2026 Spring Conference : Grains of Sand & Stars in the Sky – *Science and Theology from the microscopic to the cosmic*

Conference Programme & Abstracts

15 – 16th May 2026

Joining the Conference

Please note it is the same Zoom link for both days. There are not separate links for each session

A link will be sent to registered participants

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 them 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 2024 Peacocke Prize is open until 17th May 2026. 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 July 2025 - this includes those who sat examinations in summer 2024/25 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).

Stay in touch after the conference:

LinkedIn: https://lnkd.in/euznvmE9
X/Twitter: https://twitter.com/SciRelForum_SRF
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/groups/411289328147318

Schedule Day 1 Friday 15th May

All times BST	
12:00 – 12:10	**Opening Remarks**
12:15 – 13:30	KEYNOTE 1: Prof. John Barton, University of Oxford
13:40 – 14:20	SHORT PAPER 1: Microcosms to Macrocosms: Ethical Ideals of Radical Connection
BREAK	
14:50– 15:30	SHORT PAPER 2: What can a dialogue between biomimicry and deep incarnation tell us about the role of nature in human flourishing?
BREAK	
16:00 – 17:15	KEYNOTE 2:Dr Jennifer Wiseman, NASA's Goddard Flight Centre
17:15 – 17:30	**Closing Remarks**

Schedule Day 2 Saturday 16th May

All times BST	
09:30 – 09:40	**Opening Remarks**
09:40 – 10:20	SHORT PAPER 3: Mental Causation, Divine Action, Interactionism, and Conservation Laws: Taking Noether's First Theorem and Field Theory Seriously
10:30 – 11:45	KEYNOTE 3: Prof. Mark Harris, University of Oxford
BREAK	
12:30 – 13:10	SHORT PAPER 4: Does the vast size of the universe, compared to the earth, imply that divine creation extends to parallel universes?
13:20 – 14:00	SHORT PAPER 5: Beauty: a transcendental capable of driving the advancement of research in physics
14:00 – 14:10	**Closing Remarks**

Keynote Lectures

KEYNOTE 1: The innumerable in the religious thought of the Hebrew Bible

Prof. John Barton, University of Oxford

ABSTRACT: In Genesis God promises to Abraham descendants more numerous 'than the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore'. Hebrew culture seems to have expressed the ideas for which we use terms such as 'infinite' and 'infinitesimal' by drawing an analogy with objects too many to count or too fine-grained to form a unity. This was not distinctive as a way of describing observed reality, but it came to be applied creatively to an understanding of the divine that coheres with later Jewish and Christian monotheism, by insisting that God is incomparable and outside everything measurable.

In time this yielded important paradoxes, such as that divine 'weakness' is a form of strength, which feeds into the 'kenotic' (self-emptying)' idea of God, who 'emptied himself' according to St Paul (Philippians 2) in order to become human, 'lower than the lowest that can be imagined'. In some strains of Jewish thought it promoted the doctrine of divine contraction (tsimtsum), which says that God had to 'breathe in' to make enough space for the created world. Less is more, as we might put it today!

Thus reflecting on an everyday idiom led thinkers in early Judaism and Christianity to see 'innumerability' as a key to sophisticated theological ideas. Theology often advances through the imaginative use of metaphor and analogy, even by paying attention to what may seem, as here, to be quite casual turns of phrase.

(Participants in this session may find it helpful to bring a small Bible.)

John Barton is Emeritus Oriel & Laing Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture and Fellow of Oriel College Oxford, and Senior Research Fellow at Campion Hall Oxford. He is also Fellow of the British Academy and of the Norwegian Academy of Arts and Sciences. In August 2024, John Barton was elected as a member of Academia Europaea. He is the author of several works on the Bible and ancient Israel, among them A History of the Bible: The Book and its Faiths (2019) and Ethics in Ancient Israel (2014).

KEYNOTE 2: From Light to Planets: A Universe Poised for Life

Dr. Jennifer Wiseman, NASA's Goddard Flight Centre

ABSTRACT: Modern telescopes are unveiling the universe with unprecedented sensitivity, utilizing many wavelengths of light, sensitive detectors, and innovative techniques to probe far back in cosmic space and time. The astounding findings show a universe with primitive galaxies early-on, followed by active galaxy growth, generations of stars, and eventually countless star systems with planets and the elements needed for life. I will present some of the latest astronomical findings of the distant and local universe, and then discuss how the recent burst of exoplanet discoveries is fueling a resurgence of ancient questions that reach beyond the realm of science alone, such as: Are we alone in the universe? Is there a Purpose for the universe? Is life on Earth significant? How would life beyond Earth relate to God? And how is the self-perception of humanity impacted by searching for life elsewhere in the universe?

Dr. Jennifer Wiseman is an astrophysicist, author, and speaker. She studies the process of star and planet formation in our galaxy using radio, optical, and infrared telescopes. Dr. Wiseman studied physics at MIT, where she discovered the comet 114P/Wiseman-Skiff. She then earned a Ph.D. in astronomy at Harvard University, and continued her research as a Jansky Fellow at the National Radio Astronomy Observatory and as a Hubble Fellow at The Johns Hopkins University. She has worked with several international observatories and is currently a senior astrophysicist at the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center.

In addition to research in astrophysics, Dr. Wiseman is also interested in science policy and public science outreach and engagement. She served as a U.S. Congressional Science Fellow and an elected councilor of the American Astronomical Society. She is an elected Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of

Science, where she is also Director Emeritus of the program of Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion (DoSER). She is also a Fellow of the American Scientific Affiliation, a network of Christians in Science.

KEYNOTE 3: Why was God determined to create quantum mechanics?

Prof. Mark Harris, University of Oxford

ABSTRACT: Quantum indeterminacy has been a gift for theologians. Classical Newtonian physics was widely supposed to create insuperable problems for belief in divine action and human free will owing to its rigid determinism. But the development of quantum mechanics in the twentieth century saved the day: quantum indeterminacy, in particular, appears to throw the future wide open to divine influence again (not to mention human self-determination). But what exactly is quantum indeterminacy, and is it really such a lifeline for theism? I will raise some of the problems which are often overlooked in theological accounts, but will go on to flag up my wider interest, which is to ask what quantum indeterminacy tells us about God the creator, if it is taken seriously.

Mark Harris is the Andreas Idreos Professor of Science and Religion at the University of Oxford, as well as its Director of the Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion, and a professorial fellow of Harris Manchester College, Oxford. A condensed-matter physicist who has also trained as a theologian, his current research interests explore the theological implications of recent developments in the quantum foundations field.

Short Papers

PAPER 1: Microcosms to Macrocosms: Ethical Ideals of Radical Connection

Matthew Dennis; TU Eindhoven

ABSTRACT: Philosophers view their discipline has having many tasks, but one task that escapes attention in contemporary academic philosophy is expounding, defending, and contesting concrete ethical ideals. This marks a change from philosophers in previous eras, who devoted much of their energies and attention to question of how one should live and how to cultivate the good life (Dennis 2020, Williams 2006), as they viewed the task of articulating ethical ideals as one of their most fundamental roles. Today it is gurus, spiritual leaders, religious thinkers, and even influencers (Dennis 2023, 2021) who most commonly propose ethical ideals, often proposing practical life advice by invoking their own social, political, or cosmological worldview.

The primary aim of this presentation is to trace a neglected genealogical thread that connects what I term, ethical ideals of radical connection. The common denominator of such ideals is that they offer a normative framework that attributes ultimate value in aligning the human self – what I call, 'the microcosm' – with larger cosmic structures – 'the macrocosm'. Thinkers in this tradition are philosophically categorised as monists, but they differ from traditional monists insofar as they are interested in structural similarities between the microcosm (the human self) and the macrocosm (the universe), as well as stressing the importance of living in a way that emphasises this practical alignment.

The second aim of this presentation is to explore how emerging technologies create new possibilities for such an ethics of radical connection, that is, for the ideal of aligning one's own human world (microcosm) with the cosmic one (macrocosm). To do this, I discuss the so-called 'overview effect' (White 2014), which purports to describe the cognitive and emotional transformation that some astronauts experience when looking at the Earth from space. Rapid technological advances in drone photography, recordable eyewear, and virtual reality have vastly increased the extent to which the overview effect is part of our collective imaginative landscape. One key feature such technologies is their ability to allow their users to alternate between their own first-personal perspective and a third-personal one, as well as being able to share these perspectives with others (Robb et al. 2024).

I proceed as follows: first, I trace a genealogical line that links philosophers of radical connection, distinguishing between those that make a 1) weak claim about analogous alignment between the microcosm and the macrocosm (Plato, Stoics, Leibniz), from those that make 2) a strong claim about ontological alignment (Spinoza, Buddha, Taoists). I explore why these thinkers think we can understand the cosmos by knowing the self and vice versa, as well as the ethical benefits that they think flow from letting this understanding inform how we live. After this, I explore how the ability of technology to change how we view the connection between the microcosm and the macrocosm could have social, political, and environmental benefits.

PAPER 2: What can a dialogue between biomimicry and deep incarnation tell us about the role of nature in human flourishing?

Cayla Bleoaja; University of Oxford

ABSTRACT: Biomimicry refers to the practice of applying strategies observed in nature to comparable challenges in human society. It seeks to understand the principles and underlying mechanisms of living organisms and their biological processes in order to inform innovations in science, engineering, and medicine. This thesis examines the relationship between humans and nature by bringing biomimetics in conversation with the theology of deep incarnation, which extends the traditional understanding of Christ's incarnation to the physical and ecological dimensions of creation. It offers insight into how science and society might benefit from a schema in which the earth and all creatures are integrated in God through the extended mind of Christ that conjoins the biological web of all life. Deep incarnation uses the notion of 'information' to distinguish between God and creation, in that life forms can be said to 'increase' in information in the ascent from the simple to the complex. Deep incarnation presumes that God the creator must share some aspects of information with the world of creation if God can be said to be embedded, through incarnation, into the very tissues of material and biological existence. Given that in some cases nature has information that humans do not have, this thesis argues against a hierarchical structure that places humans above other life forms and reconsiders the role humanity has within the community of creatures on Earth. Additionally, the principles undergirding biospheres and ecosystems can offer unique insight for flourishing social systems and for how humans ought to live.

PAPER 3: Mental Causation, Divine Action, Interactionism, and Conservation Laws: Taking Noether's First Theorem and Field Theory Seriously

J. Brian Pitts; University of Cambridge, Mohamed bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence

ABSTRACT: Since Leibniz's day, but especially since the late 19th century, conservation laws for energy and momentum have been invoked as objections to interactionist substance dualism. 20th century philosophers, viewing interactionism as the only plausible dualism, took the conservation objection to refute dualism. The argument also confronts non-epiphenomenalist property dualism. A number of authors including Stoeger have also held that divine action respects conservation laws. Special divine action, if any, is perhaps confined to quantum interstices, undermining traditional paradigm instances. The argument in question invokes not neuroscience (a different, newer and potentially better argument), but elementary textbook physics.

This objection is, however, vitiated by two typically neglected aspects of physics and their consequences, namely, locality and the (bi)conditional relation to symmetries. While conservation laws often appear as a black box in the philosophy of mind, metaphysics and theology, they have a clear theoretical physics origin. First, conservation laws are primordially local, holding not for the universe, but for every place separately as partial differential equations, saying how the density varies with time plus how the flux varies with place. (Global conservation follows by integration if one can discard a term at spatial infinity---which likely one cannot.) Consequently, local conservation laws form an infinite conjunction of conservations in different places. By De Morgan's law (not (A and B) is (not A or not B or both)), non-conservation in some place(s) (e.g., brains) would not be catastrophic or (if one is not studying brains) even clearly bad. Second, conservation laws are grounded in symmetries by Noether's theorem: energy (momentum) conservation follows from the assumed uniformity of physical laws over time (space, respectively). Hence, there is no theoretical reason to expect conservation of energy or momentum in the presence of mental causation: willing to raise one's arm would involve one's mind/soul's acting in one's brain during one's lifetime, not equally everywhere and always. Relatedly, Noether's theorem has a converse: conservation implies symmetry, so by contraposition, non-symmetry implies non-conservation. Thus, interactionists should

expect conservation laws to fail. To demand that conservation hold anyway begs the question.

Interactionist proposals to uphold conservation tend to be either unsuccessful or unnecessary for addressing the objection. For example, non-local compensation purports to uphold conservation by what is actually a violation elsewhere. Quantum mechanics, though presumably necessary to say how the mind and brain actually work, is unnecessary to defuse the objection.

However, General Relativity makes interactionist mental causation more difficult, not easier as is sometimes proposed. It is possible to interpret this result in terms of abundant pseudotensor conservation laws in General Relativity. Whatever one's stance on gravitational energy (controversial since 1918), General Relativity tends to trivialize efforts to introduce mental causation into (classical field) physics. This tendency, however, might be overwhelmed, especially given the other beliefs (such as theism or broadly mind-first metaphysics) that proponents tend to hold.

With conservation in brains being an empirical question, expecting special divine action to respect conservation laws is a theological judgment rather than a scientific result.

PAPER 4: Does the vast size of the universe, compared to the earth, imply that divine creation extends to parallel universes?

Zak Parsons; University of St Andrews

ABSTRACT: The observable universe is enormous. Give our planet's light cone; there are areas of the universe that we will never be able to see. Areas that are moving away from us at speeds that mean we could never reach them, even at light travel. Take two postulates that many monotheists assume: that the rest of the universe is devoid of life, and that an almighty God created all for the universe as by intelligent design. We are left with a gaping question of, why? Why bother making the universe so vast and, largely, so empty? I suppose that there are positive answers to this question, but these only invite another question. If God chose for the universe to be vast and expand, the did he create any others? Maintaining the postulates, these universes would be devoid of life, but this only opens up the possibility for God to create nomologically impossible worlds. Tegmark's (1997) counterfactuals reasonings of dead worlds with different spatial and temporal dimensions could become a reality under a divine creator. Many of Lewis's (1986) weird and wonderful concrete worlds could be actualised. If God created parts of the universe for reasons other than us, then why would he not also create other universes? That is, chunks of spacetime (or whatever spacetime emerges form) that are spatiotemporally separated from our universe. This paper presents this question and offers a conditional statement; if God created parts of this universe that nobody can ever see, then he would have created parts of other universes as well. Whether this conditional will serve as a modus ponens or modus tollens, is for the reader to decide.

PAPER 5: Beauty: a transcendental capable of driving the advancement of research in physics

Luca Settimo; University of Nottingham

ABSTRACT: In this paper, I will discuss Paul A.M. Dirac's appreciation for beauty in the mathematical formulas of physical laws. Some physicists are inclined to choose "beautiful" mathematical formulas to represent the laws of physics. Beauty can serve as a path to truth in physics and can also be considered a driver of its advancement. A clear example in this regard is Einstein's theory of relativity, which enabled the advancement of physics by moving away from the Newtonian paradigm. This scientific development is consistent with the fact that some physicists have described Einstein's mathematical formulas as "beautiful." I will then briefly reflect on the ways in which philosophers have sought to justify an aesthetic criterion for theory evaluation. I will emphasize that beauty arises when certain criteria of symmetry and harmony are met. Notably, these criteria can be expressed mathematically or geometrically. Finally, I will discuss the notion of beauty as a transcendental category (together with truth and goodness) and argue that it can serve as a bridge between philosophical-theological disciplines and modern science.

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 £5/month covers 1 student discounted place at the conference

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 £40/month would (almost) cover the printing costs for Reviews

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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 of the follow the link below. Or to be added to our mailing list email srforum.membership@gmail.com.

Membership benefits include (for full details see the website):

- Receipt of *Reviews in Science and Religion Journal* per year
- Member-only early access to recordings of talks at SRF conferences.
- 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*.
- Notification of the Forum's activities, details of relevant third-party events and early information concerning SRF conferences.

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