

# Barbour fostered dialogue between religion and science

by [John Dart](#) in the [February 5, 2014](#) issue

Ian Barbour, who died at 90 in Northfield, Minnesota, where he taught for 30 years at Carleton College, was widely lauded for his pioneering role in bridging religion and science. He died on December 24 in a hospital five days after suffering a stroke at home.

As a boy, Barbour grew up within a mixture of church, science and academic settings. His Episcopalian mother and his Presbyterian father (who was a noted geologist) both taught in China in the 1920s; the family left in 1931 for England, later moving to the United States.

Barbour earned a bachelor's degree in physics at Swarthmore College in 1943. While there, influenced by Quaker thought, he registered as a conscientious objector.

After World War II ended and was followed by a nuclear arms race, Barbour resumed physics studies, earning a master's degree in 1946 at Duke University and a Ph.D. in 1949 at the University of Chicago, where he was a teaching assistant for the famed Enrico Fermi of the Manhattan Project.

Barbour was hired to teach physics by Kalamazoo College, but he said in later interviews that he was drawn to the ethical and theological implications of scientific discoveries. Supported by a Ford Foundation fellowship, he earned a degree at Yale Divinity School in 1956.

In 1955 he joined the faculty of Carleton, which had just founded its religion department. That campus became his base for writing or editing 16 books, including *Issues in Science and Religion*, published in 1966.

"His deep understanding of both science and theology allowed him to find parallels in the ways that systems of thought were constructed," wrote Karl Giberson of Stonehill College in a Huffington Post blog article on January 2.

Barbour was awarded the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion in 1999—an award “long overdue,” said Giberson. Giberson noted that Barbour donated much of the seven-figure award to the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences in Berkeley, California.

Robert John Russell, founder and director of the Berkeley center, said Barbour “gave birth almost single-handedly to the contemporary dialogue between science and religion.” The center is affiliated with the multiseminary Graduate Theological Union. “He made a convincing and lasting case that science and religion are more alike and analogous than unlike and conflictive,” said Russell.

Barbour overcame more than a century of intellectual conflict between scientists and theologians. “I always felt we needed to move beyond the hostility,” Barbour told the *Los Angeles Times* in a 1999 interview. “Scientists say they believe in evolution, not God. Religious scholars say they believe in God, but not evolution. Well, I say we don’t have to choose a side. We can meet somewhere in the middle,” he said.

He retired as professor emeritus at Carleton in 1986. He gave the prestigious Gifford Lectures in 1989 and 1990 in Scotland, which were published as books—*Religion in an Age of Science* (1990) and *Ethics in an Age of Technology* (1993).

“Ian left not only a wide and deep intellectual legacy, but also one of great kindness and generosity,” said Carolyn Fure-Slocum, Carleton College chaplain. For his students, Barbour “gently opened new worlds of thought for them in contemporary theology, religion’s intersection with science, sustainable technology and environmental ethics.”