

[Please note that this article was previously published in the 2012 SRF conference volume, 'The Concept of the Soul']

The Science and Religion Forum: a short history

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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 object of these discussions was to identify a way of facilitating the dialogue on the relationship of scientific knowledge to religious faith and practice. As a result of these discussions the Forum was formally established at a meeting in Durham in 1975. 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.

The Forum grew steadily in size in its early years and was awarded charitable status in 1994. By the early 2000s it had grown to well over 300 members but the merging of the 'Christ in the Cosmos Initiative' (CCI) with the Forum in 2003 added an additional 100 members in that year. CCI had been founded by the Revd Bill Gowland, former Chairman of the Methodist Conference, with the aim of bringing scientific knowledge to the layman; but in 2003 it seems to have taken the view, in the light of declining membership numbers, that it might be better to meet this aim by joining with the Forum. The merger took effect in 2005: CCI transferred its financial assets to the Forum and expressed the hope that the Forum might be willing to continue the annual Gowland Lecture which CCI had established in honour of its founder. This the Forum agreed to do, and the Gowland Lecture, open to the public, has become an important feature of each year's annual conference.

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. Right from the start the annual conference has been the Forum's main activity, and there have so far been 38 annual conferences held at different locations across the UK. The Forum has tried to provide a balance between north and south in choosing locations and eighteen have been used in total: five of these, Oxford, Cambridge, Durham, Chester, and the High Leigh Conference Centre in Hoddesden, have each hosted the conference at least three times. The topics covered by the conferences have included most of the key themes in the science and religion debate, but four broad areas have predominated: physical sciences/ cosmology-related topics: man and his place in the universe: evolutionary/ biological sciences-related topics; and divine action (the topic for 2013 but also discussed in 1978 and 1991). A number of conferences have been jointly organised with other bodies including the British Ecological Society (1996), the British Association for the Advancement of Science (1997), the Ian Ramsey Centre and the Cavendish Laboratory (2005), the European Society for the Study of Science and Theology (2010), and Cumberland Lodge, Windsor (2011).

Publication has become a major activity for the Forum. This began in 1982 when, at the Guildford meeting that year, it was decided to publish *Reviews in Science and Religion*. The first issue appeared in June 1982 and May 2013 saw the publication of issue no 62 in the series. Originally it was intended that *Reviews* should contain articles that had already appeared elsewhere, and this policy was followed during the first 15 years of publication (the period of office of the first editor). *Reviews* began to change with the inclusion of specially commissioned articles, and now consists mainly of original reviews of books in the science and religion area, together with longer commissioned articles on the ideas expressed in a particular (not necessarily new) book. *Reviews* has become an important part of the Forum's activities, and for this SRF owes much to the sterling efforts of the four members who have held the post of editor during the last 31 years.

The publication of SRF conference proceedings is a comparatively recent addition to this publishing activity, and began with the proceedings of the 2006 conference on Creation and the Abrahamic Faiths. Published proceedings have been produced every year since then, with the exception of the proceedings of the joint conference with ESSSAT in 2010, and the present volume represents the sixth in the series. The full list of volumes published to date (all by Cambridge Scholars Publishing) is as follows:

Creation and the Abrahamic Faiths (ed N. Spurway) 2008

Theology, Evolution and the Mind (ed N. Spurway) 2009

Matter and Meaning: is Matter sacred or profane (ed M. Fuller) 2010

Darwinism and Natural Theology: evolving perspectives (ed A. Robinson) 2012

Inspiration in Science and Religion (ed M. Fuller) 2102.

When the Revd Dr Arthur Peacocke died in 2006 SRF received a generous bequest from his estate. The Forum encourages student membership, and the Peacocke Bequest allowed the Forum to establish an annual student essay prize competition as an important part of its activities designed to reach out to students. The prize is offered for an essay directly relevant to the theme of the Forum's annual conference, and is open to all undergraduate and post-graduate students in full or part-time education.

Throughout its existence SRF has benefitted from having in its membership some of the leading thinkers in the field of science and religion. This, along with the many others who have spoken at the Forum's annual conferences, has been an important contributory factor in allowing the Forum to realise its aims and achieve its current standing.