

Some observations from the Faraday Institute conference on science and religion

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My educational background is in the humanities; my exposure to the sciences has been almost nil. The closest I come to the sciences is through my daughter and her husband, both high school biology teachers. However, I've become interested in the conversation between science and religion. So this week I'm at a conference at [the Faraday Institute](#) in Cambridge, England.

Faraday is a relatively new organization that sponsors research in the interface between science and religion. It also has an educational component. [The conference I'm at](#) is actually called a course, because its intent is to welcome to the conversation people like myself who aren't up to speed on science or, conversely, on theology and religion. In the U.S. it strikes me as though the science-and-religion dialogue tends to include only people who can engage it at a high level, although I know the Templeton Foundation is working at drawing more people into that conversation. Templeton is a major supporter of the Faraday Institute.

Some observations from the conference so far:

- Evolution is not a problem for most British Christians. To the extent that it is, this has been exported to the U.K. by American evangelicals. Yet the stereotype persists in the U.K., that if someone is a Christian then he or she must be a six-day creationist or whatever.
- Secularization theory has long held that the more scientific a culture becomes, the more secular it will be. Peter Berger and others are having second thoughts about that, because it doesn't explain the persistence of religion—even among some scientists—in secular cultures like England.
- The U.K. has had this phenomenon of a few people with rather high visibility who are trained both as scientists and theologians and in some cases ministers—people like John Polkinghorne, Alisdair McGrath, and two of our speakers this week, Mark Harris and David Wilkinson. These people are able to elevate the discussion about science, religion, and the relationship between the two in a way that I think would be rather unusual in the U.S.
- On the other hand, U.K. culture has not only secularized to a great degree; it has also privatized religion. So if you are religious you are likely not to talk about it, and other people don't expect you to, either. In fact, they feel uncomfortable. In research among British scientists about faith and religion, those who were Christians said they are open to talking about their faith with their science colleagues. But asked if they actually do this, few admit to it—and then only when some church-related event comes up, like a death or wedding.
- In the UK scientists afraid of faith impinging on science are more concerned about Muslims than they are evangelical Christians. And there are an increasing number of junior level scientists in

the UK who are Muslim. The concern seems more based on prejudice than actual fact, although there was one anecdote about a really devout Muslim student who would refuse to do an experiment over again if the desired results didn't come from the first try, because he thought it was Allah's way of telling him to try something else.

- Many non-religious scientists in the U.K. would agree with most of what Richard Dawkins says about religion. But they dislike his tactics. His militant atheism goes against the grain of what many Brits think about a civil society.
- The media tends to focus on controversy either between science and religion or within science, but the media isn't capable of weighing the evidence on either side. This doesn't help the public discussion about faith and religion.
- [Tom McLeish](#) said in a lecture here that if we could get this relationship right between science and religion, it would help immensely in the public discussion about science. I think he had in mind conversation about climate change, for example. Of course, this begs the question, *what is* the right relationship between the two? (More on this in a future post.)
- There is the perception in the U.K. that the most adaptable religions when dealing with the findings of science are Quakerism, Buddhism, and official Catholicism. Secular scientists in the UK also have respect for the Church of England—for obvious cultural reasons, but also because they don't see the C of E as dogmatic.

I'll post further about this conference in the coming days.