

Science and Religion Forum Conference 2017

Mental Wellbeing, Neuroscience and Religion

Bishop Grosseteste University, Longdales Road, Lincoln, UK

After Dinner Conversation

Jaime Wright

Listening to a Conversation: Michael Harvey and Sarah Lane Ritchie

Following our conference dinner at the Science and Religion Forum, we experienced an unusual version of the annual after-dinner talk: a conversation between two people from different corners of our mental wellbeing, neuroscience, and religion dialogue.

Michael Harvey is a church innovator, who is well known for his Back to Church Sunday initiative and his development of invitation as a missional tool. He has written multiple books and is an itinerant speaker, giving Unlocking the Growth seminars. Sarah Lane Ritchie is a postdoctoral research fellow at St Andrews University. She recently completed a doctoral programme in Science and Religion, focusing on consciousness and divine action at the University of Edinburgh.

The conversation between Michael and Sarah ranged from personal motivations behind their work to a discussion of what might be occurring in the brain when someone goes on mission. Watching the conversation, one has the sense of how wide-ranging and difficult a science and religion dialogue might be. Michael admitted that he was asking the ‘innocent’ questions that needed to be asked, even if they did not have answers. Meanwhile, we watched as Sarah articulated answers as best possible given the research available—which sometimes required her to not provide the simple answers Michael’s questions may have been asking for.

The conversation between these two speakers from different professions and specialties, reminds us of the complexities involved in understanding scientific research (for example, how does one define mission such that a researcher can know what and how to measure the impacts of ‘mission’ on the brain?); the two-way

interaction between our life-stories and our research or profession; and just how different the approaches, questions, and terminology can be in the two fields of science and religion.

At the end of the conversation, Michael entreated scientists of faith to conduct more research, producing data on topics such as the neuroscience of Christian hope, healing, and mission. While one might be tempted to think that such an entreaty implies that Sarah should have had answers to all of Michael's questions, it is important to remember that part of the science and religion dialogue is about acknowledging the limitations of the two fields in what they can tell us. Furthermore, this dialogue carried out before us served as a reminder to how healing and growing simply having the conversation—with or without solid answers—can be.