

Science, Religion, and Human Identity: Contributions from the Science and Religion Forum

with Finley Lawson, "Science, Religion, and Human Identity: Contributions from the Science and Religion Forum"; Susannah Cornwall, "Transformative Creatures: Theology, Gender Diversity, and Human Identity"; Joanna Collicutt, "Religion, Brains, and Persons: The Contribution of Neurology Patients and Clinicians to Understanding Human Faith"; Robert Lewis, "Humans as Interpretive Animals: A Phenomenological Understanding of Why Humans Bear God's Image"; Rebekah Wallace, "The Wholeness of Humanity: Coleridge, Cognition, and Holistic Perception"; James Thieke, "Energies and Personhood: A Christological Perspective on Human Identity"; and Emily Qureshi-Hurst, "Can Sinners Really Change? Understanding Personal Salvation in the Block Universe."

SCIENCE, RELIGION, AND HUMAN IDENTITY: CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE SCIENCE AND RELIGION FORUM

by Finley Lawson 

Abstract. The Science and Religion Forum promotes discussion on issues at the interface of science and religion. The forum membership is diverse including professionals, academics, clergy, and interested lay people and each year it holds a conference to encourage discussion and exploration of issues that arise at the interface of science and religion. This article provides an overview of the online conference that took place in May 2021 and introduces this thematic section that includes six articles from the conference.

Keywords: holism; personal identity; Science and Religion Forum; transformation

The Science and Religion Forum (SRF), based in the United Kingdom, aims to promote discussion on issues at the interface of science and religion. We are proud to have a diverse membership that welcomes practitioners at the forefront of scientific development, clergy addressing these issues with their congregations and wider ministry, researchers, and students. Open to those of all faiths and none, SRF is an inclusive community promoting interdisciplinary discussion and inquiry into the relationships

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between scientific understanding and religious thought and one of the issues where this is most keenly felt is the question of human identity. In May 2021, SRF met online to discuss a range of responses to this question. While not all are included within this thematic section, the articles that follow cover issues from gender identity to the impact of time on soteriology, highlighting the breadth of discussion to be had.

The short conference in 2019, where Tom McLeish was speaker, explored the importance of interdisciplinarity for our theological discussion alongside the role of creativity in science and the humanities, and these themes are implicitly echoed in the articles gathered here. Between the creation of artificial intelligence, and the drive to understand consciousness our scientific understanding of identity seeks to capture the human essence in a discrete identifiable picture. But as both Susannah Cornwall's Gowland Lecture and Joanna Collicut's articles highlight it is of vital importance that neither by design nor omission our scientific exploration of personhood does not leave us as fragmented individuals. As Lisa Stenmark notes in addressing the relationships between science and religion, we must ensure that we take account for the global revolutions that occurred alongside the scientific revolution. To fail to do so, and take only a "narrow" view of the relationship that "exaggerates conflicts between Western religion and Western science" and highlights Western science as entirely separate from Western religion "(creating a binary of science and religion), but also from many ways of knowing creating a series of overlapping binaries of gender, race, and class" (Stenmark 2018, 70). It is this theme of striving toward a more cohesive account of human identity, recognizing the importance of transformation, self-reflection, and holism (understood broadly) as key features of human identity that unites these diverse articles.

We are grateful to the editor of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* for publishing six articles from the conference. The conference opened with the public Gowland Lecture presented by Susannah Cornwall; in "Transformative Creatures: Theology, Gender Diversity and Human Identity" we are presented not only with an exciting opportunity to preview key themes from her forthcoming book: *Constructive Theology and Gender Variance: Transformative Creatures*, but we are also asked to thoughtfully consider the role of transformation within the Christian tradition and how there may be powerful and affirming parallels to be drawn between the transformation experienced in religious conversion and that experienced in gender transition.¹ In "Religion, Brains, and Persons: The Contribution of Neurology Patients and Clinicians to Understanding Human Faith," Collicut presents a richly informative article on the ways in which we have tried, and continue to try, to understand the place of religion within the human brain. Highlighting both the opportunities to develop our understanding through imaging and the limitations of what the technology can show, she concludes with a reminder of the importance of considering the whole,

not simply the parts—and that the lives of neurology patients speak more strongly to the role of religion as “meaning making” than can be captured in study of their brain in isolation. The role of “meaning-making” in terms of self-interpretation, openness, and malleability are picked up in Robert Lewis’ “Humans as Interpretive Animals: A Phenomenological Understanding of Why Humans Can Bear God’s Image,” where he examines what it is that enables humans to be “bearers” of God’s image and argues that it is our capacities rather than specific features of humanity that allow us to do so. It is our capacities for action and transformation that allow us to relate to, and be image bearers for, God. The final three articles, broadly speaking, move us from discussion of the nature of human identity to the theological implications of scientific metaphysics. In “The Wholeness of Humanity: Coleridge, Cognition, and Holistic Perception,” Rebekah Wallace provides a bridge between these two foci. In a detailed and technical article, Wallace examines the prevalent distinction between “thought” and “feeling,” alongside its implications for a holistic account of the engagement of persons (and their parts) with the physical world. Again, we are invited to consider the role of self-reflection and reason for the human identity and how this more holistic understanding of consciousness in turn should inform our understanding of a relational God. James Thieke’s “Energies and Personhood: A Christological Perspective on Human Identity” invites us to consider what scientific conversations about human identity are focusing on—are they referring to human nature, or human personhood, and why does this matter for Christology? Drawing on Eastern Orthodox thinking, Thieke’s poses the question of what exactly *are we*? Through a discussion of Christos Yannaras’ theology, Thieke’s presents us with a holistic and relational model of human nature that accounts for the continual change and transformation we experience as persons without losing the unity of our personal identity. Finally, to conclude a collection of articles in which change and transformation are considered foundational to personhood, Emily Qureshi-Hurst highlights the problematic nature of ontological change for a block universe or B-Theory approach to time. In “Can Sinners Really Change? Understanding Personal Salvation in the Block Universe,” Qureshi-Hurst challenges us to reconsider how one may be able to provide a theologically robust soteriology if, as provided by the block universe, all temporal parts of an entity (or person) must exist eternally and therefore the person’s “whole” being cannot be ontologically transformed. Qureshi-Hurst provides a model of soteriology in which the change that takes place within the sinner is not ontological but phenomenological or qualitative. This move to understand soteriology in light of lessons from philosophy of temporal experience arguably brings us back full circle to the importance of transformation as self-reflective and experiential (as seen in Cornwall and Collicutt) rather than a singular physical or material change.

The conference brought together invited speakers and short articles and through its online format was able to welcome global voices into the discussion. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the context of the conference, there was much discussion on the interaction of science and religions in addressing questions of mental and physical health and how, as we see in Collicut's article, the medical investigation into the place of religion for our embodied selves needs to be handled with sensitivity, so that findings into the role of faith in managing pain, trauma, and our mental health can be recognized by the scientific/medical communities without fragmenting ourselves in ways that remove or reduce the value of our lived experiences. While the topics and discussions ranged widely, there was an overall recognition of the importance of recognizing the experiential nature of personhood, and the question of how the relationality and subjectiveness of our lives can be, meaningfully, examined by the natural sciences. It may be that when we consider our personhood at the often-contested boundary spaces we find, to borrow from Rachel Mann, "a series of spectral and ghostly manifestations and traces centered around God, bodies, language and lives lived through the line of fragility and otherness" (Mann 2021) but that is why these are precisely the spaces in which we should be inviting interdisciplinary and interfaith dialogue. To understand ourselves, we must understand our interaction with each other and the world and in doing so recognize the unity that unites our otherness.

NOTE

1. The lecture and Rev. Rachel Mann's response can be viewed in full online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYMlvwhyxp0>

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