

Staging a National Lecture Series: Challenges, Blessings and Opportunities

R.B. Mann

Abstract

The Canadian Scientific & Christian Affiliation (CSCA) has organized and hosted a Canadian-wide lecture series for the past three years. Entitled "Science & Faith in the 21st Century", the purpose of this series was to present to the public some of the current issues in the science/faith dialogue as we enter a new century. So far there have been over 50 presentations by 10 speakers in more than 15 cities across Canada. As the third year of this series draws to a close, it is prudent to reflect on what has been accomplished by the series and what remains to be accomplished. Key issues that the CSCA has dealt with are as follows.

(A) Organization: How do we go about coordinating the grand vision of the lecture series with the local organizational needs and idiosyncrasies?

(B) Openness: How does one ensure that other perspectives are respected and listened to whilst maintaining with integrity the faith-position of the organization?

(C) Outreach: How do we best use the series draw new people into the dialogue and new people into membership of our organization?

The challenges, blessings, and opportunities associated with each of these aspects will be addressed in both general and specific terms, drawing on particular examples from the history of the series thus far.

Biography

Robert Mann is the chair of the Physics Department at the University of Waterloo, in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. He has published over 200 refereed articles in scientific journals, supervised more than 30 graduate students, and has given over 150 invited talks. He is an affiliate member of the newly-established Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics, and has served on several academic and scientific advisory boards, including two grant selections committees of the Natural Sciences & Engineering Research Council of Canada, the Ontario College of Graduate Studies, and the Institute for Quantum Computing. His research interests are in black holes, quantum gravity, particle physics, quantum information, chaotic phenomena, and the relationship between science and religion. He is a Templeton Course Prize winner for his course on "Faith & Science Faith". As president of the Canadian Scientific & Christian Affiliation, he oversees the activities of Canada's only national organization concerned with science/faith issues. He is an active member of First Mennonite Church in Kitchener, Ontario, and lives in Waterloo, Ontario with his wife Nancy, daughter Heather and pets Frisky and Gracie.

Introduction

The Canadian Scientific and Christian Affiliation (CSCA) is a nation-wide Canadian organization whose goal is that of exploration and education concerning the science/faith relationship. It was founded in 1973 and has operated continuously since that time. The goals of the organization, broadly speaking, are to uphold the integrity of both the Christian faith as a relevant means of expressing God's love and the scientific method as a means of providing reliable knowledge concerning God's creation.

The idea of a lecture series was proposed at an executive council meeting of the CSCA in the winter of 2000. The purpose of the series was to present to the interested members of the public some of the current issues in the science/faith dialogue from a Christian perspective as we enter a new century. So far there have been over 50 presentations by 10 speakers in more than 15 cities across Canada, drawing well over 5000 people thus far.

Our rationale for initiating the series was to provide members of the public – Christians of all denominations and those outside of the Christian tradition – with a scientifically and theologically informed perspective on the current science/religion issues facing our society today. Each session allowed members of the public to hear expert speakers discuss particular issues (detailed below) pertinent to the science/faith interface, and to discuss the relevant ideas in question-and-answer sessions that followed each talk.

Beginning with seed money from the Priscilla and Stanford Reid Trust (henceforth referred to as the Reid Trust) and private donations, the CSCA hosted a nation-wide public lecture series entitled "Science and Faith in the New Millennium". A grant of \$21,000 (\$15,000US) from the Local Societies Initiative (LSI) allowed for a 3-year extension of the series.

The following essay is a reflection on what has been accomplished by hosting this series, what challenges were faced in delivering it, what benefits and blessings resulted from the series, and what future directions there are for the CSCA in light of this work.

Organization

Fundraising

The first challenge of hosting the lecture series was to raise funds. This was a significant challenge for the CSCA. The CSCA partners with the American Scientific Affiliation (ASA), sharing a journal and newsletter with that group, and the bulk of the funds it raises from membership fees are paid to the ASA for these and other services, leaving an annual budget typically under \$1000 per year¹.

It was clear that such a small ongoing budget would not permit launching a nation-wide series, and so creative fundraising methods had to be adopted. Research on agencies from

¹ All funds will be expressed in Canadian dollars unless otherwise stated.

which funds might be accessed revealed two promising sources: the Reid Trust and the LSI. The LSI required matching funding as a necessary condition to secure a grant, whereas the Reid Trust did not. However the latter agency did not offer grants as large as that of the LSI and so a decision was made to pursue both avenues for funds.

Matching funds for the LSI grant were raised by using a bequest as seed funding. An appeal was sent out to all members that for every dollar donated to the CSCA above the cost of membership fees, a dollar would be matched from the bequest. The matching fund campaign lasted for 16 months.

It was very successful. The original goal was to raise \$5000 in additional donations for a total of \$10,000. When the campaign closed over \$12,000 in total had been raised. In addition to this, the Reid Trust had agreed to supply a grant of \$1200 at first, and then later increase this amount by \$3000. The CSCA's application to LSI was successful, bringing in more than \$21,000 in funds (\$15,000US).

The first challenge became a blessing. Members of the CSCA executive learned how to function more cohesively as a professional organization with a mission. There is no doubt that the funding support from both the Reid Trust and the LSI made possible for the CSCA things that otherwise would never have happened.

Administration

The second organizational step to be taken was to form a lecture series committee. As the vision for the series was that it be nation-wide, members of the committee were chosen from 5 regions in Canada: West Coast, Prairies, Ontario, Quebec and the Maritimes. The National Lecture series Committee (NLC) was first established in January 2001. The committee was chosen on the recommendations of the CSCA executive, and reported to the executive through the president, who chaired of the committee.

Each member of the lecture series committee was a CSCA member and an established scientist in their own field, requirements that are still in place. Each had some affiliation with a university community. The membership of the series has changed somewhat since its inception, but all 5 regions continue to be represented on the lecture series committee. The chair of the committee was an additional member, for a total of 6 on the NLC.

Members of the NLC participate in three tasks. The first is that of suggesting and critiquing possible speakers. The committee seeks people with a track record of scientific expertise, commitment to the Christian faith, and a level of awareness of the current issues in the science/faith dialogue. Ideally they are leading figures in the science/faith dialogue, but this is not a necessary requirement. Breadth was also an important consideration, and each year several speakers were chosen to represent many of the current areas of interest in the science/faith interaction. Consideration was also given

toward ensuring that at least one speaker per year for the series was Canadian. This was viewed as important so as to raise the profile of Canadians actively working in this area.

The second task assigned to each member of the NLC is that of being responsible for the local organization of a given lecture series event (described below). While each member is expected to seek help, the responsibility for a given local event rests with the NLC member in charge. The third task is that of providing a follow-up report to the chair of the committee.

The chair of the committee has the following responsibilities. The primary task is that of acting as the first contact with a proposed invited speaker. Once this is established, the chair carries out several additional organizational tasks. The first is coordination of publicity for each lecture series event. The second is that of providing large-scale organization between regions, so that the travel and scheduling were appropriately coordinated. The third task is that of acting as a resource for approval of expenditures by members of the NLC, and of ensuring that all expenses are appropriately remitted through the secretary-treasurer of the CSCA.

Overall this structure worked quite well organizationally, though it was not without its pitfalls. Its main challenge was the vast distances between regions and the contrasting needs and interests of each. Each speaker has his/her own schedule, and it was often quite time-consuming to match the availability of a given speaker with the opportunities for a given region. It was not unusual for it to take several weeks of e-mailing back and

forth between the NLC members, the chair, and the invited speaker before a schedule was finally settled upon. It is not clear as to how this process could be made more efficient.

Publicity remains one of the most difficult challenges. In order to ensure adequate advertising for a given event, it is necessary to have publicity materials (posters primarily) available no less than 2 weeks (and preferably three weeks) prior to the event itself. However it was often difficult to obtain the requisite logistical details (time of day, specific location, etc) until nearly the last minute, and on more than one occasion we were too late with publicity (i.e. the publicity appeared less than 2 weeks before the event). Members of the NLC report that they find the local organizational details quite time-consuming, and different members have differing levels of ability to access the infrastructure of their university communities to assist with the task.

This point bears further consideration. One of the things that we have learned from running the series is that strong local organization is absolutely essential. The local organizer needs to be well connected to his/her university community, to the local Christian groups and churches in the area, and to their own colleagues. It is simply not possible to host a lecture series event in a city that does not have this strong level of local organization. Indeed, we have on several occasions had to avoid hosting an event in a given city because this organizational aspect was not in place.

Format

The general plan was to solicit 3-5 speakers for a given academic year (September to April). As noted above, these speakers ideally should represent a breadth of scientific disciplines, and should be engaged in forefront work in science and religion. While there was a bias in favour of asking professional scientists as speakers, exceptions were made for speakers that had exceptional merit. So far two speakers in the series have been from non-scientific disciplines (English and Theology).

Sometime in June or July of a given year, the chair of the committee contacts all members of the NLC with a list of potential speakers for the coming academic session (September to April), and requests their feedback as to which speakers were possible in which regions at which dates. This at times became a frustrating process, since it was more often than not difficult to obtain commitments well in advance, either from the invited speaker or from the local organizer, who at times had difficulty obtaining reservations for a room in which to hold the lecture.

The general format consisted of having a public lecture from 7 - 10 PM. This timing allowed both members of the local university community and interested members of the public to attend the events we held. The following scheduled framework was typically adopted, with small variations in each region.

7:00 PM Booktable and/or reception

7:30 PM Public lecture

8:30 PM Questions

9:00 PM Refreshments and informal discussion (booktable open)

10:00 PM Closure

Some talks were also given during an afternoon seminar time on a university campus. These afternoon talks have some value to members of the academic community (faculty and students), and a CSCA speaker was encouraged to give such talks if time permitted.

The format was generally a success. Typically between 50 and 200 people would attend a lecture, depending of the time of year, the topic, and the population of the region. Some lecture events had several hundred people (the largest was over 700 at one event in Edmonton). Afternoon events were generally much less well attended, and brought out primarily members of the academic community. However these events did serve a useful function insofar as they did much to promote the awareness of the science/faith dialogue amongst university faculty and students. While the turnout was typically 20-30 people for such events, the level of exchange and interaction tended to be much more sophisticated than at the evening events.

Openness

Focus

The CSCA is a Christian organization. As such it has a mandate to remain faithful to what might be called a gospel perspective on the world. However the science/faith dialogue is rich and multifaceted, bringing together people of many different traditions and backgrounds. Furthermore, it introduces ideas and perspectives hitherto unconsidered both within Christianity and outside of it. How could the CSCA respond to the challenge of presenting issues at the forefront of the science/faith dialogue whilst remaining true to its mandate?

It might be helpful at this point to briefly mention what some of these issues are. The relationship between science and Christian faith is not new, having roots going back to the Enlightenment¹. However the rapid progress of science today has raised qualitatively new issues for consideration that were all but unheard of even half a century ago. The advent of cloning has pushed issues of bioethics into the public consciousness. New discoveries in cosmology have significantly altered our picture of the universe and our place within it. The paradigm of evolutionary biology has expanded into the fields of sociology and psychology, with significant implications for the meaning of personhood. New studies on the relationship between faith and health are challenging traditional medical wisdom. Environmental degradation is never far from public awareness, and is all the more important with our increased understanding of ozone erosion and global

warming. Further issues abound, including artificial intelligence, near-death studies, weapons research, and global communication.

It was the vision of the CSCA lecture series to address these issues, bringing them to the public for consideration from a Christian perspective while reaching out to those of other faiths and perspectives. To do this, the NLC adopted several policies. Some of these were noted above. However I shall recapitulate them here.

- 1) All invited speakers were members of some denomination within the Christian tradition.
- 2) All invited speakers had some demonstrated level of high-calibre expertise within a given academic discipline.
- 3) A member of the NLC governs the responsibility for local organization of all talks.
- 4) Each talk would begin with an introduction to the CSCA that briefly explained its goals and the purposes of the series, and thanked the sponsors.
- 5) Significant effort would be made to reach out to people outside of the Christian faith and/or academic communities wherever possible and appropriate.

One of the encouraging outcomes of this format was that people outside of both the Christian and academic communities would attend the talks, provided the publicity was sufficiently well organized. This yielded genuine dialogue between people of different faiths and perspectives.

A significant challenge was that of maintaining an appropriate focus for the series. In order to ensure that the lectures would be accessible to members of the public, it was important that each invited speaker be aware of his/her potential audience. This was generally successful, though on a few occasions the speaker appeared to assume that the most members of the audience were specialists in the subject of interestⁱⁱ. Another issue was then of ensuring that the talks were scheduled so as to remain accessible to the public. Some members of the NLC found that the only way they were able to obtain appropriate infrastructure support (e.g. room reservations, overhead projectors, etc) was to hold the lecture in the daytime. Others felt that an evening venue would not draw sufficient numbers, and so scheduled most (sometimes all) lectures in the daytime. This had the unfortunate effect of excluding members of the public and biasing the focus of the series toward an academic audience. On the positive side, however, virtually all reports from NLC members concerning talks presented to an academic audience were quite positive, and the profile of the CSCA was raised considerably within the academy. This has proven to be a small blessing that has grown over time, as members of the academic community report to NLC members that they look forward to further lectures in the series.

Partnering

One of the unanticipated features that developed over the course of the series was that of developing partnerships with other organizations. These partnerships were formed on a case-by-case basis within given local regions. Our partners have included Regent College

in Vancouver, the Pascal Lecture Series Committee in Waterloo, the Guelph-Waterloo Physics Institute, the Montreal Chapter of the Sigma-Xi Society at McGill University, the Theoretical Physics Institute at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, the Hooker Lectures at McMaster University in Hamilton, and various campus Christian fellowship groups at universities across Canada. Such partnerships have provided an interesting learning experience for the CSCA.

The first lesson is the enormous financial benefit gained from such partnerships. Virtually all of the organizations that we worked with were willing to make a financial contribution in support of travel and/or accommodation expenses for a given speaker. Indeed, when the organizations learned that the cost to their unit was quite minimal relative to what it would be had the speaker been invited only by them, they were typically quite happy to work with the CSCA. Oft times this relationship had to be soft-pedaled: a member of the NLC would simply ask the partnering unit if they would consider making a contribution toward expenses. However on other occasions the relationship was quite clear and explicit, and in virtually all situations the outcome was positive for all parties concerned.

Another lesson was that of learning how to maintain the integrity of our mandate whilst working together with other organizations that share similar but not identical goals. Some of our partners were interested only in the scientific work of our invited speakers, whereas others were interested only in the faith perspective a speaker would present. In all such cases members of the NLC learned how to articulate the position and mandate of the CSCA while respecting the viewpoints and concerns of their partner organizations.

By and large this has been a positive experience, and the CSCA has found that the focus of its mandate has been clarified, rather than diluted, by such interactions.

Controversy

It would be remiss to avoid acknowledgement of some of the controversial situations faced by the CSCA throughout the course of the series thus far. These controversies typically emerged when the CSCA hosted a speaker whose theological perspectives were significantly different from those held by the audience in attendance. We were faced both with situations in which a speaker's more liberal theological viewpoint encountered a conservative audience, and in which a speaker's more conservative theological viewpoint collided with a liberal and secular perspective.

The two examples in which these situations were most significantly highlighted were situations involving George Ellis and William Dembski. Professor Ellis delivered a set of lectures on "Science, the Natures of Existence, and the Grounds of True Morality" in all five regions in Canada. While these were generally very well received nation-wide, there was one setting in which the audience tended to be of a conservative Christian persuasion, and were quite disturbed by the broader theological perspective presented by Professor Ellis. Although a considerable number of questions that were posed to him verged on being rather aggressive, he responded with an admirable measure of patience and grace. Though NLC member Judy Toronchuk found the situation bordering at times on the embarrassing, she also reported that several people present at the talk approached

her privately afterward, commending her for organizing the event and Professor Ellis for his presentation.

Professor Dembski spoke on Intelligent Design at several places in southern Ontario. While generally known for the controversial perspective he brings to the creation/evolution debate, his presentations were very well received at all but one setting. In this latter case NLC member Don McNally (now the executive director of the CSCA) reported that there was significant hostility toward Dembski's views, and that other CSCA members present at this lecture were concerned that the reputation of the CSCA might be damaged as a consequence.

Looking back, the pertinent issue here is that of appropriately managing such controversy as opposed to avoiding it. The CSCA's mandate is to present a broad range of perspectives on the science/faith dialogue from a Christian perspective. This will necessarily involve a broad range of theological perspectives, and at times what might be rather unorthodox interpretations of scientific findings. Any acrimonious controversy generated by the series has been far outweighed by the stimulating interactions generated amongst members of the audiences that have attended the talks.

Outreach

Media and Publicity

Publicity for the lecture series consisted primarily of local distribution of posters and advertisement on the CSCA website. Some of the difficulties of poster distribution were noted above. The main challenges here involve improving efficiency of distribution of posters and of ensuring timely advertising on the website. To the extent these goals were not always realized, it was in no small part due to the limited amount of volunteer human labour available for these tasks.

The CSCA lecture series received attention from various local media outlets across Canada. These included newspapers, Christian magazines and periodicals, and radio and television interviews. This afforded the opportunity to present the goals and activities of the lecture series to a much wider audience. These were generally positive experiences. However on a few occasions this proved to be frustrating. The most extreme example occurred after a visit by Professor Anne Foerst at Waterloo. This event was executed in partnership with the Pascal Lectures Committee mentioned above. The local media were alerted to this event, and gave it appropriate advance coverage. However a follow-up article did not mention the CSCA despite devoting more than a full-page spread in the Saturday edition of the local paper. Appeals to the local paper concerning this omission were not satisfactorily responded to (at least from the perspective of the CSCA!).

This example highlights one of the difficulties in dealing with the media: freedom of the press means that there is no assurance that the CSCA will be acknowledged as the sponsoring organization of a given event. While we have generally been fortunate in being acknowledged by other media, we have yet to find a foolproof solution to this dilemma.

Membership

In terms of numbers, more than 5000 people have collectively attended at least one of the lectures in the series. This is a much broader range of people than the CSCA had ever reached prior to the onset of the series. A multifaith symposium in Edmonton afforded an opportunity for the CSCA to present itself to a broad range of faith groups with an audience of over 700 people. While in certain instances attendance at some lectures was disappointing, the general attendance level at our lectures has by and large been generally robust.

One of the goals of the series was to increase membership in the CSCA. While this has taken place, the increase (20%) has not been as significant as we might have hoped, given the attendance figures noted above. Our experience has been that although people express significant interest in the CSCA and its activities, there is considerable reluctance to join for significant numbers of people. Our membership fees and benefits are currently under review, and a survey of CSCA members was conducted last summer that in part was designed to probe the reasons for this situation.

Summary

The CSCA lecture series represented a significant new challenge for our organization. It involved a broader range of national outreach, a significantly larger level of financial management, and a wider level of interaction with other organizations and groups than we had ever experienced. To summarize the main challenges we have faced are:

1. Financing: How do we secure the requisite level of grants and donations that are required to host a nation-wide series?
2. Administration: How do we organize the series over many different cities and regions within Canada while maintaining a common vision?
3. Publicity: How do we ensure that the series receives proper advertising and that the CSCA receives appropriate after-the-fact coverage in the media?
4. Dialogue: How do we ensure that the series provides a forum for a broad range of views while remaining faithful to the mandate of our organization?
5. Outreach: How do we effectively use the lecture series as a tool to minister to the religiously curious and as forum for inviting people into membership?

For the most part the challenges of the lecture series have been met, though not without certain difficulties as noted above, particularly in terms of membership.

What is the future of the CSCA now that the lecture series has had 3 full years of activity? In the near term we are – in partnership with the ASA and the British

organization Christians in Science – hosting a conference entitled “Neuroscience and the Image of God”. The purpose of this meeting is to assess some of the latest findings in neuroscience and psychology concern the role of personhood and the implications they have for a Christian understanding of the self. Our goal is to further research in this subject by promoting the exchange of ideas and examining some of the new findings in this rapidly developing field.

In the longer-term, there is enough funding to carry the lecture series through the 2004/05 season. After this the CSCA will face a number of decisions. Should the lecture series continue as a regular activity of the CSCA? If so, how will stable funding be acquired to carry out this activity? If not, what other activities should occupy the attention of our organization over the next 5-year period?

The CSCA is Canada’s only national organization devoted to the constructive engagement of science and faith from a Christian perspective. As such it has a unique role to play in the investigation of science and religion and in public education of the current issues in this area that are relevant to our society. This mission remains our ongoing challenge.

ⁱ For an overview, see I.G. Barbour, *Religion and Science* (Harper San Francisco, 1997).

ⁱⁱ This finding was borne out in a survey of CSCA membership conducted in the summer of 2003.