

## LAUDATIO

### **The South African Science and Religion Forum: a memoir**

*Peter Barrett*

School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics,  
University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa

This tells of a congenial partnership with Cornel du Toit in initiating and helping to plan the annual conferences of the South African Science and Religion Forum (SASRF) from 1993 to 2008. It all began when, in late 1992, I suggested to Willem Vorster, the then director of Unisa's Institute for Theological Research, that he should devote one of the Institute's several annual conferences to the science-and-religion scene that was already burgeoning in the USA and Europe. He immediately welcomed the idea but, sadly, died a few weeks later. It was left to the Institute's excellent administrative staff to set up the opening one-day conference, held on 7 May 1993 with the title, "Theology and the New Physics". Cornel succeeded Vorster later that year and the Institute was then broadened into the Research Institute for Theology and Religion. The SASRF took its name from the British SRF and received a gracious letter of good wishes from their president, Russell Stannard. It has operated throughout as a "project" of the Institute.

That first conference drew an audience of well over a hundred – for a one-day programme comprising three talks plus the showing of part of Angela Tilby's BBC television production, *Soul of the universe*. Dr John Webster (philosopher-theologian at Helderberg College and editor of the 1992 *Who's who in theology & science*) outlined the science-theology dialogue, Cornel offered a theological response to 20th-century cosmology, and I (as a physicist at the University of Natal) sketched the physical world-picture of the very small, the very large and the very complex. Altogether, the event seemed to be much appreciated, even though one person remarked afterwards, "New physics, yes, but what about new theology?"

What about Cornel's approach to the continuation of the SASRF venture, if not the entire range of his intellectual endeavour? A prolific science-and-religion writer once told me that he read about five hundred books a year and what's more, he said, "I know where everything is in them that I need to know!" Cornel seems to have the same sort of ability to read rapidly, organise the relevant ideas and re-express them in broad brush terms – densely packed and sometimes a little difficult to follow, but effective in introducing and opening up a conference theme for others to engage and help illuminate. He is extremely well informed over a wide range of topics at the frontline of science-and-religion discourse, not least through participation in the activities of the European Society for the Study of Science and Theology.

Moving on from his earlier role as a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, Du Toit embraced the opportunity to place religious belief under the spotlight of science-informed epistemology. He would no doubt affirm Scottish theologian Thomas Torrance's remark that biblical and theological scholarship could not but be greatly benefited if it opened itself to the critical questions of modern science, for that would have the effect of "exposing its hidden presuppositions and mechanisms, purging it of pseudo-concepts and substitute symbolisms, and throwing it back upon its own proper ontological ground".

There is perhaps a little irony in the fact that in our respective papers at a number of SASRF conferences, Cornel always strongly emphasised the view from science, whereas I, as a retired physicist, invariably sought to include elements of Trinitarian tradition. In fact, the science-and-religion discourse has tended to be driven from the side of science and weighted towards a philosophically based theism, rather than one that is theologically based. Cornel is clearly more in tune with the philosophical approach and would perhaps hope for a progressive deepening of spirituality in the world at large – free of the constricting and polemical attitudes often carried by religious life and thought. However, as the SASRF's first distinguished speaker, Arthur Peacocke, once expressed it, the name of the game is "inference to the best explanation" – a science-and-religion explanation that involves the usual aesthetic criteria of simplicity, elegance, coherence, explanatory power and, in this case, the capacity to deal with the profound existential questions of horrendous evil and ultimate meaning. I believe that under these constraints, a compelling account is available in terms of well-winnowed Christian tradition.

What then is the future direction of the SASRF, given its past discussion of cosmic and biological evolution, and of aspects of human personhood with its capacity for language, symbolic understanding and, thence, culture? In the first place, in the light of the continuing quest for an African renaissance, it might be useful to establish links

with science-and-religion activity elsewhere in Africa, notably at the Makerere University, Uganda, and in one or two institutions in Kenya and Nigeria.

Otherwise, a serious challenge lies in further and deeper exploration of the nature and meaning of human personhood – through the combined areas of inquiry and creativity represented by the logo on the SASRF's past newsletters. This contains the words "science religion philosophy arts – the search for understanding" lying between two concentric circles, and these surround a four-leaf clover carrying the corresponding Greek letters  $\sigma$   $\rho$   $\phi$   $\alpha$ . Some writers are wondering if the field of science-and-religion has been more or less exhaustively worked through, but if  $\alpha$  is fed into the  $\sigma$   $\rho$  interplay, this would increase the epistemic role of aesthetics and imagination alongside that of logic and reason and would surely open up the field immensely. All the more so if  $\rho$  is advanced to full-blooded  $\theta$  – indeed, to a new-style natural theology "in all its christological and pneumatological glory" as Prof Sarah Coakley, who presents the annual series of Gifford Lectures, phrased it.

And in openness to our contemporary world of conflict, there remains for the SASRF the challenge to try to facilitate constructive interfaith engagement via the world-picture of science. Jesuit priest Thomas Berry may be right in claiming that "the story of the universe is the only thing that can bring the religions of the world together".

