

Science, Consciousness and Ultimate Reality Award from John Templeton Foundation

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The Network has recently been awarded a grant of 93,000 by the John Templeton Foundation for a major series of events under the overall title 'Science, Religion and Consciousness', with a specific focus on Science, Consciousness and Ultimate Reality.

Since its foundation in 1987, The John Templeton Foundation has made the most significant contribution in the world to the exploration of the relationship between science and religion through its extensive programme of courses, its prizes for courses and books, its publications and its conferences. Much of the change in climate in this field during the 1990s has been a direct result of the Foundation's work. This year's Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion has been awarded to Rev. Dr. Arthur Peacocke, as reported elsewhere in this issue.

As readers of the Review will know, the 1990s saw a very significant increase in scientific interest in consciousness studies after decades of neglect owing partly to the pervasive influence of behaviourism in academic psychology. The Network believes that the work currently being pursued at the interface of science and consciousness is as significant as that going on at the science-religion interface. The series of events will help draw the attention of scientists to the role of the subjective perspective and remind them that objectivity itself is founded on intersubjective consensus.

The Network project will explore the interface between science, religion and consciousness and aims to raise public awareness of the significant issues involved in the interaction between these fields. The theme is designed to open up a dialogue between scholars in the science and religion field on the one hand, and those active in consciousness studies on the other. Speakers will debate a series of specific issues which are of general interest to Network Members:

- What role do philosophical assumptions play in science and religion?
- Is epistemological and ontological reductionism a necessary assumption in science or a hypothesis to be justified and applied to appropriate fields?
- Is there any validity in means of obtaining knowledge other than through the five senses?
- What is the relationship between the self or consciousness and the brain? How do you justify your position on this question and on what basis do you reject other positions? Is there any evidence- value in near-death experiences that might relate to this question?
- Which data from mystical experiences might challenge current materialistic assumptions and which of these data might validate propositions about the existence of God and a transcendent dimension as the source of values?
- How might one account for the transformative effects of mystical and near-death experiences?
- What evidence is there for purpose and meaning in the universe?

- What might be recognised as a point of spiritual convergence between the great religions - or possibly even beyond them, including science, thus giving a new perspective on science?
- On what basis do you derive your own deepest values and sense of meaning?
- How might a new science of consciousness contribute to moral and spiritual progress?

The project falls into five parts:

A series of public dialogues at twelve different UK universities, to be arranged during the academic year 2001-2. The universities are Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial College and King's College London, Bristol, Kent, Manchester, Wales, Durham, Edinburgh, Glasgow and St. Andrews. Reports of these dialogues will be posted on a the Network web site and sent round the science and religion Meta list-server.

A seminar at Durham University in June 2002 for eight students and two staff from these twelve universities. This will be followed up by an essay competition for undergraduates.

A structured invited seminar in June 2002 for 25 scholars who have been invited to take part in the dialogues. This will take up and further the issues raised in the dialogues and serve as a preparation for the public event to follow.

A public conference for up to 500 people in London, immediately following the seminar. The conference will be videocast to ensure maximum outreach. Press participation will be arranged and encouraged. This will take place over the weekend of 29-30 June 2002.

A book derived from the seminar, to be published with a press launch in London in May 2003.

The emphasis throughout the project will be to stimulate serious interest in the Science, Religion and Consciousness field, reaching both academic audiences and the interested public. We aim to move beyond the stereotypes of science vs. religion so prevalent in the media and extend the science-religion debate to include consideration of the nature of spiritual experience and of interdisciplinary issues arising from consciousness studies.

This is an exciting project for the Network, which will enable us to increase our outreach to the twelve universities involved. In addition to the events to be arranged, we will be producing a resource booklet to introduce the field. This will not only contain details of the events themselves, but also an annotated bibliography of key texts so that people can pursue their interests even if they are unable to attend any specific event. We will be contacting members in local areas for the university events, while all Members will be able to attend the large public event next year.