My admiration began when, as a young organic chemist, I read Robert Jungk's *Heller als Tausend Sonnen* (1956; published in English in 1958 as *Brighter than a Thousand Suns*) and found von Weizsacker and Werner Heisenberg portrayed as noble opponents of a German effort to produce the bomb during World War II because of their moral scruples. I was further impressed some ten years later when, as a young theologian in Heidelberg, I was introduced to von Weizsacker's philosophical and theological writings. Here was a person associated with the most fundamental scientific breakthroughs in human history (atomic theory and the origins of the cosmos) reflecting philosophically on the meaning of truth and existence from a decidedly Christian perspective. I was excited!

Recently, however, a revisionist reading of that early history of the atomic age has called the roles of Heisenberg and von Weizsacker into question (cf., e.g., Mark Walker, *German National Socialism and the Quest for Nuclear Power, 1939-49*, 1990, and Thomas Powers, *Heisenberg's War: The Secret History of the German Bomb*, 1993). Worst of all was a May 1, 1992 article in *Die Zeit* ("Warum Hitler die Bombe nicht baute") in which Hermann Jensen suggests that Heisenberg and von Weizsacker actually soft-pedaled the bomb only to save their own necks. After their failure in 1942 to convince Danish physicist Neils Bohr to join them in building a bomb to ensure a kind of long-term *Pax Germanica* in Europe (Jensen's reading of this controversial event), the two German scientists feared that, should Hitler ever learn the actual potential of an atomic bomb, they would be charged with treason for discussing such important war-secrets with a foreigner like Bohr. Soft-pedaling the bomb to the German war command was their only hope. Reading this article produced in me the kind of "Say it ain't so, Joe!" response given by Shoeless Joe Jackson's fans when they learned of his involvement in the 1919 Black Sox scandal: "Say it ain't so, Carl!"

Well, von Weizsacker has said it ain't so—sort of. He writes of his own memory of these things in his 1988 book *Bewußtseinswandel* (esp. pp. 362-408). Yet, his own reflections make abundantly clear the complex motives and misjudgments that affected his youthful decisions. Von Weizsacker admits that, though he was neither a Nazi nor a Hitler fan, he was caught up in the optimistic fervor to make a difference in the world. Thinking Hitler would win the war, he initially favored building the bomb in order to secure himself a voice in the future of Europe, a future where peace would, in fact, be secured by German might. On the other

hand, the bomb was never a great cause for him, and on later reflection he did not believe it could or should be built during the duration of the war. Any youthful naivete carried over from earlier time was destroyed by seeing the results of the bomb and recognizing more fully the terrors of

Nazism. It was, he says, divine grace that spared the world the consequences of a direction he had once favored.

More aware after the war of the scientist's ethical responsibilities, he was the primary author of the 1957 *Göttinger Erklärung*, in which 18 major German atomic scientists published their opposition to allowing the German army access to strategic nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, von Weizsacker does not subscribe to what he calls another kind of naivete—that somehow the genie can be put back into the bottle, that for the good of humanity nuclear research can simply be stopped, or, indeed, that there are things that simply should not be investigated. It is impossible, he says, to decide to investigate that which would be helpful and to avoid that which would be dangerous since “it is always the same things that are both helpful and dangerous”; what needs to be developed is an ethical consciousness which can distinguish between what we should do and what we should not do with what we discover and the political structures to implement such distinctions (374).

Scientists have now put a match in the hand of the human race—not because scientists like matches, but because they wanted to do research. Therefore, I believe that scientists, as citizens—as citizens of the world, if you will,—are morally obligated to be the first to be concerned with the political consequences of their discoveries. The way they do this must be carefully considered. If they do it in away that is politically ineffective, they have done it poorly. (397)

For von Weizsacker, dealing with the consequences of our actions is both a political and a theological issue. What he asks of the church is not simplistic answers, either from the right or from the left, but radical answers.

Nuclear weapons have altered the very *nature* of war. We must draw radical consequences from this fact. But nothing important will be said about the problem of the atom by a theology that is unable to comprehend that the course of history can bring something to light that retroactively changes all of history. (408)

Professor von Weizsacker graciously declined an invitation to write in this issue because he was completing another book (*Zeit und Wissen*) and because, at age 80, “there are limits to what one can do. Please excuse me.” He surely does not require our excuse, but his careful emphasis on the limits of human work, expressed in away that does not negate the task and joy of human discovery, will be very helpful as we carry on the conversation between faith and science to which this issue is dedicated.

We begin with a personal perspective essay in which physician *Robert Niedringhaus* ponders science as a Christian vocation. He makes at least two things clear: his wonder at being God's creative agent in the healing of disease and the importance of faith in facing the struggles he shares with all humanity.

Martha Lindbeck (scientist) and *Ann Pederson* (theologian) draw from their work together in a team-taught course to help church leaders become scientifically

literate—a necessary goal for those who want to speak with credibility in today’s public arena.

In a major article, filling a significant gap in biblical studies, *Rolf Knierim* examines science in the Bible. What was the state-of-the-art science behind the biblical narratives? Knierim’s article makes an important contribution to contemporary discussions about the Bible and the modern world; he demonstrates how scientific thinking appropriate to its time permeates the biblical record. It is, therefore, not possible to maintain a simplistic distinction between mythic biblical thought and scientific modern thought.

George Murphy uses the recent development of anthropic principles (that intelligent life plays a crucial role in the shaping of the universe) to provide new ways to think about the incarnation. He seeks not a new natural theology but a particular Christian theology in meaningful dialogue with the best of natural science.

How do scientists and theologians construe reality? *H. Frederick Reisz, Jr.* introduces five approaches to the relationship between reality itself and the way it is expressed. He hopes, as do we, that defining these presuppositions can contribute to self-understanding and to the dialogue between theology and science. *Beverly Stratton* agrees, claiming in the process that science is not scientific—at least if that means neutral, objective, and certain. She challenges us to think in revolutionary ways about what we always knew to be true—in both science and theology.

When the TV set breaks, most of us call the repair shop rather than praying. When we are ill, we expect a pill to make us better. We rely on technology in ways that earlier cultures relied on God. *Per Anderson* uses Luther’s essay on whether Christians can flee a plague to help us think theologically about the place and limits of technology in modern life.

L. Gregory Jones uses a novel (Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*) to introduce his reflections on the Christian contribution to the notions of aging, death, and medical care in American culture. Jones recognizes that the voice informed by trinitarian theology will sound surprisingly alien in a culture devoted both to denial of and fascination with death.

Considering another area of cultural life, *Frederick Kirschenmann* explores the role of technology in American agriculture. Kirschenmann is consistent, arguing the case for sustainable agriculture not only here on paper, but also in practice on his North Dakota farm!

In the Resources section, we are particularly pleased to bring the world’s first two Lutheran women bishops, *Maria Jepsen* and *April Ulring Larson*, face to face on our pages—we believe for the first time anywhere. Both address the catechism’s question (“What does this mean?”) to the fact of their election. In *Texts in Context*, *James Boyce* works through five Matthean texts for the Pentecost season. He finds their common theme to be the transforming power for discipleship provided by God in Jesus Christ.

F..J.G.