



Science and Christianity Cadre Welcomes Challenge of Big Questions

by Sean Flynt

According to historian James F. Sulzby Jr., Howard College biology professor H. Calvin Day was a man of faith and science who lost his job in 1929 after raising scientific doubts about the literal truth of many Bible stories. Eighty years later, a group of Samford faculty, staff and community friends safely discusses issues unimaginable in Day's time, and with implications far beyond Bible stories.

Controversy has often arisen when science and religion mix, but participants in Samford's informal Science and Christianity Cadre see greater danger in the ways science and religion fail to mix. As Tom Woolley, professor of statistics and founder of the group, explained, "ours is an increasingly technological and scientific culture, one in which the authority of Christianity to address the big questions of life has been replaced, for many, by science."

Woolley said that although Christians have been marginalized in scientific discussions—and sometimes marginalized themselves—they have much to learn from science and much to contribute to it.

"As the pace of scientific advancement and technological change quickens," he said, "Christians need to understand the science and its implications for their faith and our common

culture if they hope to be respected and consulted when major ethical and moral issues arise."

Beyond Evolution

After completing his studies in the prestigious John Templeton Oxford Seminars on Science and Christianity at Oxford University in 2005, Woolley returned to Samford eager to connect with others who share his interest in the biggest of big questions. He soon found Samford professors Wilton Bunch, Steve Donaldson and George Keller, who he said have been faithful to the cadre from the beginning and share responsibility for its longevity.

The cadre now has as many as 12 participants at its monthly meetings, some from the campus community and some not. They're a mixed bunch, both professionally and theologically, but they all seek "better understanding of science and Christianity as coseekers of truth," Woolley said.

Monthly book readings drive cadre discussions. Although their selections address complex issues, most of them are approachable, popular books representing believers and nonbelievers alike. "We just want to be open and honest," Woolley said. "We're willing to listen to most anybody who has an idea."



The cadre casts a wide topical net but confounds stereotype by spending little time on the subject of evolution.

"We look at that as almost a dead issue," Woolley said. "That's old stuff, and religion has either dealt with it or it hasn't." He pointed out that even the Vatican has acknowledged that evolution is compatible with Christian belief. But the controversy still rages in some circles, and cadre participants fear that this is alienating Christians from science (and science from Christianity), and distracting them from pressing issues.

"There's so much more on the horizon when it comes to science and technology that's just going to broadside the faith community," Woolley said. "The more science touches people's lives, the more conflict there's going to be."

Big Questions

The questions raised in even a one-hour cadre discussion help explain the sense of urgency participants feel.

What will it mean to be human as our bodies merge with technology and artificial intelligence challenges traditional concepts of consciousness? Cochlear implants, advanced prosthetics and other new additions to the body are widely accepted and viewed as positive, but ethical problems already have arisen at the leading edge of this science. Steve Donaldson, associate professor of computer science, said, "I can do artificial intelligence research on my home computer that wasn't dreamed of 20 years ago." He added, with a mix of awe and concern, "nobody can stop me." In any case, he said, laws aren't necessarily the answer and might even be counterproductive.

What is the nature of God as creator if (when) humans manage to create life? George Keller, associate professor of biology and assistant dean of Howard College of Arts and Sciences, said there are credible scientific predictions that humans will eventually create life, perhaps within just a few decades. England's *Daily Telegraph* reported in March that a recent breakthrough in synthetic biology might allow a "second genesis" within a decade. "That's going to be a shock to some people," Keller said. "If you're just trying to put out the fire on evolution, it's going to sneak up on you."

What are the implications for theology and every other aspect of human life if neuroscience demonstrates

that humans have no free will? Donaldson said an article in one of the cadre's readings (*The Volitional Brain*) sheds light on this "dialog that's been going on for thousands of years." He said that while reading, he thought, "every Calvinist needs to read this article. When they see that neuroscience suggests that free will is an illusion, they can say, 'Look! Science proves my position!'"

How much genetic manipulation is too much? If it's acceptable to intervene genetically to prevent a debilitating birth defect, is it acceptable to select a child's IQ or height or eye color while we're at it? How will we reconcile what is scientifically possible with ethical and moral concerns about eugenics, elitism and profit motive?

Should those nations most capable of human cloning ban that research or take the lead in order to control it? According to Keller, "the thinking, among some people, is that if it's going to be done anyway, let's do it where at least it has a chance of being done ethically and there can be some government control because of the funding."

Woolley is among those who foresee trouble if we forego serious discussion on the assumption that regulation and popular disdain will prevent or control such research. "If somebody will pay \$155,000 to have their puppy cloned," he said, "it's not far down the road—I don't care what the laws are—before somebody's going to clone their lost child."

When should we discuss the ethical implications of science and technology? In the wake of news about human octuplets, Wilton Bunch, a physician and professor of ethics, noted that the generally accepted science of in vitro fertilization outpaced discussion of its ethical implications.

"It was not until it was applied widely that people started to say, 'Oops . . . when should we be doing this?'" he said. "The questions about it were never asked until, effectively, the genie was out of the bottle." Woolley added that the timing of an ethics discussion is itself an ethical problem because it would be unethical to withdraw a technology that is already improving human lives.

Next Steps

"Religious people have to have a seat at the table when these things are discussed, wherever they're discussed," Woolley said. "The cadre is looking for ways to expand the discussion on science

and Christianity through community and campus lectures, adult education opportunities in local churches, the development of undergraduate courses in science and religion, and through collaborative research."

The group expects to make significant progress toward those goals this year, and is seeking grants and other sources of funding for the work. Participants believe their efforts will stand out, nationally, because Samford defies popular stereotypes of Christian higher education and the South. Secular and religious partisans both may be surprised to find balanced and open discussion of controversial issues at a Baptist university on the buckle of the Bible Belt. But what better place to learn how faith can enlarge science? What better place to learn how science can enlarge faith? ■

The Science and Christianity Cadre's Recommended Readings

The Savior of Science (Stanly Jaki)

The Volitional Brain: Towards a Neuroscience of Free Will (Anthony Freeman, Benjamin Libet and Keith Sutherland)

The Life of the Cosmos (Lee Smolin)

God's Debris: A Thought Experiment (Scott Adams)

Chance or Purpose? Creation, Evolution and a Rational Faith (Christoph Cardinal Schonborn)

Reinventing the Sacred: A New View of Science, Reason, and Religion (Stuart Kauffman)

At Home in the Universe: The Search for the Laws of Self-Organization and Complexity (Stuart Kauffman)

Radical Evolution: The Promise and Peril of Enhancing Our Minds, Our Bodies—and What It Means to Be Human (Joel Garreau)

Modern Physics and Ancient Faith (Stephen M. Barr)

The Deep Structure of Biology: Is Convergence Sufficiently Ubiquitous to Give a Directional Signal (Simon Conway Morris)

Divine Action: Examining God's Role in an Open and Emergent Universe (Keith Ward)

Science and Religion: Are They Compatible? (Paul Kurtz, Barry Karr and Ranjit Sandhu)