

Philip Clayton

“Science and the Spiritual Quest”:
A Model for the Renewal of the Religion-Science Discourse

THE STATE OF THE INTERNATIONAL
RELIGION-SCIENCE DISCUSSION TODAY

The late 1980's and early 1990's saw an explosion of the global dialogue on science and religion. Both within specific religious traditions and across the traditions, scientists and religious believers engaged in a more sustained, more rigorous, and more productive dialogue than at perhaps any earlier point in history. This “internationalizing” of the science-religion dialogue opened in a mood of great optimism. Scientists and religious scholars in many of the world's religions began simultaneously to explore the intersections between modern science and their own religious traditions. In the initial meetings of Muslim, Jewish and Christian scientists one experienced a clear sense of being involved in a common project—a sense of commonality that one does not always feel when involved in inter-religious dialogues. The mutual respect with which participants viewed one another as fellow scientists certainly contributed significantly to these early successes in the international science-religion dialogue. One could tell that those who were geniuses at drawing lines of connection, such as Prof. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, were simultaneously recognized by those in other traditions as pioneers and partners in a common field.

As I pen these words, however, we face a much darker time. No man is an island; what occurs between our politicians and our nations will also affect the discussions between our scientists and our scholars of religion. Unnecessary and ill-conceived wars are being fought, and our hearts are wrenched daily by pictures of the deaths of innocent

Philip Clayton, Claremont School of Theology, 1325 College Ave., Claremont,
CA 91711, USA; Email: pclayton@cst.edu.

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people. Undoubtedly wrongs are being committed on all sides, and a balanced discussion of the political situation would have to present it in all its ambiguities. Still, among the wrongs to be acknowledged are the aggressive policies and cultural insensitivity of the current American administration. Saddest of all, one recognizes that some of the misguided policies stem, at least in part, from a wrongly politicized interpretation of Christianity in its relationship to Islamic cultures and nations.

It is not my place to resolve the political questions and to make ultimate assignments of blame or praise. But one does have to be realistic about how the present situation has affected the internationalization of the science-religion dialogue. Clearly, for many Muslims the recent hostilities have done great damage to the partnership in which we were engaged together until only recently. A few years ago leading Muslim scholars happily invited American scholars to international meetings that they were organizing in Pakistan, Indonesia, Morocco, and Iran. Today that is difficult, if not impossible. One needs only to imagine the American professor standing at the podium before a Muslim audience. Sadly, however much the organizers may respect the American speaker as a person and a scholar, they know that in his language and in the culture that he brings the audience will inevitably see the policies of his government. This fact means that the international science-and-religion discussion is in the greatest possible crisis that it could be in, for when we can no longer meet in each other's countries for lectures and collaborations, we are cut off from one another, and the dialogue is at an end.

I open on this dark note because it *is* the situation that we currently face. No one should see naive optimism in the proposal that follows. To the contrary: I fear that it will take years to undo the damage that has been done in recent years. But we must not accept defeat: the more difficult the situation in our field becomes, the harder we must work to attempt to reestablish common ground. First we seek, for the sake of science, to reestablish collaborations between our scientists. Then we seek to build upon that scientific exchange, once again involving our religious scholars in science-religion discussions. We know from the brief successes of the past how powerful these discussions can be in overcoming misunderstanding and animosity within our religious communities. And finally, we seek to expand that discussion outward, so as to influence our broader culture—in the

hope, perhaps, of influencing our leaders and our politicians in the direction of peace and justice.

But what kinds of collaborative programs can possibly have these positive effects in today's climate? In the few pages that remain I wish to describe a program that recently brought together scientists from a variety of religious traditions and allowed them to engage in productive dialogue concerning themes in science and religion. I will then suggest corrections and supplements to this program that would increase its effectiveness in the present context. Finally, I will argue that it is of the highest importance that we work to reestablish and carry out programs of this sort so that we can again bring light into the darkness that currently surrounds us.

Science and the Spiritual Quest

By most measures, "Science and Spiritual Quest" (SSQ) was a successful program. Between 1995 and 2003 SSQ held 16 private three-day workshops on two continents, involving 123 new scientists in constructive dialogue at the intersections of science and spirituality. The program organized 17 public events in nine countries on four continents. Taken together, these events reached close to 12,000 audience members firsthand and many millions more through the media—some 250 million, according to the official estimates of one media research firm. Six books covering the research output of SSQ have been published on four different continents or are currently in production. The group's website (www.ssq.net) lists four full-length video products and contains a massive amount of supplementary material; further excerpts from the SSQ program are available through the Counterbalance Foundation (www.counterbalance.org). In all, 48 different organizations, institutions and financial supporters became allies in achieving these results.

Could the SSQ program serve as a model for future international collaborations? To answer this question, we must first consider not only what made the SSQ program so successful, but also what were its limitations and drawbacks. Only then can we determine ways to adapt and improve this model for the present context.

SSQ scientists were chosen who could be effective spokespersons for their religious traditions as well as strong representatives for science. Scientists such as Mehdi Golshani in Tehran earned a hearing as religious persons because of the high respect in which they were held as scientists. Alongside senior figures with international

reputations, the program also included other scientists who were younger and less experienced, since their early efforts at connecting their scientific and religious lives brought freshness and authenticity to the dialogue.

It is crucial to consider the format of the private workshops, since that is the feature which, I will argue, is most worthy of repeating today. The SSQ scientists were divided into groups according to disciplinary interests, and each group met twice, each time in private sessions that lasted for two and a half days. Crucial for the success of these meetings were the in-depth and sometimes personal interviews that were conducted with each scientist prior to the meeting. Each scientist was asked to describe how he personally experienced the “double identity” of being a scientist and a religious believer—not only where the two sides of his identity enhanced each other, but also where he experienced difficulties. These interviews were transcribed and were distributed in advance to the other participants. Thus, when they met for the first time, they already shared the sort of intimacy and trust that comes from honest introspection and self-disclosure.

In one sense, what occurred at the private workshops was not extraordinary. Each scientist had an hour to summarize his understanding of science from his religious perspective. Two other scientists, usually from two other religious traditions, then raised questions and made comments about what they had heard, and the entire group engaged in discussion with the speaker. But the results of the process *were* extraordinary. Because of the personal nature of the comments and the insight they represented, each participant recognized that the struggles and the moments of integration described by the speaker were not dissimilar to his own. In no way were the differences between the religious traditions obscured. Still, while recognizing these differences one also came to see deep underlying connections in each person’s struggle to integrate his religious belief with contemporary science.

The second meeting occurred six months later and offered the opportunity to move from the personal to the conceptual level. In preparation for this meeting, each scientist prepared a careful position statement. These papers, which were circulated to the other participants in advance, showed where contemporary science could be integrated with the author’s tradition, where the common understanding of science might need to be modified, and where changes in the usual interpretation of his particular religious tradition might

be necessary. At the actual workshop the words of the presenters and commentators again led to intense exploratory discussions of the topics. And once again the scientists became allies to each other as each one attempted to find a more powerful and effective way to state his own position.

Many of the scientists were then invited to present their position papers at public forums around the world. In all, 17 public events were held in nine countries on four continents. Not only scientists but also religious leaders and interested laypersons were invited to hear the presentations and to engage in sustained discussion with the speakers. Newspaper and journal articles about the meeting appeared in many different languages around the world, and many of the presentations were collected into books that were later published. In this way the sort of common understanding that can only be achieved in small groups of experts—thanks to extended discussions, careful listening, and a deep level of trust—was subsequently made available to a much larger audience, spreading the impact of the program far beyond the circle of participating scientists.

A Program for the Future

There were of course weaknesses in the particular details of the SSQ program. The program leaders were all Christians, and the center that administered the program had a particular interest in Christian theology. Some of the selections of participating scientists were arbitrary, since the selection committee was simply unaware of scientists who would have been ideal participants. Although the public events took place around the world, the workshops themselves were all held in the West. Not enough participants were invited to speak at the public conferences, so that not all of the ideas were heard in public. Sadly, too few of the conferences took place within the Muslim world.

One therefore wants to know: what would be the ideal form for the religion-science discussion in the future, so that it could be as effective and influential as possible? In what ways might the SSQ program, in a corrected and improved form, serve as a model? Rather than dwelling on the past, we must hunt for fruitful opportunities for the future. To make the question manageable, let's limit the discussion to possible programs involving Muslim, Jewish and Christian scientists only.

One imagines, first of all, a consortium of at least three centers, one drawn from each of the three religious traditions. Leadership and administration of the joint science-and-religion project is shared

equally between the three, and each plays some role in hosting and supporting the program. Most importantly, decisions concerning participating scientists are made jointly by the leaders of the three institutes. After all, it is not easy to find scientists who are both representative of their religious traditions and also willing and able to engage in open, exploratory dialogue with members of other traditions.

The workshops themselves, and of course the final conferences, will be divided equally between locations that are primarily Muslim, Jewish and Christian. Each workshop group will consist of 15 scientists—five from each religious community—who share a common area of scientific work. The task of moderating at each of the individual workshops will be shared among the leadership staff, with representatives of at least two of the traditions sharing the role of chair at any given time.

It is not hard to imagine what would be the positive effects of carrying out this truly international project on “Science and the Spiritual Quest in the Abrahamic Traditions.” Indeed, in today’s context the mere *existence* of a cooperative program of this sort would be a powerful statement, even before any concrete results were achieved. The relationships built among the participating scientists themselves will be transformative: there is nothing like the experience of internalizing the perspective of another person, understanding it both in its similarities to and in its differences from one’s own perspective. The mutual understanding that occurs through discussions of the interviews and through cooperative work on the various position papers will itself be worth the effort of running the program.

But it is through the organization of the public events that the broadest and clearest impact will be felt. These large-scale meetings will be events of great significance both for the international scientific committee and for our respective religious communities. In today’s context, one can be sure that the international media will flock to report on them. In fact, the appearance of leading Muslim, Jewish and Christian scientists on the same platform will be such a charged event that one has to worry about whether it will be possible to find safe venues where the events can take place. One wonders, for example, whether Muslim scientists would feel safe appearing on a public stage at any major university in Israel today, and one can imagine the difficulties of hosting Jewish and Christian scientists at

certain locations in the Muslim world. Some compromises will certainly be necessary. Thus, for example, the SSQ meeting on “The Three Monotheisms” had to be held in southern Spain—which has long been a meeting ground for scholars from the three Abrahamic traditions—rather than in Tel Aviv as originally planned.

Why Should One Attempt Inter-Religious Discussion?

In the end, the motivation for pursuing inter-religious science-religion discussions must come from within each individual religious tradition. Muslim scholars have written in the pages of this Journal and elsewhere that there is ample reason within the Qurʾān and within the Islamic intellectual traditions for a close dialogue between contemporary science and Islamic thought and practice. The same is true, though for different reasons, for Judaism and Christianity. But, one wants to know, is there also a Muslim motivation for an ongoing dialogue between the various religious traditions on this topic? This is a question that I am not competent to answer.

It might be helpful, however, to pause to review some of the motivations a Christian scholar might have for engaging in an inter-religious conversation on science and religion. In the Protestant Christian tradition, the task of interpreting the scriptures and the history of the church—not to mention the history of the world as a whole—is placed upon each individual. If God is the God of the whole cosmos and of all of history, then everything in the world, and all parts of history, are relevant to our efforts to discern the divine will and action. For most Christians, and certainly for liberal Protestants like myself, God’s revelation is not limited to the Christian tradition alone. Over the last 300 years Protestants have struggled to understand how to be faithful to their own tradition while at the same time acknowledging that divine revelation goes beyond any neat set of categories we may have developed. The concept of revelation is two-sided: there must be a speaking by God, and there must be a receiving and comprehending of the revelation by human agents. If this is true, then all factors that are relevant to humanity’s comprehension of the world and its Creator—including the full complexity of our scientific, cross-cultural and inter-religious understanding—will be relevant to the project of interpreting the divine will.

This means that we have much to gain from a multi-religious approach to the science and religion discussion. By ourselves we may see only one side of the whole picture. But when we learn to listen to

those of other traditions—and especially to those who share our belief in the same self-revealing God and who trace their lineage back to the same Father Abraham—we are enriched in our understanding of God and God’s relationship to the sciences of the natural world.

I believe that Christians should acknowledge another reason that makes an inter-religious approach to the religion-science field particularly important to us. For much of its history, Christianity has tragically allowed itself to be associated with absolutist claims, claims that have sometimes manifested themselves in imperialist, colonialist, and warlike actions. Just when we think that the last of these tendencies have been eradicated from the Christian world, one is disturbed and disappointed to find that the tendencies are not gone after all. This is why it is particularly important for Christians to engage in ongoing dialogue with representatives of other religious traditions: when we do so, we can see much more clearly what is peaceful and positive about our tradition, and what dangerous potentials we must continue to avoid. When Christians listen carefully to what those in other religions are saying to us, their words serve as a sort of mirror, which provides greater self-understanding and helps ward off misapplications of our tradition.

Conclusion

I have described an inter-religious project in the field of science and religion, to be called “Science and the Spiritual Quest in the Abrahamic Traditions” (SSQAT). Outlining the strengths of the “Science and the Spiritual Quest” program (1995-2003) and admitting its weaknesses and inadequacies, I argued that SSQAT offers a model for future work in the field that is both productive and urgently required. Further, I described some of the motivations that Christians might have for engaging in such a collaborative program.

It is clear that the reasons for and against supporting such a program will be different for Muslims. It is my hope that the concrete proposals and reasons offered here will call forth responses from Islamic scholars, who alone are in the position to say whether there are reasons for cooperative inter-religious projects of this sort. The pages of *Islam & Science* offer the ideal forum in which to explore what theoretical foundations there are for future science-religion programs and what types of programs would be of most interest to Muslim scientists and to scholars of Islam. And may God bless the outcome of our work!