

Science and Religion Forum Conference 2015

Science and Religion: Celebrating the Dialogue and Exploring the Future
St John's College Durham, 3rd-5th September 2015

Closing Remarks

Dr Mark Harris

Reflections on the 2015 conference and the summing up remarks from Dr. Mark Harris

The future of science and religion as an academic discipline has been pressing on my mind these last few days. I've just returned from the Science and Religion Forum's annual conference, held at Durham (UK), for three days, from 3 – 5 September. This being the 40th anniversary of the Forum (and its founding by Arthur Peacocke), the conference was billed as a look at the past, present, and future of the science and religion dialogue. Much to my interest, a number of the plenary speakers raised concerns about the current state of science and religion as an academic discipline. While much has been achieved over those 40 years in certain key areas such as the doctrine of creation, divine action, and the relationship between science and religion, there is much that is still unsolved in these areas, and also massive areas of concern elsewhere which have never been properly addressed. In short, there is an enormous amount of work still waiting for the current and future generations of scholars to take on. One of the wonderful things about the conference was that it became apparent that, despite the concerns, some completely new avenues are being opened up even now. The imperative will be to ensure that these new avenues become established research programmes across the field in time.

I was invited to provide rounding-up comments at the end of the conference. And this is what I said...

Mike Fuller (Chair of SRF) has asked me to say a few words looking towards the future, by way of rounding up. I will keep it brief because of the time, but also because the talks we've heard over the last 2 days have done so much to explore the possibilities ahead. I do, however, want to offer a couple of honest reflections

from my own perspective as someone who teaches science and religion to the next generation of scholars in the field.

First, I don't believe that all is rosy in the science and religion garden at the moment. Wim Drees warned us of the dangers of failing to engage both with our academic peers, and with the religious beliefs and practices of ordinary people. We are not very successful, he pointed out, and our work is socially marginal. Those were the terms he used, and coming from the editor of the leading journal in our field, I think we need to hear them. Alister McGrath put it more gently, speaking of the 'flatness' of the science and religion field. Whatever the adjective you use to describe the science and religion field, it's certainly true that in some academic quarters our work isn't held in as high esteem as we think it deserves, and it remains a glaring problem, I think, that while the debate between science and religion is of enormous popular interest, yet as an academic field our numbers are rather small. It also remains an issue that, as Michael Burdett hinted, science and religion is dominated by white, male, mostly Anglo-Saxon Christians; the membership of the Forum bears that out. Now it's wonderful that there are new people coming along to the Science and Religion Forum and getting involved, including some younger people, but we need to be doing rather more, I think, if the Forum is to be in good health in another 40 years' time. Ian Barbour and Arthur left us with an inestimable legacy (John Polkinghorne too), but I wonder whether they might not be a little shocked to realise that – again as Michael Burdett demonstrated – we're still asking much the same questions as they were. There are dangers for a field that continues to be so fixated with method, and with the need to keep defining itself, especially if after all that talk we go back to quantum physics and evolutionary biology as the only sciences that are really important to us, and to a very cerebral form of Christianity as our religion of choice. It's perhaps hardly surprising that science and religion remains something of a niche topic. I'm being self-critical here, but honest too – Mike asked me to be – but I'm of the opinion that we badly need to branch out.

And this leads me to the second thing I wanted to say. I've been delighted by the many new directions we've been shown in this conference. "Thanks be to God" as David Wilkinson put it.

In organising something like this, especially with the very general title we adopted this year, one is always slightly terrified that every speaker might say much the same

thing as the last. But far from it. We've been given a wealth of new approaches at this conference. I could hardly mention them all, but just to take three, Helen's work on palaeoanthropology, Michael's interests in technology, and Gillian's emphasis on Science and Religion as a pastoral issue are three issues that the field has hardly touched upon yet, but which are clearly crying out for some serious engagement. My own interests are perhaps closer to home. As you know I'm a physicist turned biblical scholar, and like Andrew Davison I'm keen that the much wider areas of theology and biblical studies should find a more natural home for us than perhaps has been the case so far. I find it perplexing, for instance, that while every seminary or university department of theology and religion in the Western world maintains its core teaching staff in topics such as biblical studies, philosophical theology, and religious studies, yet only a handful have seen fit to create a position in science and religion. I sincerely hope that over time that situation improves, and there are signs of growth, although it seems slow. But I think that this conference has given us some valuable pointers towards what needs to be done to engage more closely with the questions that our fellow academics beyond science and religion are asking, and the questions that ordinary people are asking, in their very different religious contexts to our own.

So I'd like to finish simply by reacting with enthusiasm to what we've learned at this conference, and to reflect a quietly-confident hope that, looking forward to the next 40 years, we will be able to respect Arthur's legacy by moving into brave new worlds for science and religion.