

*Meeting report 1***INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR
SCIENCE AND RELIGION
Boston 18-22 August 2004***A personal impression*

I had the honour of being invited to attend this ISSR conference, in the wonderful city of Boston, Massachusetts, as a 'younger scholar' in science and religion. Other younger guests were Eva-Lotta Grantén, Christophe Lameter, Kevin Reimer, LeRon Shults, Xiangui Su, Mladen Turk and Kirk Wegter-McNelly. It was also a great pleasure meeting again some more senior ESSSAT members, including Ulf Görman, Niels Gregersen, Antje Jackelén, Hubert Meisinger, Palmyre Oomen, Mikael Stenmark, Fraser Watts, and our president, Willem Drees. But it was also an impressive conference, since many other important scholars in the field were present, such as Philip Clayton, George Ellis, Nancey Murphy, John Polkinghorne, and Wesley Wildman (to name but a very few).

The main theme of the conference was "Creation: Probability and Law." All the plenary sessions (lecture and response, followed by a general discussion) touched on this subject:

- George Ellis and Bruno Guideroni talked about the concept of 'multiverses'. Ellis especially drew out the challenges that the idea of multiple universes outside our own might have for theological reflection.
- Niels Gregersen and Wesley Wildman discussed "The Laws of Physics and the Rules of Complexity: On Explaining a World of Self-organization in Science and Theology".
- Simon Conway Morris and Michael Ruse debated "Chance and Purpose in Evolution". Conway Morris addressed in a rather technical, though fascinating lecture the evidence he has found that there is convergence in evolution. Ruse expressed his interest in the subject, but argued critically that it would not be

quite enough to lead theology and science to converge.

- Nancey Murphy and Anindita Balslev discussed "Neuroscience, Determinism and Downward Causation: Defusing the Free-Will Problem". Murphy argued that the discussion concerning this is deeply confused, but she also proposed a possible solution. (Her lecture was part of a book project she is working on with Warren Brown)
- "Historical Concepts of Laws of Nature" was the topic of the contribution by Norbert Samuelson and Bidare Subbarayappa. Samuelson, in his lecture, focused on the idea of 'law of nature' in the writings of some Medieval Jewish philosophers.
- Philip Clayton and Peter Harrison next talked of "Contemporary Philosophical and Religious Concepts of Laws of Nature". While Clayton's lecture provided an overview of the current philosophical and theological issues, Harrison in his response focused on the historical dimension of the concept.
- Finally, David Bartholomew's lecture "God and Probability" outlined some attempts to link probabilistic reasoning and the existence of God.

Besides the lectures, there were opportunities for networking. Formally organized network opportunities were the sessions in which people with similar interests (for instance in biology, the physical sciences, history of science, philosophy, and theology) could meet as subgroups of the Society, in order to exchange ideas and perhaps to make plans for joint publications. I attended two such subgroup-meetings: those of the biological sciences subgroup and the theology subgroup.

Frankly, I was quite unhappy with the first of these. I had hoped to find a group of people eager to explore new ideas. However, I encountered scholars (mostly American) who wanted at all costs to avoid discussions of creationism and Intelligent Design, but could not really come up with other topics except the

general, much-discussed issues concerning human uniqueness or the question “what is life?” An initiative to explore the relation between human technology and evolution was easily dismissed because of a general negative attitude towards technology as alien to nature and utterly destructive – an attitude I could not help but notice was especially strong among the senior scholars.

In the theology subgroup things were a bit different. Some participants had noticed that, during the conference, the notion ‘theology’ was used easily but without any clear meaning. Thus, a joint project was proposed, to explore the notion of theology as it is used in the context of the science and religion dialogue. Unlike the biology subgroup, the theology one generated some interesting ideas. I cannot directly say anything about the meetings of the other subgroups, but keeping my ears open, I noticed that there were other people who were not really content with how at least some of them had proceeded.

During the conference, the cosmologist Dr. George Ellis was elected as the new president of the ISSR in succession to Dr. John Polkinghorne. On one evening, both Polkinghorne and Ellis, joined by Holmes Rolston III, spoke at a public lecture on “The Science and Religion Dialogue: Why it Matters”. The lecture was extremely well-attended: more than 500 people were present, which gives an indication of the interest there is in the subject. This lecture was widely announced as a venue in which “three world renowned Templeton Prize laureates engage in an exchange across the common borders of science and theology”. The poster announcing the event can be found at <www.issr.org.uk>. Attractive as I found the poster, I came to doubt whether this was the best way to communicate the science and religion dialogue to a wider audience. The title suggests that the dialogue should make a difference. But the picture underneath is of a bench on which three elderly men sit talking: it gives the impression of the science and religion dialogue being a snug conversation between elderly people, isolated from the wider community. I had

the same impression actually during the public lecture itself. Ellis, Polkinghorne and Rolston were sitting next to each other, talking casually, and not saying anything out of the ordinary. They seemed to convey the attitude that the interaction between religion and science still is an interesting subject, but that there are no longer any real problems! I found later that my unease was shared not only by many of the other younger scholars but also by ‘older’ scholars who were young at heart. Their overall feeling was that, contrary to what the poster and the public lecture both communicated, the science and religion dialogue really *should* make a difference and that the issues between them haven’t been settled at all! So, even though there was much interest in the subject, given the number of people attending it, I wonder whether the whole event conveyed the right message.

How does the ISSR relate to ESSSAT? Despite the obvious connections, I felt that there was a huge difference between the two. First, ISSR is a closed society – its members have to be nominated and then elected. Consequently, it has a kind of elite character. ESSSAT, on the other hand, is much more open to new scholars entering the field. But that is merely a difference in formal structure. Another difference may just rest upon a personal observation. It’s really hard to put into words and I definitely do not want it to sound as if I am ungrateful for the invitation to come to the ISSR or that I didn’t have a good time there. Yet there remained a nagging feeling that, at ESSSAT conferences, the atmosphere is always so much better. Probably, this has something to do with the openness of the conferences, and the fact that much time is allotted to short presentations and discussions of the work of other members.

It may be clear from the above that for me the conference on the one hand was an important and exciting event, but also that I cannot break away from the ambivalent feeling that it could have been so much better.

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