

SSQII: SCIENCE AND THE QUEST FOR MEANING

Science and the Spiritual Quest II (SSQ II) was an international program conducted by the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences in Berkeley, California, in collaboration with several partner organizations. Through private workshops and major public conferences around the world, SSQ promoted dialogue among leading scientists on the connections between their scientific pursuits and their religious or spiritual practices. Science and the Spiritual Quest (SSQ) did not advocate a particular religious position or a specific outcome for discussions between science and religion. It sought merely to promote open and authentic dialogue on this topic within the scientific community, and to make the insights and questions resulting from these discussions available to the public through conferences, publications and multimedia.

Allan Sandage has a planet named after him and a class of variable stars. He has won the Gruber Prize and the Bruce Medal, the highest awards in his field. This is not surprising, though, as he is one of the world's leading astronomers, responsible for some of the standard textbook fare that makes up introductory courses in astronomy. What is surprising about Sandage is that he is profoundly religious, and very interested in the rigorous execution of his science. More surprising, even to Sandage, is that this interest is shared by so many of his fellow cosmologists.

At an unusual conference in 1998, sponsored by the University of California at Berkeley physics department, cosmologists interested in the spiritual implications of their work gathered. Many who attended, including Sandage, discovered for the first time that some of their well-known colleagues shared these interests. Sandage was heard to exclaim repeatedly: "We have been together for 20 years—I never knew you had any interest in religious questions!"

How is it that scientists working closely together could be so unaware of their mutual interest in spiritual matters? And how widespread are these interests in the scientific community? How accurate is the public perception that science and religion are completely at odds with one another?

The Science and the Spiritual Quest project (SSQ) launched in 1995 brought internationally distinguished scientists together to tell their own spiritual stories, and to affirm that their scientific research had not undermined their own personal faith commitments. The director of the project, philosopher Phillip Clayton, Ingraham Chair at Claremont School of Theology, is convinced that SSQ reassures religious believers who often have a "fear verging on paranoia" of how science undermines faith. "If you demonstrate, however, that leading scientists are eager to reflect on these important issues, draw lines, and be guided by religious wisdom, you take away that cause for fear," says Clayton.

SSQ took direct aim at the near universal cultural perception that science and religion are at war. Popular media images of Galileo, Darwin, and Scopes have them forever under assault for their scientific views, despite unheeded scholarly opinion to the contrary. These images are effectively countered, says Clayton, simply by having "famous scientists speak about the compatibility of science and religion." When such scientists, including Nobel laureates, go public with their faith stories, the results are both surprising and newsworthy. William D. Phillips, Nobel laureate in physics and SSQ scientist, noted that "there was genuine surprise and satisfaction that leading scientists could also be people of deep religious and spiritual conviction."

"We began," says Clayton, "by finding 60 scientists who were prestigious enough in their fields and knowledgeable enough in their religious traditions." Scientists then gathered for well-publicized meetings in settings designed to call attention to what was occurring. In June 1998, for example, press from across America and overseas descended on the University of California at Berkeley campus for the Science & the Spiritual Quest conference. Prominent, sometimes enraged, anti-religious scientists demanded equal time at the podium to defend the incompatibility of religion and science. Many media articles reported on that summer's event, including the cover story in Newsweek: "Science Finds God." Charles Harper, observed that SSQ succeeded in both "attracting the attention of academics and opinion leaders and in winning significant public opinion."

The gauntlet had been thrown down. SSQ continued to make a frontal assault on the widespread perception that religious belief and scientific prowess were somehow in opposition to each other. Behind podiums at prestigious universities around the world, leading scientists were sharing their spiritual journeys in front of packed auditoriums. “Scientists are often enthusiastic,” notes Clayton, “when for the first time, they discover significant connections between science and religion.”

In the fall of 2001, just weeks after the September 11 tragedy, Harvard University hosted an SSQ gathering that broke attendance records. A highly engaged roster of participants reflected on the value of science as a common ground to unite a tragically fragmented humanity. “Now,” reflected SSQ co-director Mark Richardson, “is the time when progressive elements of all the traditions must show backbone and declare themselves to be an alternative to the intolerance and hostility of dogmatism.” Sufi astronomer Bruno Guiderdoni concurred, calling for both science and belief in God to be “forces for wholeness and not for fragmentation.” In the wake of September 11, “Spiritual Quest” took on a new urgency.

Bangalore, India, hosted the final SSQ conference early in 2003. The program included a four-day meeting for scholars, a large public event at the Indian Institute of Science and an open-air concert attended by more than 6,500 people. Clayton was impressed with the Indians’ appreciation for the significance of Science and the Spiritual Quest: “More than in any other intellectual and cultural context in which the Quest has been active, the Indian participants sounded calls for a deeper integration of science and religion,” he observed. Richardson agreed: “It is humbling to realize the depth of the insight in the Indic traditions and the new spiritual knowledge that they offer.”

Into 2003 SSQ continued to assemble leading scientists from around the world in smaller private workshops; public conferences and telecasts, books and articles that focused attention on science and religion. Clayton, the primary architect of the program and a well-respected philosopher, is convinced that “something unbelievable has occurred.” Clayton, deeply versed in the Western intellectual tradition, believes that we are witnessing the dawn of a new era. “For the first time in its history, modern science and its practitioners have begun to grapple with the fundamental questions of human existence.” And the results are reaching far beyond the ivory towers of the academy. “In the business and political arenas and in the public at large, people are noticing. The changes are revolutionary: When worlds collide, everything is realigned,” says Clayton.