



Foundations in Science and Religion: Boundaries of Theory & Practice ECR Conference



Conference Programme & Abstracts

21st – 22nd September 2026

Link for Presentations

Please note each day is set up as a separate MS Teams meeting. There are not separate links for each session

JOINING LINKS PROVIDED TO REGISTERED ATTENDEES

Please note if you register during the conference or first thing Monday morning there may be a delay in sharing the programme/links – these will be sent as soon as possible.

Peacocke Prize: Student Essay Competition

In memory of its founding President and former Chairman, the Revd Dr Arthur Peacocke, the Science and Religion Forum offers an annual essay prize. The student essay can address any issue at the intersection of science and religion and does not need to relate to the conference theme, although students are welcome to address the conference theme should they wish. In 2024 the conference theme is Key topics from Arthur Peacocke's work. Full details:

<https://www.srforum.org/peacocke-prize>

The 2027 Peacocke Prize is open until 31st March 2027. Entrants must be registered as students (in school or university) at the time of submission OR have been registered in the previous 9 months.

- *i.e. have been in education in the previous 9 months- this includes those who sat examinations in Summer 2025/26 even if they were not receiving teaching in July*

The Peacocke Prize

The Peacocke Prize is usually run annually with the prize judged by a review panel. The Prize includes:

- A cash award of £250
- Free membership of the Forum for one year.
- UK travel and accommodation costs to the Forum's annual conference to present their winning essay in full (subject to panel decision)
- Publication of the essay as part of the conference "Special Section" in Zygon (subject to essay quality and continuing collaboration with Zygon or another journal or appropriate standing).

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Schedule Day 1 Monday 21st September

All times BST	
09:30 – 09:40	Opening Remarks
09:40 – 10:20	SHORT PAPER 1: Pascal and Hume: Two Solutions to the Problem of Scepticism
10:30 – 11:10	SHORT PAPER 2: The Controversy over the eternity of the world
Break	
11:30 – 12:45	KEYNOTE: "Through Relationship and Likeness": Relationality, Nature, and the Dialogue between Science and Theology
LUNCH	
13:30 – 13:50	LIGHTNING PAPER 1: A Christian Case for Futurism
14:00 – 14:20	LIGHTNING PAPER 2: Physical Theogony: Intersection between Science and Religion in the Derveni Papyrus
Break	
14:40 – 15:20	SHORT PAPER 6: "Magnifica Humanitas" and Human Dignity in the Age of AI: A Cross-Cultural Reading from the Chinese Context
15:20 – 15:30	Closing Remarks

Schedule Day 2 Tuesday 22nd September

All times BST	
11:00 -11:10	Opening Remarks
11:15 – 12:30	KEYNOTE: Whether and Where: Daoist and Confucian Boundaries with Science
12:35 – 13:15	SHORT PAPER 3: Non-Particularity in Physical Particle Modelling Suggests a Problem for Resurrection Models
13:20 – 14:00	SHORT PAPER 5: Tracing 19th-Century Scientific Racism and its Implications for Contemporary Gender Discourses of Religion in South Africa
LUNCH	
15:10 – 15:30	LIGHTNING PAPER 4: The Premise of Maximal Creation Immediately Entails the Law of Continuity
15:40 – 16:20	SHORT PAPER 7: How not to apply scientific evidence to philosophical debates: The case of evolutionary debunking arguments in ethics
16:45 – 16:55	Closing Remarks



Keynote Lectures

KEYNOTE 1: “Through Relationship and Likeness”: Relationality, Nature, and the Dialogue between Science and Theology

Professor Luca Settimo, University of Nottingham

ABSTRACT: This contribution proposes relationality as a fundamental category for fostering a constructive dialogue between the natural sciences and Christian theology while preserving the proper methods and claims of each discipline. It proceeds in three stages. First, it examines the pervasive character of relationality in the natural world. From the fundamental interactions described by physics to the complex networks of biochemical interactions underlying living organisms, created nature can be understood as a web of relationships in which different entities are interdependent and, in many cases, tend towards forms of unity. I will then consider relationality from a theological perspective, drawing on different Christian thinkers including Thomas Aquinas. I will argue that relation is not merely accidental to being but is intrinsic to both created and divine reality. In Trinitarian theology, the divine Persons are constituted by their relations, while in Christology the incarnation establishes a profound relational unity between divinity and humanity. My contribution further suggests that certain forms of self-donation and self-sacrifice observable in the natural world may be understood analogically as reflections of the relational and self-giving character revealed supremely in Christ. Relationality may therefore provide a shared conceptual horizon for dialogue between scientific and theological accounts of reality. Finally, I will consider the consonance of this proposal with Origen of Alexandria's interpretation of Romans 1:20, particularly his understanding of the relationship and likeness between visible and invisible realities.



*Luca Settimo is an Honorary Assistant Professor in Theology at the University of Nottingham. His first PhD, obtained in 2005, was in the field of pharmaceutical sciences. In 2022, he obtained his second PhD in Theology. During his doctoral studies in Theology, he reflected on the philosophical-theological approach adopted by Hans Jonas, a famous Jewish thinker whose philosophical reflections on life, nature, and the living organism sought to overcome the reduction of life to purely material and mechanistic explanations. Over the course of his career, Settimo has authored several articles in international peer-reviewed journals. His academic interests focus on science-engaged theology, biblical scholarship, exegesis and biblical theology. In 2024, he published a book entitled *The Philosophical-Theological Contributions of Hans Jonas: A Possible Enrichment for Christian Theology in Dialogue with Modern Natural Science*. In 2026, he published another book entitled *An introduction to the Letter to the Romans: a historical-critical guide*.*

KEYNOTE 2: Whether and Where: Daoist and Confucian Boundaries with Science

Dr Jacob Chengwei Feng, Fuller Theological Seminary

ABSTRACT: Drawing on Eastern, non-Christian sources on science & religion, I argue that the question of where a tradition's boundary with science falls can be corrected: rather, the claim should be that what a tradition's practitioners do determines whether and where that boundary lies. The field of science and religion has already recognized that its categories are Western and its framing is largely epistemic (Harrison; Smedes; Miller); what it has not done is to change the unit of analysis: as a direct consequence, the term “religion” has stayed generic. In addition, deification has been Orthodoxy's signature doctrine; its Protestant reception made an embodied practice “an intellectual exercise” (Feng), which shows that the epistemic framing diagnosed here operates inside Christianity too, not only across the East–West line.

Qi 气 (air, breath, pneuma) is the case where the answer to “whether” is no: porosity isn't a degree, it's the medium. To use religious Daoism as an example, at the end of the Tang Dynasty the Daoists began to turn their practices from waidan to neidan. Jiang and Tang call that turn a loss of scientific spirit. The question worth probing is: whose yardstick is that? Compared with waidan, neidan keeps, rather than abandons, the elixir and the equipment for compounding it — furnace, tripod, fire — moving them inside the body (Pregadio). Qi is regarded as one continuous

medium in which cosmos and body are the same workshop. Waidan was poisoning the ruling class. If we measure it against the goal Daoist practitioners actually held, external alchemy failed at its own purpose, indicating that the inward turn answers the evidence rather than retreating from it. The “decline” is produced by the imported boundary. The frame is not a Western imposition on passive Chinese material: Jiang and Tang apply that yardstick themselves.

According to the Daxue (Great Learning), a Confucian classic, gewu 格物 (investigation of things), as one of the eight items in a chain ending in 治国 and 平天下, is oriented toward governance through self-cultivation (Legge). It differs from the neidan practitioner’s aim in its scope: orderliness and wellness in the family and the state rather than one’s own health. That gewu zhizhi was retrofitted in the late Qing to mean natural studies, then modern science (Bai), is evidence for my thesis. Fung grants “no disagreement among scholars about the epistemic role of gewu” while arguing that zhizhi is not epistemic, which indicates that the Confucian sequence begins in something like inquiry and does not end in knowledge (Fung). While in Daoism the test is whether the body lasts, in Neo-Confucianism it is whether one acts (Zhu Xi). Both boundaries fall outside the epistemic register, but in different loci — the body, and conduct in the social order — because both are tested by outcome rather than warrant. The field cannot decide whether Ru 儒 is a party to the question at all — the same failure, one level up.



Jacob Chengwei Feng (Ph.D., Fuller Theological Seminary) is an Affiliate Assistant Professor of Theology and Leadership at Fuller and an Adjunct Professor at Pepperdine University and UC Irvine (teaching Religion and Science). He is Affiliated Research Professor in the Public Theology and Science Council for East Asia at the International Public Theology Forum Center, and leads the Theology Interest Group at the Society for Pentecostal Studies. His research spans religion and science, systematic theology, World Christianity, world religions, and interfaith dialogue. He is the author of Science, Religion(s), and Spirit(s) in China (Brill, 2026) and Spirits and Chinese Religiosity (Springer Nature, 2025), co-editor of the English and Chinese bilingual volume Chinese Christianity and Bible Translations (Asia Research Center Press, 2026), plus nearly three dozen articles and chapters in journals including the Scottish Journal of Theology, International Bulletin of Mission Research, Zygon, Dialog, and Theology and Science.



Short Papers

PAPER 1: Pascal and Hume: Two Solutions to the Problem of Scepticism

Rodrigo Luque, University of Luxembourg

ABSTRACT: In early modernity there was an important revival of ancient skepticism, which was very influential for Blaise Pascal and David Hume. The radical skeptics known as Pyrrhonians held that epochê (total suspension of judgement) could lead to peace, but for Hume and Pascal there is instead a tragic element in epochê. Both authors recognized that the Pyrrhonian arguments were ultimately irrefutable, but they also believed that the skeptic conclusion was highly hostile to life. Because science and rationality could not fully solve the skeptical problem, these authors used two radically different strategies. Hume's solution was 'mitigated skepticism', while Pascal's solution was to be found in religious faith. Hume accepts the Pyrrhonian conclusions, but he uses common-sense judgment and everyday activities to dampen the destructive force of radical doubt. Pascal instead argues that we must commit to a specific doctrine or set of beliefs, because reason alone is incapable of abating skepticism. One of the most challenging aspects of Hume's *Treatise* is that, while he seems to accept a form of skepticism, he also tries to offer a solid foundation for all the sciences, parting from 'the science of man' or psychology. Pascal is a lot less optimistic about solid foundations for science, but he does believe that rationality and faith are compatible. The two authors are thus grappling with very similar issues and using similar tools, but their epistemic intuitions end up taking them in completely different directions. For Terence Penelhum, these two stances symbolize two crucial antipodes of modern philosophy. Hume does not often mention Pascal, but in the few passages where he does, he is extremely critical, claiming that Pascal's philosophy was based on self-hatred. This is one more reason why the relationship between these authors is underexplored. In this paper, I examine their two strategies for overcoming epochê, and I offer an argument in favor of the Pascalian alternative. I argue that, although both solutions have significant risks, the religious option offers an upshot which is absent in Hume's mitigated skepticism.

PAPER 2: The Controversy over the eternity of the world

Eve-Alaine Dubois, University of Namur

ABSTRACT: In the first half of the twentieth century, the Big Bang theory had serious opponents. They favoured the idea of an eternal past of the universe in the name of science. But why should science be on the side of eternity rather than of finitist or temporalist positions? This question may be linked to the medieval controversy over the eternity of the world.

During the thirteenth century, the University of Paris was the scene of a conflict between the Faculty of Theology and the Faculty of Arts concerning the incorporation of Aristotle's corpus into the university curriculum and its reconciliation with Christian doctrine. One of the major stumbling blocks in this process was the question of the eternity of the world. The monotheistic religions unquestionably defended a temporalist or finitist position. Indeed, the Fourth Lateran Council reaffirmed the doctrine of divine creation. By contrast, although Aristotle firmly rejected the actual existence of an infinite magnitude, he maintained that the universe must be eternal.

In this context, numerous treatises entitled *De Aeternitate Mundi*, or bearing similar titles, were written during this period. A wide spectrum of positions emerged, ranging from Bonaventure, Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor, to Siger of Brabant, philosopher and master in the Faculty of Arts. Thomas Aquinas, who sought to reconcile Holy Scriptures and ancient philosophy, and Boethius of Dacie, who was less of an Averroist than he initially appeared, occupied intermediate positions within this spectrum. Gradually, as the Faculty of Arts asserted its intellectual independence, philosophical reasoning increasingly favoured the doctrine of the world's eternity. The aim of this paper



is to trace the intellectual genealogy from this medieval debate to the contemporary controversies in modern cosmology.

PAPER 3: Non-Particularity in Physical Particle Modelling Suggests a Problem for Resurrection Models

Braden Cooper, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

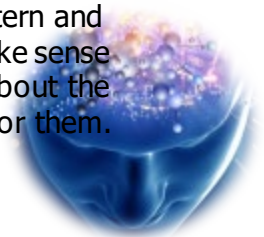
ABSTRACT: A traditional problem posed against reassembly resurrection models suggests that resurrection by reassembly is untenable because no causal connection between a pre-mortem person and their post-mortem resurrected person can be established; what instead results in the reassembly process is merely the creation of a duplicate person. Recent work attempting to revive reassembly modeling suggests that this problem can be dealt with if God were to pick out certain constitutive particles near the time of a person's death (as opposed to choosing any particles haphazardly, as in naive models) and reassemble them through some sort of back-tracking process. I argue that this solution is untenable, because it assumes that elementary particles are individual particulars, which does not reflect how particles are modeled nor interpreted in empirical physical (and philosophical) studies. Further, the fact that particles are instead modeled as non-particular and (sometimes) indistinguishable suggests a problem for all materialist resurrection models that assume the opposite.

In this paper, I show why the assumption of particle particularity arises in reassembly models, and then show why the assumption does not hold, working through multiple case studies defending the non-particularity and non-individuality of particles. This entails a serious problem for reassembly (and other materialist) models, since materialist models are doctrinally desirable. I briefly survey the reasons why this is the case, as well as the historical importance of and adherence to materialist resurrection. Finally, I consider the implications for theists if the challenges posed against materialist resurrection models are too great to overcome. I propose that the non-particularity of particles warrants the notion that materialist resurrection models are highly implausible. While I take seriously the problematic consequences for theism if this view is convincing, I also suggest more positively that it may have negligible impact on spiritual practice and hope for continuation beyond material existence. Taking cues from process-theoretical epistemic frameworks, I suggest that while we may not be able to say (or model) much of anything positive concerning the specific dynamics of resurrection in our current context, we need not deny its very possibility. As such, the theist can continue practice without much worry.

PAPER 5: Tracing 19th-Century Scientific Racism and its Implications for Contemporary Gender Discourses of Religion in South Africa

Siphosethu Fela, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

ABSTRACT: This article argues that current Christian religious discourses and attitudes toward the black female body, such as religious identity marked through sexuality, purity culture, (in)fertility rituals, menstruation and the exclusion from communion or prayers, have been influenced and informed by 19th-century scientific assumptions of the black female body as 1) source of pollution, 2) hypersexual/oversexed, and 3) unruly and feral. These scientific assumptions of the black female body can be said to be the genesis of our current realities as (black) women in South Africa of gender-based violence, sexual assault and femicide (Roberts, 1997; Baderoon, 2014). In postcolonial South Africa, the black female body continues to be seen as the measure of moral order, and social order, conversion and civility are maintained through the regulation of (black) women's sexuality. How the black female body and sexuality are defined and controlled using Western and Christian religious discourse calls for the need for a decolonial feminist lens to make sense of the present by searching the past in hopes of constructing a new narrative about the black female body and a new hope for black women living in a world not meant for them.



In this article, I am interested in tracing how the Church in South Africa viewed and still views the black female body through the lens of 19th-century scientific racism and sexism. I aim to illuminate the Black female as a gendered body, how 19th-century science has commodified, dehumanized, hypersexualized, and exploited this gendered body and how the colonial classifications of race and black(ness) have played a significant role in this.

PAPER 6: "Magnifica Humanitas" and Human Dignity in the Age of AI: A Cross-Cultural Reading from the Chinese Context

Oscar Siu

ABSTRACT: In May 2026, Pope Leo XIV issued his first encyclical, **Magnifica Humanitas**, marking a systematic application of Catholic social teaching to the digital age. The document robustly critiques the technocratic paradigm, the non-neutrality of algorithms, and autonomous weapon systems, while proposing a normative framework centered on the common good, the universal destination of common goods, subsidiarity, and solidarity. However, its theological grounding and Western primacy also raise questions regarding the universal validity of its claims.

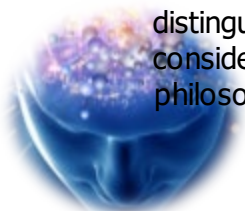
This paper pursues three objectives. First, it introduces the encyclical's background and core concerns. Second, it outlines its characterization of AI (as both a valuable tool and an inherently non-neutral entity), its guiding principles, and its critique of technocratic narratives of dominance. Third, and most importantly, it establishes a critical dialogue from a Chinese perspective. Specifically, this paper argues that: (1) the encyclical's concept of dignity, rooted in the "image of God," faces conceptual translation challenges in secular and East Asian Chinese cultural contexts heavily influenced by Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism; (2) its critique of the technocratic paradigm carry certain Western-centric assumptions that may create tension with the governance practices of China and some other Global South nations; and (3) the document remains predominantly principle-oriented, offering limited guidance on actionable institutional pathways. Furthermore, the paper explores potential cross-cultural resonances between the encyclical's emphasis on relational personhood and finitude and Confucian understandings of the self and the wisdom of limits.

By critically engaging with this newly published document, this paper aims to provide a non-Western reference for constructing a East Asian Chinese perspective on AI ethics discourse and to foster cross-civilizational dialogue on global AI ethics and governance.

PAPER 7: How not to apply scientific evidence to philosophical debates: The case of evolutionary debunking arguments in ethics

Jonathan Emery, King's College London

ABSTRACT: Evolutionary debunking arguments rest on the premise that evolution has substantially influenced our moral beliefs. This is then used as a reason to distrust our moral beliefs, since evolution aims at survival and reproduction rather than at any objective moral facts there may be. This is an issue of serious concern to a variety of religious traditions in which there is an objective moral law 'written on our hearts' to which we are accountable. I propose that there is a major problem with the way evidence is brought in from its original context in evolutionary debates and applied the philosophical debate. The debate in the sciences concerns whether evolution or culture is the source of our morals. The empirical evidence gathered is pertinent to that question. However, I argue that most of the evidence is actually irrelevant in the philosophical debate. Many predictions of the evolutionary hypothesis are also predictions of the moral realist alternative view. The success (or failure) of such predictions does not help to distinguish between these two hypotheses. I make a more general appeal for consideration of implicit alternative hypotheses when applying scientific evidence to philosophical and theological debates.



Lightning Papers

LIGHTNING 1: A Christian Case for Futurism

Sam McKee, Manchester Metropolitan

ABSTRACT: Religious views of the future can default to dystopian models, usually resting on eschatological images and interpretations on the Old Testament prophetic literature or the Book of Revelation. When envisioning nature in such terms, the focus often falls into negative connotations of the immediate future in favour of a nature restored, reborn or recreated. However, are such views of the future necessary in a Christian worldview? The early Royal Society envisioned a future where science was rallied for the good of the common man and woman, where the new science could transform the prospects of humanity and better the conditions of living, whilst inspiring awe and worship. Here I make the case for futurism - the view that the future can be glorious and better as science and technology advance - from a Christian perspective. I call more Christians to the futurist vision in lieu of the humanist writers claiming it as their own.

LIGHTNING 2: Physical Theogony: Intersection between Science and Religion in the Derveni Papyrus

Cristóbal Palisson, Universidad Finis Terrae

ABSTRACT: During archaeological excavations carried out in 1962 at a funerary site in Derveni, near Thessaloniki, the cremated remains of an ancient papyrus roll were discovered in a fourth-century BCE tomb. Following meticulous examination, the roll proved to be the oldest papyrus in Europe: The Derveni Papyrus. This papyrus is distinguished above all by presenting an unprecedented literary genre: the philosophical commentary on an Orphic theogony. The challenge of its analysis lies not only in the complexity of its content and its fragmentary state, but also in the fact that it prompts us to question the traditional paradigm concerning the development of ancient thought. Whereas the paradigm of the transition from *mýthos* to *lógos* conceives religion and philosophy as two distant and even opposing domains, the allegorical interpretation that the commentator of the Papyrus applies to traditional myth might instead establish a link between these two dimensions and strengthen the connection between mythological narrative and cosmological discourse.

This presentation has the purpose of discerning to what extent this connection is valid. This assessment is of vital importance since the ground-breaking vision presented in the Papyrus can be the first direct source of an attempt at reconciliation between science and religion in Antiquity. In order to proceed with this assessment, I will consider four key points:

- 1) First, in the same text coexist both an initiatory ritual (Col. I-VII) and a cosmological speech about the creation of the universe (Col. VIII-XVI), which leads us to conclude that two apparently opposite literary genres, scientific and religious correspondingly, can coexist in the same text.
- 2) The divinities are represented as elements of the *kósmos*, which have a special role in the order of the universe: Zeus is air, Moira is a whirl, Oceanus is water, and Cronos is fire. In this sense, the elements of the *kósmos* are conceived as sacred entities. Additionally, the phrase: "impiety is ignorance" (Col. V, 10) displays how, without a certain interest towards transcendence, we would never start the inquiry to comprehend the universe.
- 3) Furthermore, the author of the Derveni Papyrus intertwines its narration of the *génésis* of the gods with scientific theories of the explanation of the phenomena of the cosmos, such as the creation of tornadoes (Col. XVIII), the lack of light of the moon (Col. XIV), and universal conflagration (Col. XXV). The cosmological phenomena serve as ground for the explanation of the theogony.



4) Finally, a cosmological quote of Heraclitus in Col. IV, the most impious of all presocratic philosophers, serves as justification for its theogony. In this section, the cosmological speech of Heraclitus is described, according to the most followed readings, as a sacred speech (hieròs lógos). Moreover, Heraclitus employs mythological figures such as the Erynies and Justice to portray the cosmic order. In this sense, the arrangement of the universe is a product of the divinity.

All these features will lead us to the conclusion that the relationship between science and religion was closer in Antiquity than we traditionally supposed.

LIGHTNING 4: The Premise of Maximal Creation Immediately Entails the Law of Continuity

Robert Seletsky, University of New Mexico

ABSTRACT: This essay discusses an important instance of Leibniz's metaphysical and natural Law of Continuity: All physical objects in motion move gradually and continuously. This essay will argue that the premise of God's maximal creation, where maximal creation is defined as God actualizing everything in the most complete way possible, immediately entails the Law of Continuity. The primary reason for this is that maximal creation is contradictory to the existence of any empty space. I initially had one objection that maximal creation does not always entail the Law of Continuity. This objection is that if we assume, without loss of generality, that there is one point of discontinuity then maximal creation holds when an object moves discontinuously when the point of discontinuity is replaced by a different object. However, this essay will explain why this objection is not valid.

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About SRF

The Science and Religion Forum (SRF) had its inception in a series of discussions involving scientists, theologians and clergy which took place in Oxford in the early 1970s. The key figure in the early discussions was Arthur Peacocke who was to become the Forum's first Chairman, and later a Vice President and then President.

Today, SRF exists to promote discussion between scientific understanding and religious thought on issues at the interface of science and religion, and membership is open to people of any religion or none.

History of the Forum

In 1972, informal consultations began in Oxford between a group of scientists, theologians, and clergy who were concerned to relate their scientific knowledge and methods of study to their religious faith and practice. This group, gradually increasing in size, met annually.

It was decided at a meeting in Durham, in 1975, to inaugurate the SCIENCE AND RELIGION FORUM to enable further discussion of the complex issues that arise at the interaction between scientific understanding and religious thought. Such issues need close attention and continuing re-assessment. Together with the social and ethical decisions demanded by scientific and technological advances, these issues have formed the subject of the Forum's meetings since that date.

The Forum received charitable status in 1994. In 2005 the Science and Religion Forum merged with the Christ and the Cosmos Initiative. (The latter had been founded by the Revd Bill Gowland, a past President of the Methodist Conference, with the intention of bringing the latest knowledge of scientific thinking within the orbit of the enquiring layperson).

Membership

Science and Religion Forum a UK charity and membership organisation that is dedicated to promoting the discussion between scientific understanding and religious thought on issues at the interface of science, religion, and society. We are open to members of all faiths and none, and our conferences and student essay prize are open to all.

We have been working hard to diversify and broaden our membership, so that it is more reflective of those engaging with questions of science (including social sciences) and all religions. We have competitive membership rates. If you are interested in becoming a member follow the link below. Or to be added to our mailing list email srforum.membership@gmail.com.

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- Reduced rates for all SRF events, and opportunities for Early Bird discounts on the biennial hybrid conference.
- Student members receive free access to online events.
- Access to versions of conference papers published in external journals such as *Zygon*.
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