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THE INTERNATIONAL RELIGION-SCIENCE DISCOURSE:
PITFALLS, OBSTACLES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

In his perceptive article on the state of contemporary religion and science discourse, Philip Clayton had hoped that the concrete proposals he offered in his article “will call forth responses from Islamic scholars”.¹ He had suggested that “the pages of *Islam & Science* offer the ideal forum in which to explore what theoretical foundations there are for future science-religion programs and what types of programs would be of most interest to Muslim scientists and to scholars of Islam”.² This “Endnote” offers a perspective of a Muslim who has been part of that international discussion for over a decade and who has closely watched, analyzed, and discussed this discourse with many Muslim, Christian, and Jewish participants. It is also an effort to bring into relief some of the pitfalls, obstacles, and opportunities which characterize this inter-faith dialogue at a time when the situation of the world—which cannot be abstracted from this discourse on the relationship between science and religion—is marked by enormous tragedies: earthquakes, hurricanes, and acts of terrorism leading to the sudden death of thousands of human beings.

1. Philip Clayton, “The State of the International Religion-Science Discussion Today” in *Islam & Science*, Vol. 2 (Summer 2004) No. 1, 105-112.

2. Ibid.

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Clayton had pointed out that compared to the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the religion and science dialogue saw a global explosion, today “we face a much darker time...Unnecessary and ill-conceived wars are being fought, and our hearts are wrenched daily by pictures of the deaths of innocent people... Undoubtedly wrongs are being committed on both sides, and a balanced discussion of the political situation would have to present it in all its ambiguities. Still, among the wrongs to be acknowledged are the aggressive policies and cultural insensitivity of the current American administration. Saddest of all, one recognizes that some of the misguided policies stem, at least in part, from a wrongly politicized interpretation of Christianity in its relationship to Islamic cultures and nations.” Clayton had very perceptively realized that “for many Muslims the recent hostilities have done great damage to the partnership in which we were engaged together until only recently.”³

The current situation is, indeed, dark, and as Clayton rightly pointed out, there is little that scientists and scholars involved in the religion and science discourse can do to stem the tide of aggression and conflict, but within the parameters of discourse there are numerous things that *can* be done by those who are sincerely interested in a truly international discourse on the relationship of science and religion and it is toward this end that this present article is directed. Two programs have dominated the international religion-science discourse: the Science and Spiritual Quest (SSQ) (1995-2003) and the eight-year-long Science and Religion Course Program, both administered by the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences (CTNS).⁴ In addition to these programs, the establishment of an International Society for Science and Religion in 2002 also gained some importance, though its potential has remained untapped.

Science and the Spiritual Quest (SSQ) and the Science-Religion Course Program of CTNS (SRCP)

Being one of the two leading scholars directly responsible for the conception, organization, and execution of the “Science and Spiritual Quest” (SSQ) program between 1995 and 2003, Clayton has succinctly summarized the main features of SSQ.⁵ More importantly, he has also

3. Ibid.

4. For details of this program, list of participants, and selected courses, see the website of the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, www.ctns.org.

5. For details of the program see Clayton's aforementioned article as well as the SSQ website, www.ssq.net.

pointed out some of the “weaknesses in the particular details of the SSQ program: The program leaders were all Christians, and the center that administered the program had a particular interest in Christian theology. Some of the selections of participating scientists were arbitrary, since the selection committee was simply unaware of scientists who would have been ideal participants. Although the public events took place around the world, the workshops themselves were all held in the West. Not enough of the participants were invited to speak at the public conferences, so that not all of the ideas were heard in public. Sadly, too few of the conferences took place within the Muslim world.”⁶ These are generous admissions, deserving appreciation of Clayton’s sincerity. One must also publicly recognize his enormous personal contribution to the SSQ program as well as the various positive outcomes of the program such as the establishment of important connections between members of various faith traditions within the parameters of the SSQ program. But in the interests of the future, one must also point out some of the fundamental problems inherent in the SSQ as well as in the Science and Religion Course Program of the CNTS—problems that have brought the process of internationalizing the science-religion discourse to a cul-de-sac. It is important to present these problems at this stage because the future of the science and religion discourse depends upon their resolution.

Problems Arising from the Single Source of Religion-Science Programs

The first major problem of the entire effort of internationalizing the religion-science discourse is the funding source. Not only the SSQ and SRCP, but the entire process of recent internationalization of the religion-science discourse owes its existence and propagation to one funding source: the John Templeton Foundation. This is not to say that there are no other institutions interested in the internationalization of the science-religion discourse, but to point out the overwhelming absence of any other substantial funding source in the field. This absence of other funding sources means that everyone in the field is beholden to the preferences, choices, and even dictates of the one and only one funding source. This may not have been a major obstacle in the continuation of a genuine dialogue among the members of various faith traditions in the context of science and religion, had the agents managing the funding been interested in supporting an honest, no-strings-attached discourse; sadly this is not the

6. Ibid.

case. The John Templeton Foundation, which has bankrolled numerous religion and science programs over the last fifteen years, is a foundation established by one man and managed by a handful of close associates, all of whom have well-definable faith commitments, motives, and goals. These commitments, motives, and goals are not only personal, they are the *raison d'être* of the Foundation, and as such, not only is the funding process directly affected by these personal preferences, even the programs funded through a so-called independent review process are constantly monitored to suit the goals and preferences of the individuals who run this Christian foundation with a pronounced right-wing attachment aligned to the politics of the present US administration.⁷ The orchestration of the Templeton Foundation in the programs it funds extends even to the extent of selection of participants and themes of the specific conferences.⁸ The *modus operandi* of the Foundation suggests ulterior motives, as far as the Muslim world is concerned. This is not merely conjecture; there is solid factual evidence which suggests that under the guise of science-religion discourse, the John Templeton Foundation is actually trying to implement a religious and political agenda in the Muslim world which attempts to undermine faith, ferment political unrest and provide platforms to those who would be willing to be the mouthpieces of the Foundation.

A case in point is Iran. The political agenda of the present US administration against the Islamic Republic of Iran is well-known. Over the course of the last seven years, the Foundation has tried hard to discover inroads into the Iranian scientific and intellectual community; it has supported and promoted individuals known for their opposition to the demo-

7. One has only to look at the content of "Endless Possibilities", the regular column of Sir John Templeton, the founder and chairman of the John Templeton Foundation, in the Foundation-sponsored *Science & Theology News* (www.stnews.org) to ascertain the veracity of these links. For Sir John, the US invasion and occupation of Iraq offers endless possibilities for the expansion of "democracy and freedom". When the US military was savagely destroying Fallujah, Sir John was singing the praises of American soldiers on mission; when the torture cells in Abu Ghuraib prison were the headlines around the world, Sir John was writing about the "blessings" of political freedom in Iraq.

8. In 2003, I was shocked to find out that the Executive Head of the Foundation had contacted the UNESCO's Paris office, with which SSQ was jointly organizing a conference in Kazakhstan, to tell them who were not "acceptable" Muslim participants.

cratically elected governments of the Islamic Republic of Iran,⁹ attempted to ferment political unrest, and has supported US administrations' attempts to gather information about Iran's nuclear program. At one point, one of its front organizations, Metanexus Institute, even announced an award of more than one million-dollar funding to an unknown group in Tehran—a group that had no background in science-religion discourse. As it happened, the effort failed; the same funding was then given to a group in Israel! The Foundation has been more successful in other cases, such as Pakistan, Indonesia, and Nigeria, where it has found individuals who are willing to provide local support.¹⁰ These are also countries where dictatorial governments are directly supported by the United States and where a repressive climate of torture, oppression, and the annihilation of dissident voices prevails.

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9. In an attempt to project a so-called dissident voice, one of the Iranian “intellectuals” was brought to Harvard and offered a position which could have hardly gone to a man of his qualifications had due academic process taken place. The same man, whose field of specialization is political science, was then invited to deliver a keynote speech in the science-religion conference organized by Metanexus Institute.
 10. Some of these individuals may be totally unsuspecting of the real motives of the John Templeton Foundation. This is especially true for newcomers to the discourse, for what they see is the academic veneer of the Foundation—there is an advisory board, there are consultants, there are numerous programs with their academic/scholarly apparatus and it takes some discernment and contextual experience with the Foundation to realize that behind this veneer, the Foundation functions in an autocratic manner on the whims of a handful of people closely associated with its Executive Director and all decisions regarding programs and funding are actually made by these people, without any regard to the academic apparatus put forward. Two or three Muslims who have in the past been members of the Foundation's Advisory Board or the advisory boards of one of its ancillary organizations, have privately said that their presence was of little significance and when they realized the *modus operandi* of the Foundation and the futility of their attempts at contribution, they dissociated themselves. A look at the present Advisory Board of the Metanexus Institute or that of the Tempelton Foundation itself provides ample proof of the cosmetic nature of these boards. The programs funded by the Foundation are also indicative of an agenda steeped in the vision of borne-again Christians. This would have been acceptable had the Foundation and the front organizations funded by it, such as the Metanexus Institute, not been claiming to promote an inter-faith and global discourse in religion and science.

It must be emphasized, however, that though both the SSQ and the SRCP were funded by the John Templeton Foundation, they were administered by the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences (CTNS), a center that has a long-standing history of academic research and support for science and religion dialogue, and the foregoing remarks are not in any way meant to suggest any collusion between the John Templeton Foundation and CTNS. In fact, I am personally aware of the strong position taken by CTNS against the interference of the Foundation in the SRCP program. Both of these programs, however, had certain foundational problems in their conception and execution and these remained operative throughout the long period of their existence; they need to be pointed out so that if a future program comes into existence, it may benefit from this analyses.¹¹ Since the main intent of this article is to suggest a possible future course of action, only two main problems with the past programs will be mentioned.

Conceptual Problems with SSQ and SRCP

Both programs were conceived by Christian scholars with very little input from Muslim and Jewish representatives as far as the basic concepts of the discourse were concerned. It was therefore, natural that both SSQ and SRCP laid out a particularly Christian banquet, as it were, and invited the representatives of the other two Abrahamic traditions to partake of what was laid out. Furthermore, the basic concepts underlying this international religion and science discourse had a pronounced American content; almost the entire team which conceived the programs was American. This foundational limitation was to remain a defining factor of these programs throughout their existence, and hence when Muslims joined the discourse, they could only do what had already been determined. This is more than a peripheral matter as the basic concerns that underlie the relationship between Islam and science are not the same as those that define the discourse in Christianity. Even the very notion of conflict between science and religion—which has remained an abiding concept in Christianity since the seventeenth century, and which has been a major conceptual element in both SSQ and SRCP—is a foreign idea in Islamic tradition which takes *Tawhīd*, the Oneness of the Creator, as its foundation—a Oneness that is

11. Clayton has in fact briefly mentioned some of these problems. He has, however, not mentioned all of them and even those pointed out by him have not received due importance, perhaps because they were not perceived as foundational problems.

operative throughout the universe.

Both SSQ and SRCP also suffered from other conceptual problems that stemmed from the desire, even the need, of the managers of the programs for inclusiveness, as well as the specific dictates of the three Abrahamic traditions which share a unique and well-defined spiritual dimension quite distinct from the great bazaar of spiritual trends which attempts to equate the various expressions of a new-age spirituality with the great religions of humanity. This may even be a reflection of the great difference present in the understanding of Jews, Muslims, and most Christians of the key source of their religions. For Muslims, not only Islam but also Christianity and Judaism are religions founded on revelation (*wahy*); that is to say, on direct Divine revelations to three Prophets chosen by God to convey His message. For Muslims, the Gospels are not the revelation in the same sense in which the Qurʾān is. This difference of understanding about the foundation of religion is bound to influence the primary concepts in the religion and science discourse, and the sources from which material is drawn to discuss issues at the interface of religion and science. Since however the table was already set, there was little Muslims could do to alter the parameters.

The Problem of Representation

Clayton has already generously mentioned that the program leaders for SSQ were Christians and that the program was administered by a Center that had a particular interest in Christian theology; the same is true for SRCP. One of the main problems that stemmed from this limitation was of representation of other faith traditions. How could the Christian leaders of the programs determine whom to invite, especially when they were almost entirely unaware of the genuine representatives of the discourse in non-Western countries? An obvious answer to this problem was to do what refereed journals do to determine the suitability of their content: make an independent selection board consisting of scholars in the field who were qualified to determine the quality of representation. This was not done, not at the beginning of the programs nor during the long years of their existence, even after its repeated suggestion. There was simply no willingness to address this basic issue. This meant that representation of non-Christian traditions was not only arbitrary, as Clayton mentioned, but was definitely a major disadvantage to Muslims, because in addition to being under-represented, they were now being represented at public conferences by “representatives” who cut a sorry figure because they spoke

from the same platform from which Christian, and in many cases Jewish, theologians had eloquently presented their positions. In numerous cases, Muslims who had no past history of academic work in Islam and science discourse were presented as major Islamic voices in the field; in other cases, scholars were actually made out of non-scholars through media projection techniques, and second-rate scholarship was proffered as chief representation of Islamic tradition.¹²

These “Templeton scholars” were given center stage; the vast network of the Foundation’s public relations was put at their service. This effort was remarkably similar to the USA’s strategies in Afghanistan and Iraq: following the invasion and occupation, shadowy men were brought to these countries and made presidents and prime ministers; it was assumed that over time Iraqis and Afghans and indeed the entire world would accept former CIA operatives as genuine representatives. “All eyes are now on Iraq,” writes Sir John in the Foundation’s mouthpiece, *Science & Theology News*, “as the country struggles to construct a constitution that will equally serve the deeply divided people groups within the country.”¹³ True to his neoconservative credentials and born-again Christianity, Sir John is totally blind to the fact of occupation of a Muslim country by a savage army that has desecrated mosques, killed more than 100,000 innocent civilians, and created conditions for civil war; he is merely seeing his hallucinatory “endless possibilities” and looking forward to a constitution made by those who have no legitimate right to be where they are. Many “Templeton scholars” were, likewise, brought to the limelight and asked to speak on behalf of a tradition which did not recognize them as its representatives.

The question of representation of Islamic tradition has yet another

12. It is still possible to assess and establish the damage done by the selection procedure by looking at the list of Muslim participants to the 17 public events held under SSQ in nine countries on four continents; one would be amazed to see the absence of scholars recognized in the field at these events. On the other hand, one would also be puzzled to see the consistent invitations extended to certain individuals who spoke at almost all public events. Why such unique preferences? I pointed out this disparity to the managers of the discourse on more than one occasion, but without any remedy. The same approach was demonstrated in SRCP; I am personally aware of a particular event in which the selection of Muslim participants was made by an office secretary!

13. *Science & Theology*, October 2005, 5.

aspect that deserves to be mentioned. Muslims speaking on behalf of their tradition need to fulfill a minimum level of Islamic standards and this is something which our Christian colleagues failed to understand when discussed. They felt that merely academic qualifications are enough, although there were cases where these too were not required. There is a huge difference in their understanding of the standard and the standard set by the Islamic tradition for its own representatives. The problem is, however, not merely limited to this particular situation; it is a problem of two entirely different worldviews that is present at various levels in the Western understanding of Islam. In the Western academic world, for instance, a person can be a professor of ethics without being required to live by the highest standards of ethics in his or her own life. In the Islamic tradition, such a situation is unthinkable. Those who gain knowledge (*ʿilm*) are only knowledgeable if they apply that knowledge to themselves; those who have been given knowledge, the Qurʾān tells us, and do not carry it with its due rights, are like donkeys carrying books.¹⁴ During one of the SSQ meetings held in Morocco, a student of the host university approached me and asked: “How can so and so represent Islam and talk about our most Noble Prophet and the Book of Allah with the same tongue which was, only a few minutes ago, imbibing wine in the company of Christian theologians in that back room?” I understood exactly what he meant, but when this was mentioned to our Christian colleagues, my remarks drew only disdain, silence, or total disregard, as if such a comment meant nothing.

International Society for Science and Religion (ISSR)

Another major initiative funded by the John Templeton Foundation, the International Society for Science and Religion (ISSR), was established in 2002. From its very inception, ISSR has been marred by procedures that can hardly be conducive to the promotion of an inter-faith discourse. Ninety-seven “founding members” were pre-selected by a small committee and invited to Granada, Spain, for the purpose of founding the Society. But when they arrived at the Founding Meeting at the historic Alhambra in Granada on August 23, 2002, they were surprised to know that the Executive Committee had already been “elected”, the bylaws of the Society had already been determined, and no changes could be made to either of them. Then, one day, the first “elected” President of the Society, who had insisted that he would remain the President of the Society for three years to direct its course, suddenly resigned without

14. *al-Jumuʿah*: 5.

offering any explanation for either his insistence to be President for three years or for his sudden change of heart. The Society then chose another president, but has remained more or less dormant during these years. This entity, bankrolled by the John Templeton Foundation with a great deal of fanfare in Spain, remains to this day an enigma, as its future is shrouded in mystery. Why was it created? What is the real purpose of its existence? Who chose its first Executive Committee and why did the chosen President resign after being extremely insistent on maintaining his unelected position for three years? Why were the criteria for membership changed by a small unrepresentative committee? There are no answers for this. Various attempts to make public what remains behind the scene have remained unfruitful. Many Christian scholars who are genuinely interested in the inter-faith dialogue have even mentioned that it is the allure of the Templeton money that silences voices for everyone knows that “there is only one duck that lays the golden eggs.”

Despite all the fanfare with which ISSR was propped in Spain in 2002, its subsequent history suggests that this secretive organization had other designs but perhaps the subsequent world situation rendered its hidden motives obsolete, at least for now, and Templeton gurus are now interested in keeping it dormant until its utility re-emerges.

What Future awaits the International Religion-Science Discourse?

Given the single source of funding for religion and science programs, given the checkered history of the past attempts at internationalization of the discourse, and given the slow withdrawal of almost all recognized Muslim scholars in the field of Islam and science from events funded by the John Templeton Foundation as well as their dissociation from organizations established by the Foundation, what future can we envision for any genuine inter-faith dialogue in the realm of religion and science? Clayton had rightly pointed out the need and importance for such an exchange in his article, but what possibilities exist for an honorable discourse?

One of the most important practical requirements of an inter-faith discourse between the three Abrahamic religions is obviously a transparent mechanism of funding any initiative, a mechanism that is free of ulterior motives. Then there is the question of evolving a foundational framework in which the discourse can take place; in other words, before any discussion can take place, representatives of the three faith traditions need to agree on the parameters of discourse: what are the faith positions regarding the physical world? Is revealed knowledge superior to that

gained through human effort? What are the epistemic criteria? Are these accepted by all sides? Who represents a given faith tradition? What criteria can be used for selection?

These are fundamental questions for a meaningful inter-faith exchange and they should have been explored in the early 1980s when the recent attempts for internationalization of the religion and science dialogue were still in the making. Nevertheless, for those who are genuinely interested in this dialogue, it is still not too late.

I am not sure if Clayton had this historical background in mind when he asked the question: “Is there also a Muslim motivation for an ongoing dialogue between the various religious traditions on this topic?”, but the fact that he asked the question and the fact that he is personally aware of at least some of the aforementioned events, indicates that there is a sensitivity to Muslim feelings regarding the past and this is a positive sign. As far as Muslims are concerned, there should be no hesitation in continuing a genuine dialogue with the people of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*)—they are even religiously bound to do so—but a dialogue, by definition, is a conversation between two parties in which there is an exchange, a reciprocity, a mutually respectful attitude, and a willingness to understand the other. So far, we have only seen attempts where one side has set up the table and invited the other side to come and sit at a prescribed place and speak on prescribed topics. This phase has more or less come to an end.¹⁵

What can be done through such an inter-faith dialogue has enormous potential for stemming the tide of violence. It can build public awareness of a kind that is simply absent from the scene. Scientists are held in high esteem in both the West and the Islamic lands, and a group of scientists and scholars belonging to the three Abrahamic faiths, speaking at public

15. This does not mean that the John Templeton Foundation has stopped its designs against Islam and Muslims; in fact, the Foundation continues to make inroads into the Muslim heartland and, much like the missionaries of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Foundation uses its monetary resources to recruit adherents to its vision and programs. Its current focus is on Indonesia and Malaysia, where its neoconservative allies are busy in forging an intellectual front against what they call radical Islam. Likewise, the Islamic Republic of Iran remains a high priority area both for the neoconservatives in Washington and the men who run the John Templeton Foundation; both are interested in regime change in the only country in the world where an Islamic Revolution has produced fundamental changes in the society and state institutions.

events on matters of relevance to the human situation on this ravaged planet, is bound to have an impact on the shaping of events.

Clayton has already suggested a *modus operandi* for such a genuine dialogue: a consortium of three centers drawn from each of the three religious traditions jointly managing a longer-term program of science-and-religion projects, each playing its role in hosting and supporting the program, with decisions concerning participating scientists being made jointly by the leaders of the three institutes. This would provide an excellent opportunity to build upon the positive achievements of the SSQ and SRCP programs and under the changed global situation, a new initiative on the lines suggested by Clayton will be an effort welcomed by many Muslims in the field of Islam and science. In response to Clayton's specific question and the concrete proposal he had made, I can certainly say the Center for Islam and Science (www.cis-ca.org) would be very interested in this initiative. The current situation of the world, with its tragic natural disasters and human follies, demands an active participation in positive and constructive efforts by all who care for the state of humanity. *Islam & Science* is receptive to other views on this subject and certainly to the concrete proposals by any other center or institution interested in the inter-faith exchange in the context of religion and science.