

Science and Religion Forum Conference 2017

Mental Wellbeing, Neuroscience and Religion

Bishop Grosseteste University, Longdales Road, Lincoln, UK

Welcome Address

Dr Michael Fuller, SRF Chair

It is once again my great privilege and pleasure in my role as chair of the Science and Religion Forum to welcome you all most warmly to our annual Science and Religion Forum conference, and to say a few brief words at its commencement. It's extremely appropriate for us to be meeting here at Bishop Grosseteste University, named after the celebrated Bishop of Lincoln whose wide-ranging scholarship have led some in recent years to see him as something of a pioneer in the field of science and religion. It's also a great pleasure to be in this beautiful city of Lincoln, and I do hope that as many of you as are able will take some time to have a look around, especially if this place is new to you – that will have to be after the conference, of course, as we're going to be keeping you pretty busy over the next 48 hours!

It's a particular pleasure to be welcoming you to a conference looking at the interactions of science and religion at a time when, I feel, the ongoing dialogue of these areas of human thought and experience is entering a new phase. After some decades of thinking in largely theoretical terms, we have seen a recent practical turn, to the exploration new areas of mutual concern to those with scientific and religious backgrounds. In this climate it is both fitting and exciting that our 2017 conference is being held in partnership with the Guild of Health and St Raphael, to explore an area which will be of profound interest to the membership of Guild and Forum alike: 'Mental Wellbeing, Neuroscience and Religion'. Gillian Straine, the Publicity Officer for the Science and Religion Forum and the Director of the Guild of Health and St Raphael, will add her own words of welcome in just a moment.

Our Committee has already met to being looking at matters which we'll be discussing further in our AGM tomorrow. For the moment, though, I'd like to thank most warmly on your behalf those who have been working so hard in the setting up of this conference, and in ensuring its smooth running: Gillian herself, and also our Conference Secretary, Mark Harris, and our Membership Secretary, Hilary Martin,

who have been working diligently behind the scenes to prepare for this event. Gillian has also edited the Symposium from last year's Forum conference in Birmingham: this is available on our conference bookstall, together with proceedings from our other past conferences. Our thanks go to Gavin Merrifield, our Treasurer, who on top of his other duties has been liaising with the publisher, and making that bookstall possible. (In addition to all his work for the Forum, Gavin has found time to get married in the past year, and our congratulations go to him and Joy). Special thanks go to Julie Wearing, who has combined her work as the SRF's Secretary with being our person 'on the ground' here in Lincoln. Julie has been our principal liaison with BGU and has done a huge amount of work in preparation not only for this conference but also for the 'Fruitfulness of Science and Faith' conference which will follow on from it on Saturday here in Lincoln.

Let me now very briefly turn to the theme of this conference: 'Mental Wellbeing, Neuroscience and Religion'. For some time now, it's been said that the great scientific frontier for the 21st century is the human brain: it is here that we may reasonably expect huge strides forward in our understanding to be made. And this has undoubtedly been the case: thanks to the neuroscientific application of techniques such as functional magnetic resonance imaging, our knowledge of how our brains work is increasing on an almost daily basis. But this brings with it, in turn, a fresh set of questions, as well as a new perspective on some very old ones. As we understand more and more about the brain, are we coming to a greater understanding too of what religions have traditionally referred to as the soul or spirit, or will this remain forever elusive for our scientific procedures? As the mechanisms undergirding the functioning of the brain are better understood, to what extent will this offer us fresh insights into what have in the past been seen as mental aspects of human life? Is it possible that this will lead to new understandings of what have been classed as mental afflictions, such as depression? And, of huge importance for those in the caring professions (and indeed for all who devote themselves to the mental wellbeing of others), what (if any) therapeutic benefits may flow from our increasing understanding of how the brain functions? How does our scientific knowledge 'cash out' in terms of helping those in need? These are just some of the issues which I look forward to exploring with you in our sessions over the next couple of days, in what promises to be a fascinating range of topics addressed by our various speakers.