
ANNUAL REPORT OF THE LOS ALAMOS FAITH AND SCIENCE FORUM

November 2018

SUMMARY

In 2018, as in past years, the Los Alamos Faith and Science Forum organized a weekly seminar series during the summer months. This year the seminars centered around the topic “Purposeful Evolution,” with presentations by local speakers. The Forum hosted an invited speaker, Prof. Dennis Venema of Trinity Western U., Langley, B. C., who gave two evening lectures at Fuller Lodge on topics of evolution and genetics. Members of the Forum’s Board of Directors met monthly to guide the activities of the Forum. Forum members organized several book discussion groups, publicized and interacted with an independent, on-going discussion group (“Journeys in Faith”) studying yet other books, attended a nation-wide meeting of Catholic scientists, and engaged in several other external interactions. As of the time of the annual meeting in November 2018, there were 27 dues-paying members of the Forum, down slightly from last year’s membership of 28.

SUMMER 2018 ACTIVITIES

SUMMER THEME AND WEEKLY PRESENTATIONS

The theme for the 2018 weekly seminar series was “Purposeful Evolution.” Our intention in these seminars was to explore recent ideas in evolutionary theory that broaden the mechanisms of evolution well beyond the limits of NeoDarwinism or the Modern Synthesis, and which are sometimes referred to under the rubric of the “Extended Evolutionary

Synthesis”, or EES. The choice of this theme emerged from numerous discussions and meetings of the Forum’s board members, originally motivated by their study of the book *Science and Religion: Beyond Warfare and Toward Understanding* (Anselm Academic, 2016), by Joshua Moritz, and by articles in *Nature* and *The Atlantic* describing the EES. (See below under “Book Studies during Winter 2017-2018” for more about the book.)

A press release drafted by the board expressed our aim for the summer seminars this way:

Purposeful Evolution?

One of the main stumbling blocks about evolution, for people of faith, is that it is portrayed as totally random and without direction. They ask — where in this is the Creator’s purpose?

Actually, however, recent thinking in evolutionary biology increasingly shows that evolution is not so random. Rather, it responds to constraints that seem to direct it, perhaps in "purposeful" directions. The main goal in this summer’s Los Alamos Faith and Science Forum lectures is to bring our community up to date on the latest views about evolution: “Humans and Purposeful Evolution”.

To understand these arguments, we need to know both the history of evolutionary thinking and some of the details of how living organisms work. The summer lectures are designed to share this information in terms as non-technical as possible - “evolution made understandable”. The forum’s lectures start with what Darwin had to work with, and advance through recognizing that random mutation and natural selection aren’t sufficient to explain all the ways that the myriad life forms have arisen over the millennia. The implications for people of faith are significant, for this new understanding shows a remarkably subtle creator, who gives freedom as well as direction to all of creation to develop in marvelous ways, insuring the Creator’s purposes.

The goal was ambitious, even risky, as it required a significant amount of exposition on fairly arcane scientific topics in which the speakers were novices. Furthermore, the EES is a field

whose theological implications have hardly been explored at all, meaning that the summer's material would be heavy on science and light on religion. All the same, it is safe to say that the speakers, and no doubt many of the audience, learned a good deal about evolutionary theory in the process, although not much progress was made on the theological implications.

A list of the summer's local speakers and their presentation titles is given in Appendix I. 2018 Summer speakers and presentation titles. The curriculum committee, chaired by board member Gerry Wood, had a kickoff meeting in January 2018, followed by weekly meetings during March and April to discuss outlines for, and then conduct dry runs of, all local presentations before they were given to the public. Just as for last year, the consensus was that the preparation paid off in terms of better quality of the presentations.



Audience at a typical Wednesday night dinner and presentation during summer 2018

The format was similar to that of past summers: each Wednesday evening we began at 6 PM with dinner provided by a local church or board member, followed at 6:30 PM by the presentation (typically lasting 30-40 minutes). After the talk, the speaker answered a few questions with discussion from the large group, and then we broke up into small group discussions, each with about 6 to 8 people around a table, moderated by facilitators. The event formally ended at 8 PM, although participants often extended their discussions beyond that time. The average attendance at the Wednesday night sessions was about 40. All

Wednesday night meetings took place at Los Alamos Unitarian Church, 1738 N Sage Loop. Weekly announcements advertising the Wednesday sessions were placed in local news media.

A questionnaire was circulated to audience members at our final seminar on 1 August, asking for comments about the summer program, about what could be improved, and soliciting ideas for future themes. We found that, generally, our audience was satisfied with this past season, and also earlier seasons. (Attendance numbers have been pretty steady the last two years.) They liked the overall format of dinner, a lecture and then table discussions. They rated the facility and the food as very good; the lectures were interesting, with good content, but a little light on religion, and some of the talks were a bit long. The table discussions were lively and useful but sometimes off-topic. Dr. Dennis Venema, our invited speaker, was highly praised for his talks and his interactions with the audience. But looking over the season as a whole, some people weren't convinced about "purposeful evolution" or what was meant by "purpose".

A number of people suggested expansion of the activities of the Forum: to bring in more post-docs and students, have more external speakers and meetings during the rest of the year. Finally, a number of ideas for next year were suggested. These include how science is applied to various religious perspectives, how religion is evolving as technology resets beliefs and culture, issues related to consciousness, brain science, language and artificial intelligence; and more on the transition of hominins to humans.

VISITING SPEAKER

Our visiting speaker was Dennis Venema, professor of biology at Trinity Western University in Langley, British Columbia, and author (with Scot McKnight) of *Adam and The Genome: Reading Scripture after Genetic Science* (Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, MI, 2017). Professor Venema is affiliated with the BioLogos Voices speakers bureau, and writes a blog, "Letters to the Duchess", on the biologos.org web site.



Professor Dennis Venema speaking at Fuller Lodge in July 2018

Venema's two evening lectures, presented at Fuller Lodge on Tuesday and Wednesday 10-11 July, were titled "Adam, the Genome, and Evolution" and "Evolution, Intelligent Design, and the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis." The events were attended by about 40 persons each evening. The flyer used to advertise his lectures is included in Appendix III. Board members also had the opportunity to converse in more depth with Dennis during meals, and in an extended discussion at the Holiday Inn Express hotel on Wednesday morning.

BOOK STUDIES DURING WINTER 2017-2018

During the winter of 2017-18, the board of directors of the Forum spent considerable time on the book *Science and Religion: Beyond Warfare and Toward Understanding* (Anselm Academic, 2016), by Joshua Moritz. Board member Dan Winske had first proposed studying this book, at the November 2017 Annual Meeting. The "Journeys in Faith" discussion group, meeting every Thursday evening at the home of board member Bob and Selma Reinovsky, adopted the book as their focus for most of late 2017 and the first several months of 2018. The book is a rich source of topics in a number of areas where science and religion interact, but several board members took a special interest in Chap. 6, particularly the section titled

“Where Is The Evolutionary Process Going?” This portion of the book presents many new ideas in evolutionary theory, moving well beyond the NeoDarwinian emphasis on random mutation and natural selection; it played a major role in stimulating and guiding the thinking of the Forum’s board as they chose the theme and content for the 2018 summer seminars.

ATTENDANCE AT NATIONAL CONFERENCES

Dan Winske attended the Goshen College Conference on Religion and Science on 9-11 March 2018, in Goshen, IN. The theme of the meeting was "Islam and Science" and the featured speaker was Dr. Muzaffar Iqbal, founder-president of Islamic Science, Canada.

Dan also attended the 2018 meeting of the Society of Catholic Scientists in Washington, DC, on 9-10 June 2018, at which he presented a poster about the activities of the Forum. The theme of the conference was “The Human Mind and Physicalism.” The abstract for Dan’s presentation is shown below in Appendix IV: Abstract for poster presented by Dan Winske at 2018 meeting of Society of Catholic Scientists, 9-10 June 2018, Washington, DC”.

As Dan and other Forum members have found in past years, conferences such as these are informative and stimulating, and helpful for suggesting topics and speakers for our future seminars. Beyond their immediate value as an information resource and source of encouragement, such conferences are a way to make connections and keep in touch with current developments in the wider science/religion community.

PLANNING FOR BOOK STUDIES DURING WINTER 2018-2019

Several books have been proposed by board members for study during winter 2018-2019. These include:

- *The Consciousness Instinct: Unraveling the Mystery of How the Brain Makes the Mind*, by Michael S. Gazzaniga (The ‘father of cognitive neuroscience’ illuminates the past, present, and future of the mind-brain problem.)
- *The Disordered Mind: What Unusual Brains Tell Us About Ourselves*, by Eric R. Kandel (A Nobel Prize–winning neuroscientist’s probing investigation of what brain disorders can tell us about human nature.)

- *The Human Instinct: How We Evolved to Have Reason, Consciousness, and Free Will*, by Kenneth R. Miller (A radical, optimistic exploration of how humans evolved to develop reason, consciousness, and free will.)

As in past years, such books are likely to play an important role in helping the Forum choose its topic for the summer 2019 seminar series, and to give guidance in identifying possible invited speakers. Times and venues for discussion groups are not yet identified, other than the Reinovsky's ongoing "Journeys in Faith" group, referred to earlier, who are currently studying:

- *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning*, by Jonathan Sacks (An impassioned, erudite, thoroughly researched, and beautifully reasoned book from one of the most admired religious thinkers of our time that argues not only that science and religion are compatible, but that they complement each other—and that the world needs both.)

OTHER BOARD ACTIVITIES

The Board of Directors engaged in other activities during the past year. Building on the successful talks given in Los Alamos by Prof. John Haught, our 2017 invited summer speaker, board member Chick Keller suggested Prof. Haught address the seminarians at the Benedictine's St. Vincent Seminary in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, which is Chick's alma mater. Chick had previously, through the Forum, inspired the seminary to offer its first course on faith-and-science topics. The Archabbot at St. Vincent decided to have Haught's talk be given campus-wide as the year's Benedict XVI Lecture. Some three hundred attended and were quite impressed, as the discussion afterwards showed.

Board members discussed the possibility of working with the churches of Los Alamos to host and mentor a summer ministerial intern focusing on science/religion interactions. Some ideas were developed specifying how the Forum would interact with such an intern, but no actions have yet been taken to create the position or to recruit anyone, pending agreement on how to support the position financially.

Another intention of the board is to revive and improve the Forum's web site, now that former board member and Forum founding president Laura McClellan, who had managed the web site in the past, is no longer on the board. Several board members met with Laura during the past year to learn some of the basics of web page management, and plan to begin this task in the near future.

Recently, board members have participated in "strategic visioning" exercises, led by board member Laurie Triplett, with a view towards a longer, more formal process to define the Forum's mission and vision with greater clarity. This process will then lead naturally to strategic planning as the next step.

APPENDIX I. 2018 SUMMER SPEAKERS AND PRESENTATION TITLES

“PURPOSEFUL EVOLUTION”

(Weekly sessions on Wednesday evenings at Los Alamos Unitarian Church, 1738 N Sage Loop, unless otherwise noted)

I. June 6	Evolution and Humans: Where Are We Headed?	Dan Winske
II. June 13	How Life Works	Nels Hoffman
III. June 20	Evolution Observed and Thought About	Chick Keller
IV. June 27	Beyond the Neo-Darwinian Evolution Synthesis	Glenn Magelssen
July 4	Holiday	
July 10	Prof. Dennis Venema, guest speaker; 7 PM Fuller Lodge	
July 11	Adam, the Genome, and Evolution	
	Evolution, Intelligent Design, and the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis	
V. July 18	Can Organisms Drive Their Evolution?	Nels Hoffman
VI. July 25	Future Directions for Humanity	Bob Reinovsky
VII. August 1	Review, Follow-up, Comments, Feedback	Morrie Pongratz

APPENDIX II: ORGANIZATION OF THE LOS ALAMOS FAITH AND SCIENCE FORUM

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Neil Goodman; Member, Unitarian Church of Los Alamos

Nelson Hoffman (President); Member, First United Methodist Church of Los Alamos

Charles Keller; Member, Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church

Glenn Magelssen; Deacon, Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Church

Morris Pongratz; Member, Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church

Robert Reinovsky (Secretary); Elder, White Rock Presbyterian Church

Laurie Triplett; Priest Associate, Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church

Dan Winske (Treasurer); Member, Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church

Gerry Wood (Vice-President); Elder, Los Alamos Church of Christ

COMMITTEE CHAIRS

Budget – Dan Winske

Curriculum – Gerry Wood

Logistics – Nels Hoffman (acting)

Membership – Chick Keller

Publicity – Morris Pongratz

Visiting Speaker – Nels Hoffman

Strategic Planning – Laurie Triplett

**The Los Alamos Faith and Science Forum presents two lectures
by Dennis Venema**

Professor of Biology, Trinity Western University, Langley, B. C.

*Tuesday-Wednesday July 10-11, 2018 at 7 PM
Fuller Lodge, 2132 Central Avenue, Los Alamos, NM*



Tuesday July 10: Adam, the Genome, and Evolution

Many Christians believe that God created humans directly, and that Adam and Eve are the sole genetic and genealogical progenitors of the entire human race. Evolutionary biology, in contrast, indicates that humans share ancestors in common with other species, and that humans arose gradually as a substantial population. This talk will survey the evidence for common ancestry, our population sizes as we became human, and discuss how Christians are responding to this evidence.

**Wednesday July 11: Evolution, Intelligent Design, and the Extended
Evolutionary Synthesis**

Does evolutionary biology need a major overhaul in light of the genomics era? Some biologists say yes. Proponents of Intelligent Design go further, and say that evolutionary biology is fundamentally flawed, and needs to be replaced altogether. This talk will survey the debate, evaluate the arguments, and offer suggestions for how Christians can be informed consumers of scientific information.

Dennis Venema is professor of biology at Trinity Western University in Langley, British Columbia. He holds a B.Sc. (with Honors) from the University of British Columbia (1996), and received his Ph.D. from the University of British Columbia in 2003. His research is focused on the genetics of pattern formation and signaling using the common fruit fly *Drosophila melanogaster* as a model organism. Dennis is a gifted thinker and writer on matters of science and faith, but

also an award-winning biology teacher—he won the 2008 College Biology Teaching Award from the National Association of Biology Teachers. He and his family enjoy numerous outdoor activities that the Canadian Pacific coast region has to offer. Dennis writes regularly for the BioLogos Forum about the biological evidence for evolution. He is the author, with Scot McKnight, of *Adam and the Genome: Reading Scripture after Genetic Science* (2017; Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, MI).

APPENDIX IV: ABSTRACT FOR POSTER PRESENTED BY DAN WINSKE AT
2018 MEETING OF SOCIETY OF CATHOLIC SCIENTISTS, 9-10 JUNE 2018,
WASHINGTON, DC

Evolution and Humans: Where Are We Headed? Los Alamos Faith and Science Forum: Theme of the 2018 Summer Series

Dan Winske

Abstract. In this poster I will describe the goals, history and current activities of the Los Alamos Faith and Science Forum. This organization addresses topical issues related to the intersection of religious faith and discoveries of modern science. We meet in an ecumenical environment that is open to everyone with or without a particular religious affiliation. As the birthplace of the atomic bomb, a relatively small town with a large number of PhD scientists and a community in which all religious denominations are well represented, Los Alamos is the ideal location for a continuing dialog on religion and science. The strong attendance at our events over the past four years indicates that we are meeting a real need for people to come together to engage civilly and respectfully in deep conversation about meaningful topics in a congenial atmosphere. Our summer series extends over two months with weekly lectures held after a light dinner; one week is instead devoted to a featured external speaker. Last year the topic was "Hope: Science, Religion and the Future" and the featured speaker was Prof. John Haught. This summer we are discussing evolution, and in particular how recent thinking in evolutionary biology increasingly shows that evolution may not be so random. Rather, it responds to constraints that seem to direct it, perhaps in "purposeful" directions. The implications for people of faith are significant: for this new understanding shows a remarkably subtle Creator, who gives freedom as well as direction to all of creation to develop in marvelous ways, ensuring the Creator's purposes. Our speaker this summer will be Prof. Dennis Venema, Trinity Western University in British Columbia, who is co-author of the recent book "Adam and the Genome". The poster will go into some detail about this summer's activities.