

Why the Science and Religion
Dialogue Matters

WHY THE SCIENCE
and RELIGION
DIALOGUE MATTERS

VOICES FROM THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY
FOR SCIENCE AND RELIGION

Edited by Fraser Watts
and Kevin Dutton


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Contents

Preface	vii
<i>Fraser Watts</i>	
PART 1: WHY THE DIALOGUE MATTERS	
1. Why the Science and Religion Dialogue Matters	3
<i>George F. R. Ellis</i>	
2. Does “Science and Religion” Matter?	27
<i>John Polkinghorne</i>	
3. The Science and Religion Dialogue: Why It Matters	33
<i>Holmes Rolston III</i>	
PART 2: THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT	
4. Science and Religion: Where Have We Come From and Where Are We Going?	41
<i>John Polkinghorne</i>	
5. Science, Religion, and Culture	53
<i>Fraser Watts</i>	
6. The State of the International Religion-Science Discussion Today	63
<i>Philip Clayton</i>	
PART 3: PERSPECTIVES FROM WORLD FAITH TRADITIONS	
7. Judaism and Science: A Contemporary Appraisal	75
<i>Carl Feit</i>	

8. Is the Science and Religion Discourse Relevant to Islam? <i>Munawar A. Anees</i>	81
9. Science and Hinduism: Some Reflections <i>B. V. Subbarayappa</i>	91
10. Science and Buddhism: At the Crossroads <i>Trinh Xuan Thuan</i>	101
11. Asian Christianity: Toward a Trilogue of Humility: Sciences, Theologies, and Asian Religions <i>Heup Young Kim</i>	121
Conclusion: Science, Religion, and the Future of Dialogue <i>Ronald Cole-Turner</i>	135
Contributors	145
Index	149

Preface

THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN SCIENCE AND RELIGION, in its contemporary form, has been most vigorously pursued within the Christian West. However, the time has come for it to transcend that narrow cultural context. Each of the world faith traditions has its own relationship with science, and the science and religion dialogue would benefit, in every context, from a greater awareness of how it is pursued in other faith traditions. This book arises from work of the International Society for Science and Religion (ISSR), and reflects the commitment of the society to an international approach to the relationship between science and religion.

This book also reflects the conviction that the dialogue between science and religion is of wide social and cultural importance. In many countries, there has been a growing separation between science and religion, reflecting a fragmentation of society. The underlying conviction of most of the contributors to this book is that religion and science each proceed best when they're pursued in dialogue with the other, and also that our fragmented and divided world order would benefit more from a stronger dialogue between science and religion. Out of these convictions the present essays are presented. They reflect a commitment to pursuing the dialogue between science and religion in an international and multifaith context.

The book begins with a trio of chapters by three of the most distinguished figures in the current dialogue between science and research, and are based on talks given at a remarkably well-attended public session of ISSR in Boston in August 2004. The authors reflect different backgrounds. George Ellis, a South African and Quaker, works on models of complex systems. John Polkinghorne, a priest in the Church of England, is a former theoretical physicist. Holmes Rolston, a Presbyterian minister in the United States, is concerned with human biology and environmental ethics.

These three are followed by a set of papers that place the dialogue

between science and religion in international context. First is a paper from John Polkinghorne, given as the inaugural presidential address of ISSR in Granada in 2002. Next I write on the international significance of both science and religion, originally a paper given to a meeting of the Third World Academy of Sciences held in Trieste on March 7, 2003. Third, Philip Clayton's chapter (originally published in the *Journal of Islam and Science*) describes an interreligious project in the field of science and religion and offers it as a model for future work in the field.

The third part of the book has contributions from members of different world faith traditions, each looking at their distinct relationship to science, including Carl Feit on Judaism, Munawar Anees on Islam, B. V. Subbarayappa on Hinduism, Trinh Thuan on Buddhism, and Hep Young Kim on Asian Christianity. (The dialogue between science and religion is very different for Asian than for Western Christians.) The first three of these contributions are also based on papers given to the meeting of ISSR in August 2004. The book concludes with a summation by Ronald Cole-Turner, incorporating a critical consideration of the field of biotechnology and the ethical issues that emerge from it.

Fraser Watts
Vice President, ISSR

PART I
Why the Dialogue Matters



Why the Science and Religion Dialogue Matters

GEORGE F. R. ELLIS

THE BASIC THEMES

THE SCIENCE AND RELIGION DIALOGUE¹ provides essential benefits from religion to science and from science to religion—provided we reinforce the open-minded, nonfundamentalist tendencies on both sides. That is what I explore here.

Tempering Religion

On the religious side, there is the issue of religious dogmatism and hubris: the tendency to claim absolute truth for fallible religious beliefs (they can't all be true!). The scientific approach can temper this tendency and—realizing that faith will always be the core of religion—can help religious understanding relate more coherently to the evidence that supports faith. Crucial is the issue of discernment. Science can help in the understanding of how to both evaluate evidence² and understand the multiple ways that a single reality can be represented and understood.³ It can thereby also be a force for progress in interreligious dialogue.

A primary issue here is the tensions experienced by religion in the face of the sweep of understanding given us by modern science, which undermines the faith of many believers. The science and religion dialogue can help in developing mature religious understandings that will be robust in the face of modern scientific discoveries; indeed, this is its core project.

Tempering Science

On the scientific side, we also face dogmatism and hubris: in particular, a denial of the full depth of human nature in some of biology, the human

sciences, and neuroscience. Thus, an equally important issue is tempering the extremist claims of some scientists about the scope and implications of science. At issue are, first, the way we understand ultimate reality in the light of modern cosmology and physics, which underlies the nature of our existence, and, second, the way we see the nature of humanity in the light of the progress of modern biology. These understandings play a key role in how we see ourselves and so understand the meaning in our lives. Crucial consequences follow for how we treat people medically, individually, and politically. There is thus a need for more humanist views to counter scientific fundamentalism. The science and religion debate can help here as a strong force on the side of humanity against dehumanizing views.⁴

Part of this need is realizing and respecting the boundaries of science: agreeing on what is and what is not within its domain. Its imperialistic tendencies need to be tempered with a realistic view of what science in fact can and cannot do.⁵

Fundamentalisms

The crucial battle is against all the fundamentalisms that deny the multifactorial nature of causality and existence that elevate some simplistic explanatory scheme (which the proponent happens to be expert in) over all other considerations without taking context into account. The science and religion dialogue can help fight dogmatism across the board by bringing broadly scientific criteria into the search for truth, but not by denying the breadth of human evidence and the need for faith and hope, as well as rationality. This dialogue can emphasize all the dimensions of humanity and the crucial role of value systems that cannot be derived from science alone. In this way it can promote a consilience of very different worldviews that are attempts to view important aspects of the same underlying reality, giving up the need to be right in favor of trying to see what is actually there as seen from different viewpoints—all the time keeping in mind the need for the testing of theories and realizing the dangers of self-delusion.

Applied Values

Also at issue is how applied science impacts lives; for example, in terms of biotechnology, issues such as cloning, values in environmental decisions, production of weapons, and so on. What is the nature of the values that