

The Science and Religion Dialogue: Issues, Models, Obstacles and Insights

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Abstract

If scientists take seriously the role of God in the world and if the Fatherhood of God can be understood by all religious communities many of the problems of the world can be solved and we can all live peacefully. Thus a good platform for a serious dialogue about science and religion is to discuss the origin of life and the universe including their purpose.

In order to sustain the science and religion dialogue and the local groups formed by LSI beyond the grant period, it seems to be very essential to have a regular dialogue between the LSI groups of a country. An annual National Conference jointly organized by all the LSI's of a particular nation could be a significant step in this direction. Other than that, we can plan from today to have a Global meeting every 3 years of all the LSI's all over the world after the grant period is over.

For a long-term promotion of science and religion dialogue, the non-profit host institutions of LSI groups could invite local candidates for doctoral thesis on Science and Religion. The degrees could be given by these Institutes in collaboration with the Metanexus Institute. Some of the students in the group might be interested to study further in this direction. When the individuals will make an effort to incorporate elements of spirituality/religion in their own specific area of work, it will ensure a deeper and lasting commitment for the integration of science and religion.

Another aspect for the sustainability of the science and religion groups is that LSI groups' must have publication as an important part of their group activity.

One of the important tips we found to please all the group members is to sing a prayer in local language. After all, those who are coming for the group meetings are working hard in their own fields. When they come for such a dialogue and get some peace, they feel enthusiastic to further participate in the dialogue. Thus, to have a few minutes of peace/spiritual prayer in every group meeting could be put as a guideline for all the LSI groups.

Science and Religion are very crucial aspects of world peace. So, the scientists should be an integral part of any peace making process. Many religious leaders are already involved. Since the LSI members are expert in both in science and in religion and are also from different religious backgrounds, their efforts towards interfaith dialogue and world peace will be of great effect.

Metanexus Institute could also collaborate with the United Religions Initiative (URI) for a better contribution of science and religion dialogue towards interfaith understanding. URI was started only a few years back. It is very actively promoting interreligious

dialogues all over the world. It has now 'Cooperation Circles' (CC's), similar to our LSI's all over the world.

LSI and world peace - interfaith understanding: The Science and Religious dialogue can play a very important role in the issues of world peace and interfaith understanding. Indeed the two are synonymous. The idea of 'globalization' is also a key factor in this equation. As the major powers try to direct a global market economy, undercurrent religiously motivated violence continues to plague society. We can all benefit from interfaith dialogue to help facilitate peace. LSI can play a crucial role in this process. Our scientists are the designers of sophisticated weaponry and sometimes some fanatic religious groups may misuse. Both of these groups could be influenced in a positive way towards peace by the Science and religion dialogue. Religion is typically the purveyor of ethical standards. Science is the force behind our technological advancements. Which in turn is a major influence behind our global economy.

Biography

T. D. Singh (1937-): An extraordinary combination of a scientist, a spiritualist, an active promoter of world peace, an interfaith leader, an educationist, a poet, a singer, and a cultural ambassador. He is well known for his pioneering efforts for more than thirty years to interface between science and religion for a deeper understanding of life and the universe. He received his Ph.D. in Physical Organic Chemistry from the University of California, Irvine in 1974. He has contributed many papers in the Journal of American Chemical Society and the Journal of Organic Chemistry in the field of fast proton transfer kinetics in model biological systems using stopped-flow technique and NMR spectroscopy. He also worked on gas phase reaction mechanisms using Ion Cyclotron Resonance (ICR) spectroscopy. He underwent Vaishnava Vedanta Studies (1970-77) under His Divine Grace Srila Prabhupāda and was appointed as Director of the Bhaktivedanta Institute (1974-), which is a center to promote studies about the relationship between science and vedanta. He has organized three International conferences on science and religion - First and Second World Congress for the Synthesis of Science and Religion (1986 & 1997) and First International Conference on the Study of Consciousness within Science (1990) where a galaxy of prominent scientists and religious leaders including several Nobel Laureates participated. He is also organizing "Second International Congress on Life and its Origin: Exploration from Science and Various Spiritual and Religious Traditions" in Rome, Italy from November 12-15, 2004. He has authored and edited several books including "What is Matter and What is Life?" (1977), "Theobiology" (1979), (Ed.) "Synthesis of Science and Religion: Critical Essays and Dialogues" (1987), "Thoughts on Synthesis of Science and Religion" (2001), and "Seven Nobel Laureates on Science and Spirituality" (2004). He is the Editor-in-chief of the Journal of the Bhaktivedanta Institute entitled, Savijnanam: Scientific Exploration for a Spiritual Paradigm (www.savijnanam.org).

Dr. Singh is a founding member of the United Religions Initiative (URI). He is president of its Manipur (Northeastern India) Cooperation Circle and instrumental in starting its Kuala Lumpur Cooperation Circle. He started a network of schools in Northeastern India where about 4000 students receive education centered on spiritual values. He is the

founder and Director of "Ranganiketan Manipuri Cultural Arts Troupe" which has approximately 600 performances at over 300 venues in over 15 countries. He guides over a thousand of his students around the world in the techniques of spiritual life. His poems inspire introspection and his beautiful singing of prayer at the opening of various global peace and interfaith meetings is a much-awaited sacred moment.

Web: www.bvinst.org

1. Introduction

The pioneering concept and program of Local Society Initiative (LSI) introduced by Metanexus Institute is one of the major breakthroughs in popularizing the science and religion dialogue throughout the world. This is visible by the works of LSIs around the world and the interest it has generated in creating a number of new LSIs in different parts of the world. We are witnessing the science and religion dialogue reaching different academic institutions, non-profit organizations, faith based communities, peace and interfaith groups, schools and general public. All the LSIs worldwide have to plan to survive and sustain their activities beyond the grant period. At this critical juncture, we need to strengthen our LSI network and activities and further enhance our efforts for advancing the science and religion dialogue for a great and noble cause.

2. Issues of Science and Religion Dialogue

Some of the most important areas and issues where the dialogue of science and religion can contribute significantly for the benefit of humanity are as follows:

- (i) **Study of Life, its meaning and Origin:** The scientific approach to the understanding of life and its origin is quite incomplete. Science only studies the physical aspects of life whereas religion provides the inner meaning and spiritual values of our existence. Hence the approach of science and religion dialogue in the study of life will greatly enhance our knowledge of life.
- (ii) **Universe and its Purpose:** Cosmology seems to be the meeting point between science and spirituality/religion. The concept of God and creation of the universe can be discussed in cosmology.
- (iii) **World Peace:** The dialogue of science and religion has the potential to bring lasting peace in the world. We have seen that the political dialogues, international dialogues, etc., are not able to bring any lasting peace.
- (iv) **Enhancing Moral and Ethical Character in Society:** Science and Religion are like two balanced wheels of a peaceful journey of life. Yet religious wisdom is not systematically taught and practiced as much as the scientific knowledge is. Rapid scientific advancement with its reductionistic approach with no room for God in its theories could be the prime reason for this. This created an imbalance in the holistic development of the individuals. The one sided materialistic education that is prevalent in today's educational system is largely the cause of the decline in moral and ethical values in the society. This decline is the major source of disturbances in our societies. Thus we observe that many people get interested in a dialogue which discusses moral and ethical aspects of life. Even scientists who are not very much inclined to

participate in meetings/discussions involving 'religious' aspects, still come for a discussion involving morality and ethics. Thus, our dialogue discussing the role of science and religion for helping society, and restoring moral and ethical characters could also be a good platform.

- (v) Dialogue for a scientific study about the existence of God.
- (vi) Study about the nature of reality from science and religion dialogue.

3. Models of Dialogue

- (a) **Prayer:** One of the important tips we found to please all the group members is to start the group discussion with a prayer in local language. Many members who come to the group meetings are working hard in their own fields. When they come for such a dialogue and get some inner peace, they feel enthusiastic to further participate in the dialogue. Thus, to have a few minutes of peace/spiritual prayer in the beginning of every group meeting could be made as an optional guideline for all the LSI groups.
- (b) **Personal Relationships:** A personal relationship among the group members is one of the important foundations on which a group or a society lasts long. Thus other than the discussion topic, it is a good technique to give at least a few minutes to all the members to discuss with each other and interact personally. We can even extend help to each other in some of our life's difficulties so that the individuals feel that they are part of a family-group. This inspires many members to develop more interest and deeper commitment for participating in group discussions and furthering science and religion dialogue.
- (c) **Group reading:** This model is very helpful for members who attend the meeting for the first time and is suitable for a small group of about 6 to 8 persons.
- (d) **Seminar format:** Small seminar with one or two lead speakers on some important topic or issue followed by questions and answers. This format is suitable for a group of about 15 to 20 persons.
- (e) **Dialogue followed by dinner:** We find that the members are very appreciative if we can provide a light dinner or some refreshments after the group meeting. It is also a good time for members to interact informally with each other. Thus it is very important to have nice refreshments/dinner after the group discussion/meeting.

4. Obstacles to the Science and Religion Dialogue

There are many questions, doubts and critiques often faced during these science and religion dialogues. Some of these are:

- (a) There are sometimes disagreements among members regarding the wisdom and worldview of different religious traditions. We need to devise ways and means to produce a useful dialogue through respect and appreciation of each other. Here science can help greatly.
- (b) The dialogue is not often related to the profession of the participating members. Hence the members have to be oriented to basic scientific views as well as religious views regarding the nature of reality. In other words, we need to motivate specially the new members so that they can understand the importance of science and religion dialogue.
- (c) Many of us come from different religious and spiritual traditions. When there are new scientific discoveries and advancements, how are we going to react to these scientific approaches that do not agree with the religious scriptures, for example, cloning, abortion, euthanasia, etc.?
- (d) Will science and religion dialogue create a platform where religious traditions are treated beyond sectarian perspective by its own members and embrace other traditions simultaneously based on their merit? Are we open enough? We will definitely learn from the dialogue and the time will definitely come that we will do the right thing.
- (e) Obstacles due to economic involvement: Most members are all voluntary participants. Some interested persons cannot participate because their financial background does not allow them.
- (f) What should be the guidelines for performing science and religion dialogues since the dialogue can vary from a simple discussion to a very technical and specific research oriented discussion? When the dialogue reaches to a level involving deeper and technical aspects of science, the domain of dialogue gets restricted since layman and non-scientific background people cannot participate.

5. LSI and Youth

Youth participation in LSI is one of the most important aspects of LSI so that this next generation of leaders can get first hand exposure and experience of these important dialogues on science and religion. Some of the advantages of youth participation in LSI are: (i) Youths have fresh and open mind to accept new wisdom (ii) Youths are very active and enthusiastic for participation and program organization (iii) Youths are future leaders of tomorrow. They will go and settle at different places and could become potential sites for opening new centers and societies to further promote science and religion dialogue there.

One suggestion for involving youth in LSI is that each LSI could organize a local “Annual Youth Festival” inviting as many youths as possible. Other than many attractive

items like traditional music, dance, lectures, exhibition of prominent scientists quotes on science and religion, it could also include a section of counseling where students could get some advise from some invited expert academicians about their future prospects. Since most of the youths are worried and concerned about their future prospects, the counseling will attract them to participate in the festival. The youth festival could be one of the most important efforts of LSIs to reach the students and youths to introduce them the science and religion dialogue.

Another suggestion is that those youth who make a significant contribution towards promoting science and religion dialogue could be awarded some 'scholarships' to help them in their academics. This will encourage them to get further involved, promote and participate in science and religion dialogues.

6. LSI and World Peace

Recent world events continue to remind us of the urgency for a global strategy for world peace. The last century has witnessed many major global conflicts. The world is threatened by various forms of violence such as, terrorism, nuclear war, biological warfare, etc. The proliferation of our destructive capabilities is clear evidence that the world urgently needs some serious measures to bring global peace. Thus world peace is an important issue to be addressed in LSI discussions/meetings. For the discussion of the role of science and religion on world peace, we suggest:

(a) Participation of Scientists: We suggest the participation of at least a few scientists in the peace meetings. Scientists are directly or indirectly involved in the invention of weapons of mass destruction. These weapons are misused for political and other purposes. Generally the peace meetings are participated by the representatives from different religious traditions and political leaders. It is rare that we see scientists participating in the peace meetings. If scientists are made as part of the peacemaking meetings, they will be conscious of the urgent need of peace. Then they will be able to protest for any attempt to misuse their inventions. Also scientists themselves will restrain from their curiosity to apply the discovery for the development of weapons. Einstein himself wrote a letter to F. D. Roosevelt, the President of USA on how the enormous amount of energy locked in the atom can be used for the construction of atom bomb. After the United States dropped two atomic bombs on civilians in Japan in 1945, Einstein regretted sending the letter to Roosevelt. For rest of his life he became the advocator of nuclear disarmament. He remarked, "I am willing to fight for peace... Is it not better for a man to die for a cause in which he believes, such as peace, than to suffer for a cause which he does not believe in, such as war?"

(b) Interreligious Dialogue: Interreligious dialogue is an integral part of the peace process. A culture of partnership among different religions catalyzes and facilitates in

making a peace process. In the last century we have witnessed many religiously motivated violence, which continues to plague society.

Thus it is suggested that in our LSI's discussions and meetings focusing on role of science and religion for world peace, we also invite a few people of diverse religious backgrounds to promote interfaith understanding. The dialogue could include a scientific approach to the contemplative values of various religious traditions.

We can also inspire each and every participant of diverse religious tradition that we all human beings are brothers and sisters. Although we perform different religious rituals, speak different languages, have different colors – we are all God's dear children. Human life is very precious in God's creation. We should respect one another and should cultivate unity while allowing for diversity. We are all eternal spiritual beings in temporary material bodies and ultimate goal of human life is to achieve love of the Supreme Lord. Religion should never be used for political purposes or material gain, nor should we allow ourselves to be used by others for such ends. We should all agree not to commit any crimes against the creation in the name of God. We should always be mindful not to be misguided in the name of religion but be guided by those persons who are sincerely following the essence of their respective religious teachings.

If scientists seriously take the role of God in the world and if all religious communities can understand the universal Fatherhood of God, many of the problems of the world can be solved and we can all live peacefully.

United Religions Initiative (URI, www.uri.org) is leading international interfaith organization. It has Cooperation Circles throughout the world similar to our LSI groups. We can collaborate with URI and we can derive mutual benefit. The purpose of URI is: "to promote enduring, daily interfaith cooperation, to end religiously motivated violence and to create cultures of peace, justice and healing for the Earth and all living beings."

7. Future of LSI

(a) Networking of LSI's and National Conference: To ensure long term sustainability of science and religion dialogues after the grant period, it will be essential to have a regular dialogue between the LSI groups of every country. We suggest that there could be an annual or biannual national conference jointly organized by LSIs of a particular nation. This will bring them closer and they will work together. Other than that, there could also be at least one half-yearly meeting of a nation's LSIs. The political and cultural scenario varies from country to country and also physical transportation is easier and economic arrangement within a country could be easier. In this way the LSIs of a particular country could have a long-term relationship and collaborate closely and

support one another. Similarly, we could divide the world-wide LSIs into five or six regions and have every few years a regional conference of LSIs of that region.

(b) LSI and Academic Activities: For a long-term promotion of science and religion dialogue and having intellectual content in our dialogues, LSI's entrance into academics is very significant. We suggest that –

- (i) All LSIs try to collaborate as much as possible with local academic institutions to start short-term courses on 'science and religion' in their region.
- (ii) The non-profit host institutions of LSI groups could invite local candidates for doctoral thesis on Science and Religion. The degrees could be given by these Institutes in collaboration with the Metanexus Institute. Some of the students in the group might be interested to study further in this direction. When the individuals will make an effort to incorporate elements of spirituality/religion in their own specific area of work, it will ensure a deeper and lasting commitment for the integration of science and religion.
- (iii) We can introduce the course of science and religion dialogue in schools and colleges.

(c) Publications for LSI Sustainability: Another aspect for the sustainability of the science and religion groups is that LSI groups must have publication as an important part of their group activity. Books are the second largest source of information, according to the survey report in the April 2004 issue of *Science and Theology News*.

(d) Funds after grant period is over: We can approach many other generous funding agencies and philanthropic groups. The outreach programs can provide a significant help in this direction. As we have experienced in our outreach programs, they not only promote science and religion dialogue but also have a great potential to encounter many philanthropic groups and rich people. This can be a good source of funding. Each LSI has to work hard and with determination seeking the blessings of the Almighty Lord.