

Blurring Boundaries: science and religion in an Asian context

Suggested readings

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During the Q&A, I was asked what other people are writing about blurring boundaries. This annotated list is intended to provide a few starting directions for people who want to read more. It is by no means exhaustive. If you think I have missed any key texts, I am happy for suggestions.

Let me start from a biblical position and work out from there. John Walton, Professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College, and specializing in Ancient Near Eastern thought, authored a series of three books looking at the start of Genesis:

Walton, John H. (2010). *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.

Walton, John H. (2015). *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.

Longman, Tremper, III and John H. Walton (2018). *The Lost World of the Flood: Mythology, Theology, and the Deluge Debate*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.

These look at the categories that people in the Ancient Near East adopted and takes the view that, if those categories don't help you answer the questions you want to ask, well, that's a shame; but those are the categories with which the Bible was written, so deal with it. As such it does not so much "blur the boundaries" between science and religion, as ignore science and religion all together and roll with what Hebrew thought considered important.

We think in terms of "rights, freedoms, capitalism, democracy, individualism, globalism, market economy, scientific naturalism, an expanding universe, empiricism, and natural laws." (LWOTF, P.1.) Even if we don't adhere to these ideas, it is in terms of these ideas that our non-adherence is framed: anti-capitalist, un-democratic etc. Walton claims that Hebrew thought simply didn't operate with such categories. They framed ideas around things like "community identity, the comprehensive and ubiquitous control of the gods, the role of kingship, divination, the centrality of the temple, the mediatory role of images, and the reality of the spirit world and magic." (LWOTF, P.1.)

Of the categories in the two lists considered in the webinar, I find one break particularly worthy of note. Ancient Near Eastern cultures did not have conceptions of *natural* and *super-natural*. The universe only exists because God holds it together moment by moment; what space is there for anything *natural*. Instead they have the categories of *usual* and *unusual* courses of events. Rain in the rainy series is usual. Lack of rain in the rainy season is unusual. God is at work both in giving rain and in withholding rain. Water from a river is usual. Water from a rock is unusual. God is at work in both. One does not need the distinct category of *supernatural* to have the category of *miraculous*.

Pearcey, Nancy (2008). *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.
Latour, Bruno (1993). *We Have Never Been Modern* (Catherine Porter, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1991.)

During the Q&A I pointed the finger at the Enlightenment project for the rise of the categories and dichotomies that we currently adopt in the West. Pearcey provides a historical account of how Western thought has developed over the past few hundred years to arrive at its current state. She also outlines how the Church can act to unbuild the boundaries that have been set up between different parts of the human experience.

Latour considers Modernism as essentially *defined* by the adoption and grouping of the types of dichotomies I listed. He then works through why such dichotomies do not (and cannot) work in non-Western cultures, and how they did not really (and could not really have) worked in the West.

Harrison, Peter (2017). *The Territories of Science and Religion*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Chapter 1 of this was set for reading (or watching) prior to the webinar. Harrison argues that the boundaries we have in the modern West regarding science and religion are recent and contingent.

Nancy R. Pearcey and Charles B. Thaxton (1994). *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.
Harrison, Peter (2007). *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

If we think of science ahistorically (as we are told, as scientist, that we should) then it is hard to see how science could be different from how it is now, or how it could function using any other categories from the ones it now has. In these books, Pearcey & Thaxton and Harrison provide windows on those possible other ways of doing things. They consider the worldviews within which Western science has developed, how they have changed over time, and how that has influenced and been influenced by the nature of scientific endeavor.

Latour, Bruno (2010). *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*. London: Duke University Press.

In the webinar I attempted to use the “strange” aspects of “alternative” medicine as a provocation to see if things that we uncritically accept (like Western medicine) might exhibit parallels. From that perspective, we can consider afresh why we accept or reject certain things, and whether those reasons stand up to scrutiny. Latour does the same by comparing the construction of scientific facts with the construction of cultic fetishes. He shows that the distinctions that we would like to draw between modern scientific thought and indigenous tribal religions are a lot flimsier than we might be comfortable with. He then moves on to compare the creation, use, and destruction of images in religion, science, and art. He concludes by claiming that, if we wish to group dichotomies at all, science reaches to the invisible and ineffable, while religion deals with the objective, mundane, and un-miraculous.

Ellul, Jacques (2009). *Money and Power*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers.

The divide between facts and values is often taken to extend across the areas of maths, science and engineering: numbers are neutral and so is maths; facts are neutral and so is science; technology is neutral and so is engineering. Pearcey and Thaxton (1994) will have disabused you of that view as it concerns maths and science. Anything by Ellul is worth reading to quash the view that technology is neutral. I take *Money and Power* as an exemplar because it takes the ideas he developed elsewhere in philosophy of technology and applies them to money. This is not some high-level internet-banking style of technology, but the most basic technological idea of *money as a way to keep track*.

Connecting this with serious theological insight, I enjoy the way Ellul does not get hung up about realism. When he writes about a “spirit of money” I am not sure if he intends to refer to a mindset within human societies, or an emergent property of financial systems, or an actual demon that lives in your wallet. And I enjoy the fact that the ambiguity does not seem to matter for his argument.

Palmer, David A. (2007). *Qigong Fever: Body, Science, and Utopia in China*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Qigong was hailed as being part of the new Chinese science. It has also been classified under religion, medicine, sport, pseudo-science, religion, cult and fomenter of terrorist activity. And all this within a few decades in a single country. Palmer – who attempted to study the sociology of Asian science but, without changing topic, found himself being told it was now sociology of Asian religion – picks carefully through the difficulty of applying Western categories to Asian practices.

Lei, Sean Hsiang-lin (2016). *Neither Donkey nor Horse: Medicine in the Struggle Over China's Modernity*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.

I mentioned in the webinar that Western medicine has changed radically from its early form. Galen may have extolled the health benefits of physical exercise, regular washing and a balanced diet, but tend to embrace these now despite their Galenic endorsements, rather than because of them. Even in the past hundred years, Western medicine has changed almost beyond recognition.

There are many interesting parallels between Western medicine and Chinese medicine which I did not have time to unpack. One similarity, though, regards the radical changes it has undergone in the last hundred years or so. Lei looks at the recent political history of Chinese medicine and its positioning with respect to science.

Josephson, Jason Ananda (2012). *The Invention of Religion in Japan*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

During the Q&A, questions were posed regarding empire, conquest, hegemony and so forth. I mentioned that religion was a relatively new category to Asian thought, and that it had been formed, in part, in response to Western influences. Josephson gives an account of what happened when the United States introduced religion – as a category – to Japan.

Kim, Yung Sik (2014). *Questioning Science in East Asian Contexts: Essays on Science, Confucianism and the Comparative History of Science*. Leiden: Brill.

Kim unpacks the numerous issues of relating Confucianism to science.