


Information and Reality: Contributions from the Science and Religion Forum

with Finley I. Lawson, “The Science and Religion Forum Discuss Information and Reality: Questions for Religions and Science”; Niels Henrik Gregersen, “‘The God with Clay’: The Idea of Deep Incarnation and the Informational Universe”; Michael Burdett and King-Ho Leung, “The Machine in the Ghost: Transhumanism and the Ontology of Information”; Marius Dorobantu and Fraser Watts, “Spiritual Intelligence: Processing Different Information or Processing Information Differently?”; Matthew Kuan Johnson and Rachel Siow Robertson, “A Co-Liberatory Framework for Big Data”; Peter M. Phillips, “Digital Theology and a Potential Theological Approach to a Metaphysics of Information”; and Andrew Jackson, “Peacocke Prize Essay—Towards an Eastern Orthodox Contemplation of Evolution: Maximus the Confessor’s Vision of the Phylogenetic Logoi.”

THE SCIENCE AND RELIGION FORUM DISCUSS INFORMATION AND REALITY: QUESTIONS FOR RELIGIONS AND SCIENCE

by Finley I. Lawson 

Abstract. The Science and Religion Forum (SRF) promotes discussion on issues at the interface of science and religion. The forum membership is diverse and it holds an annual conference to encourage exploration of issues that arise at the interface of science and religion. This article provides an overview of the hybrid conference that took place at the Woodbrooke Centre in Birmingham in May 2022. The conference addressed the issue of information and reality for religions and science across two broad themes. The first focused on metaphysical matters and the impact of the idea that information (quantum, biological, digital) are the fundamental building blocks of the universe, on our theological discourse. The second took a more ethical turn focusing on the issues raised by the interaction of information (biological, personal, digital) and science in society. This thematic section includes articles that span both strands of the conference including the public Gowland Lecture and the winning essay from the Peacocke Prize.

Keywords: big data; information; metaphysics; Science and Religion Forum; science-engaged theology

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The Science and Religion Forum (SRF), based in the UK, aims to promote discussion on issues at the interface of science and religion. We are proud to have a diverse membership and we are open to those of all faiths and none. SRF is an inclusive community promoting interdisciplinary discussion and inquiry into the relationships between scientific understanding and religious thought. The ethos of collaborative interdisciplinary discussion and to further understanding and thought on the interaction of science and religion is clearly evidenced in this special section through the active cross-referencing of articles that not only took place during the conference but is continued here in the articles. Ranging from spiritual intelligence, to big data and matters of metaphysics and ontology the conference articles, highlighting the breadth of discussion that is still to be had around information, reality and theology. This is emphasized further by the way in which contributors have drawn on Jackson's Peacocke prize entry, which by the nature of the competition did not explicitly address the conference theme and yet in raising the role of *logoi* as informational content is drawn into the wider thematic discussions.

There is a level of continuation between last year's conference shared in Vol 57 issue 3 of this journal and the theme of information and reality. The links in part stem from the continued question as to the impact of a metaphysics of information on our understanding of the person—this is drawn out both in terms of engagement with transhumanism through Burdett and Leung's article here and to a lesser extent Phillips' article exploring our expression of the religious in a digital age but also in questions surrounding the (de)humanization of the collection and processing of people "as" data points as discussed in Johnson and Robertson's article. In this sense, there is a continued concern to understand ourselves and our world cohesively, holistically and to position ourselves theologically in order to understand how this changes our responsibilities toward ourselves and others. But as the articles here emphasize whether raising metaphysical questions about the nature of reality or ethical concerns about our treatment of others, there is no question that the "informational age" is raising new or reframing existing theological challenges. The conference theme was inspired by Davies' and Gregersen's edited volume *Information and the Nature of Reality: From Physics to Metaphysics* (2014) and the work of the Centre for Digital Theology based at the University of Durham. Thus, we were delighted that Niels Gregersen was able to open the conference with the public Gowland Lecture and Pete Phillips from the Centre for Digital Theology was able to provide the concluding keynote of the conference. Contributions from both scholars are included in this special section.

We are grateful to the editor of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* for publishing six articles from the conference, which include the first Peacocke Prize winner for a number of years. The conference opened with the

public Gowland Lecture presented by Niels Henrick Gregersen; in “The God with Clay’: The Idea of Deep Incarnation and the Informational Universe,” Gregersen expands and develops on his earlier works on deep incarnation (including 2014; 2015; 2020) to examine the relationship between the tripartite “building blocks” of mass, energy, and information and “deep incarnation.” Gregersen takes us on a broad reaching but detailed exploration of the impact of a metaphysics of information on our understanding of the incarnation. Starting by asking us to consider the contemporary challenge of the move away from a classical model of matter as formed of material “stuff” via the development of cosmic Christology. The Gowland Lecture is a tour de force moving seamlessly from Gregory of Nyssa through the information “revolution” to the final section that asks us to consider how we can reconcile an ontology in which “every feature of our cosmos is revelatory of God” with the need to “make a distinction between Christ as the expression of God’s Nature and will for the world of creation, and the world of creation itself.” This is achieved through a nuanced distinction between different accounts of cosmos and sarx within biblical texts. Even if we are correct to argue that the fundamental ontology is informational rather than material, Gregersen argues that we must reconceptualize our theology through the lenses of *interactive communication* and *transformation*.

In “The Machine in the Ghost: Ontology, Information and Transhumanism,” Burdett and Leung continue the theme of transformation within an informational universe. They offer a thought-provoking discussion of the (implicit) inclusion of the supernatural realm within transhumanist ontology. The infosphere both in terms of mind uploading and the drive for a continuation/extension beyond the physical arguably functions as a supernatural space—as Leung and Burdett argue “their conception of the supernatural is the informational space as a realm which enables and exhibits transcendence and apotheosis.” As with the Gowland Lecture, there is a clever interweaving of these contemporary challenges of informational ontologies and technological transcendence with much earlier philosophies; in this case, the “gnostic ‘divine spark’ entrapped within the ‘natural’ material body.” In many ways, Dorobantu and Watts’ article provides a bridge between the two strands of the conference (Metaphysics and Big Data) through their investigation of the nature of spiritual intelligence and whether this should be understood as our processing of a different kind of “supernatural” information, or a different way of processing the same “natural” information processed by all cognitive animals. Drawing on developments in cognitive psychology and recent discussions on whether “spiritual intelligence” can be accurately understood as an additional “intelligence” that makes use of direct information from/communication with God/spirits. Dorobantu and Watts argue against this hypothesis. They set forth an argument that spiritual intelligence, when understood in terms

of the kinds of cognitive “architecture” used during spiritual practices, is a different way of processing the same kinds of information that access as part of our conceptual (left-brain) activities. In this vein, they conclude that spiritual intelligence is better understood as a cultivation of our receptivity to the “other.” It is a “spiritual engagement with the everyday world.” Johnson and Robertson’s “A Co-Liberatory Framework for Big Data” departs from the metaphysical discussion and challenges us to consider the use and processing of data through the lens of hamartiology. In a detailed article, Johnson and Robertson take us through a range of “harms” that can be experienced by both users and processors of data. Whilst the potential harms to users, such as algorithms reinforcing negative online behavior, are probably familiar to most, the discussion of harms brought on technologists and tech leaders through the “dehumanizing” of the people that sit behind the data points are perhaps more challenging for the theologian. These matters are taken up through a deep engagement with the wider literature that highlights the reciprocal ecosystem around Big Data, that needs to be reworked or reconceptualized within a virtue rather than harm focused framework. In many senses, this article can be viewed as a call for action for those involved with tech ethics to have a greater recognition of the relationality between our offline and online lives. The final conference article in this section also concluded the conference and therefore in “Digital Theology and a potential theological approach to a Metaphysics of Information,” Phillips draws together the metaphysical and technological strands of the theme that are raised in the preceding articles as well as pointing forwards to Jackson’s Peacocke Prize essay. In many ways, with his discussion of the nature of digital theology, Phillips’ article provides a helpful starting point (as well as conclusion) for those less familiar with the digital theology landscape. We are asked to consider the joint digital challenges of how religion is *expressed* in the digital and how God and digitality coexist. Briefly touching on the increased digitality of faith *expression* during the pandemic, the greater focus of the article is on the reflexivity and relationality of digital theology and the transcendental nature of both God and the digital. Phillips’ distinction between metaphysics as raw unmediated data versus metaphysics as an organized and organizing force calls us to interrogate further what and how much we can say about information and reality.

Drawing on Eastern Orthodox thinking, Jackson’s Peacocke Prize Essay¹ discusses the relationship(s) between contemporary accounts of evolutionary biology and Maximus the Confessor’s *logoi* toward a model of God’s action and presence within evolution. Jackson’s essay provides a survey of the spaces in which Eastern Orthodox perspectives could be brought to bear on the theological concerns raised by evolutionary biology through its recognition of the “intrinsic goodness of all that is, knowing that creation, when correctly contemplated, is nothing less than a cosmic incarnation.”

The conference brought together invited speakers and short articles and provided a particularly dialogic environment not limited to the articles presented here, and hence interested readers are encouraged to explore some of the wider conversations that were raised by engaging with the conference recordings.² Whether examining how we “do” faith in a digital age (pastorally and liturgically); how theologically informed ethics and methodologies can be turned to interact with the new and renewed issues raised but the transcendence (and eternity) of the digital; or trying to understand how God may be viewed as the informing, and creative underpinning of are less than wholly “material” world, there is no doubt that the “informational cosmos” is going to continue to push our understanding of the interaction of science, theology, and society. Whilst the topics and discussions ranged widely, there was an overall recognition of the importance of valuing beneath and beyond the “data” or “information,” of challenging the extent to which we are deifying or theologizing the infosphere, algorithm, technology. As mentioned at the start, there was an implicit and often explicit call to recognize the personal, relational, and connected nature of our lives and the cosmos. It is this rationality that emphasizes why these are precisely the spaces in which we should be undertaking interdisciplinary and interfaith dialogue.

NOTES

1. In memory of its founding President and former Chairman, Rev. Dr. Arthur Peacocke, the Science and Religion Forum offers an annual essay prize. The student essay can address any issue at the intersection of science and religion and does not need to relate to the conference theme.

2. The Gowland Lecture and response can be viewed at <https://tinyurl.com/Gowland2022>; the Peacocke Prize submission may be viewed at <https://tinyurl.com/Peacocke2022>; and all the Keynotes and short articles can be viewed at <https://tinyurl.com/SRFKeynotes2022> and <https://tinyurl.com/SRFShorts2022>, respectively.

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