

Annual Report of the Los Alamos Faith and Science Forum

December 9, 2020

Summary

At the end of 2020 the Los Alamos Faith and Science Forum completed its fourth year as an official 501 (c)(3) corporation as well as its 7th season of presenting a summer seminar series. The theme of this year's series was: Hope, Nature, Sin, and Transhumanism – Are We Making Progress? These timely issues were addressed weekly by members of the forum in an electronic format. In addition, we similarly “hosted” an external invited speaker, Prof. Elaine Ecklund, who is a Professor of Sociology and the founding Director of the Religion and Public Life Program at Rice University. This report briefly describes these summer presentations as well as other Forum activities that occurred during the rest of the year. Our website (<http://www.lafsf.org>) provides more information, not only about the 2020 season but also concerning prior years. Appendices to this report add further information. Appendix A is a list of the Forum Board members. Appendix B is the agenda of the annual meeting held in November.

Summer 2020 Activities

Now in its 7th year, the Los Alamos Faith and Science Forum (lafsf.org) investigates contemporary issues at the interface of faith and science with a weekly lecture series every summer. This year we considered a wide range of topics, under a unifying theme: “Hope, Nature, Sin, and Transhumanism: Are We Making Progress?”. Instead of our usual supper-lecture-discussion format at the Unitarian Church, all sessions took place via Zoom. Typically, we had ~ 50 people on-line during these talks and the discussions that followed. In place of our guest summer speaker, with whom the personal interactions have always been very enjoyable and informative, this year Prof. Elaine Ecklund of Rice U. presented her lecture via zoom on Sept. 8. In addition, a number of Forum members participated in a Rice-sponsored webinar event in June as well as other conferences.

Press release from Los Alamos Faith and Science Forum, May 2020

The Los Alamos Faith and Science Forum invites you to our seventh annual summer program – this year via Zooming through cyberspace. Our lecture series will begin every Wednesday evening at 6:30 pm, starting on June 3 and running for 7 weeks, through July 15. These sessions will be available on the

internet via Zoom. Registration information has already been sent to our members and previous years' attendees. Otherwise, you can register for these sessions using this link: <https://...>

This summer's series will explore a wide range of issues at the forefront of the science-religion intersection, instead of an invited speaker and a series of lectures that is primarily centered around a common theme that has been our model in the past. We will examine the issue of hope in this uncertain age, discuss the relation of religion and ecology, return to the age-old questions of original sin and the problem of evil in light of recent scientific discoveries, look at the future of humanity both in the context of bioengineering advances and regarding ethical issues, and finally, investigate near-death experiences.

At the first session, we will familiarize those signed in with the Zoom process. We will then have a short introduction to the topics that will be presented throughout the summer. Morrie Pongratz will follow with the first of our seven summer lectures. He will discuss the need for hope, both from the perspective of the individual as well as globally, drawing on the wisdom of a number of notable thinkers, from Teilhard de Chardin to Steven Pinker.

Here is the schedule of the summer presentations:

- June 3 Introductions to Zoom and the summer series, followed by:
"Why Have Hope?" -- Morrie Pongratz
- June 10 "A Mystery of the Mind: A Concern for the Planet as Part of Faith" – Bob Dryja
- June 17 "The Problem of Evil" – Chick Keller
- June 24 "The Genes of Genesis: Original Sin and Gene-Culture Co-evolution" – Nels Hoffman
- July 1 "Transhumanism 1. Bioengineered Superhumans: Technology, Ethics, Religion" – Nels Hoffman
- July 8 "Transhumanism 2. Path Forward: Superhighway or Rocky Road?" – Dan Winske and Bob Reinovsky
- July 15 "Near Death Experiences" – Glenn Magelssen and Susan Sprake

During the past six summers, the Forum has presented programs featuring Wednesday evenings of suppers, lectures, and discussions, based on specific themes and featuring highly recognized experts in areas at the intersection of religion and science. As we all are well aware, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, most of our summer plans have changed drastically: large gatherings and strong social interactions are not allowed or at best highly discouraged. In response to this situation -- while maintaining the desire to continue our tradition of a summer lecture series -- we embrace electronic social media as our solution. We will use 'Zoom' to stream our summer series out to all our previous participants as well as new people interested in these topics.

Abstracts, slides, and videos (presently being edited) of these presentations are available on the Forum's web-site (<http://lafsf.org>). The web-site is maintained by Nels Hoffman. Questions and comments can be sent to the Forum at our email address: lafaithscience@gmail.com.

Guest Speaker

Our external guest speaker this year was Prof. Elaine Howard Ecklund who presented her lecture via zoom. Prof. Ecklund is the Herbert S. Autrey Chair in Social Sciences and Professor of Sociology at Rice University, as well as the founding and present Director of the Religion and Public Life Program. Ecklund is a sociologist of religion, immigration, and science who examines how individuals bring changes to religious and scientific institutions. She is the author of four books with Oxford University Press, one book with New York University Press, one book with BrazosPress, and numerous research articles and op-eds. Her most recent book is *Why Science and Faith Need Each Other: Eight Shared Values That Move Us beyond Fear* (BrazosPress, 2020). She has received grants from the National Science Foundation, Russell Sage Foundation, John Templeton Foundation, Templeton World Charity Foundation, and Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. Her research has been cited thousands of times by local, national, and international media. In 2013, she received Rice University's Charles O. Duncan Award for Most Outstanding Academic Achievement and Teaching, and in 2018 she gave the Gifford Lecture at the University of Edinburgh.



The title of her talk here was:

What Scientists Think About Religion and the Common Values That Bring Science and Faith Communities Together

Abstract. Based on 15 years of data collection, Elaine Howard Ecklund, who is a sociologist and director of Rice University's Religion and Public Life Program, will discuss what scientists in eight national contexts think about religion and the relationship between religion and science. She will also examine some of the unexpected shared values that science and faith communities have in common, values that show why science and faith need each other. And Ecklund will talk about how-- in these fractured times --the Religion and Public Life Program is using research on religion to build common ground for the common good.

Other Board Activities

Lenten Seminar Series

The Forum participated in the 2020 Ecumenical Lenten Seminar Series, which took place in the spring at Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church. Unfortunately, the series was curtailed after the first two sessions because of the Covid-19 outbreak. Our series of talks included:

Science and Religion: Two Modes of Being and Knowing
A “Sampler” of the work of the Los Alamos Faith and Science Forum

- March 5 Are you a Robot? Brain, Mind, and Soul – The Questions — Bob Reinovsky
- March 12 Evil: Is Anyone Responsible? — Gerry Wood
- cancelled: March 19 Near Death Experiences — Glen Magelssen
- cancelled: March 26 Are We Broken? Original Sin and Gene-Culture Co-evolution — Nelson Hoffman
- cancelled: April 2 Why Hope? — Morrie Pongratz

The two talks that did take place were well received by ~ 20 people who attended each one. We will consider suggesting another series of talks when the Lenten Seminar Series resumes (probably in 2022).

Writers group

A writing group was started by Nels Hoffman to encourage Forum members to summarize or expand on talks they had previously given or to express their thoughts on other topics. At the first session in February some preliminary drafts of articles were critiqued and a number of good suggestions were provided for each of the articles. Again, the covid outbreak has postponed further development of this effort. But we hope to restart it again next year.

Ongoing writing projects:

- Nels Hoffman: Jerry Coyne’s war with religion
- Bob Dryja: The interaction of faith and science
- Gary Stradling: Adam’s origins: Humans as children of God and their hominid genetic ancestors
- Chick Keller: Thoughts on the relevance of the concept of original sin
- Dan Winske: The what, how, and why of miracles

National meetings

Don Lemons, Bob Reinovsky, and Dan Winske attended the Goshen Conference on Religion and Science: “In whose image: Perspectives from intersections of brain science and Abrahamic mindfulness”, March 6-8, 2020 in Goshen IN. The featured speaker was Prof. Michael Spezio, Scripps College, Claremont, CA. We invited him to come to Los Alamos in the summer – but those plans were curtailed by the pandemic. We hope to arrange something for next year.

Glenn Magelssen participated in the ceremony where Dr. Francis Collins, who was the founder of Biologos, was awarded the Templeton Prize. Chick Keller, Morrie Pongratz, and Dan Winske planned to attend the 4th Annual Meeting of the Society of Catholic Scientists, June 5-7, 2020 at Providence College, Providence, RI. The conference title was: “Angels, Aliens and AI”. The conference has been postponed to June 2021 and will take place in Washington, DC.

Nels Hoffman, Bob Reinovsky, Chick Keller, and Susan Sprake participated in a Rice U./Amer. Assoc. Advancement Science (AAAS) on-line workshop: “Why Scientists Need to Talk About Religion to Address Race and Gender Disparities in Science”, Oct. 6.

Rice U. Faith and Science Conference

Eight members of our Forum signed up for a conference sponsored by Prof. Elaine Ecklund’s Religion and Public Life Program at Rice U. entitled “How Science Can Strengthen the Faith of Your Church”. They were connected for at least some portion of the meeting. The purpose and the agenda of this conference were very much aligned with issues that our Forum has been addressing over the past few years; the schedule is given below. The talks were all very informative, inspiring, and thought provoking. And the smoothly run webinar format sets a high standard for the rest of us to strive for.

SCHEDULE

- 9:30am: Welcome & plenary remarks by Elaine Howard Ecklund (Rice University)
- 10:25am: Plenary remarks by Mark Labberton (Fuller Seminary) about remaking God in man’s image
- 11:15am: Plenary remarks by Praveen Sethupathy (Cornell University) about viruses
- 12:30pm: A conversation with Greg Cootsona (California State University Chico) & Gus Reyes (Texas Baptists) on engaging youth & emerging adults in science
- 1:20pm: A conversation with Nichole Phillips (Emory University) & Harvey Clemons (Pleasant Hill Baptist Church) on race, social justice, & science
- 2:10pm: A conversation with Jonathan Hill (Calvin University) & Lee Hsia (Houston's First Baptist Church) on human origins & human uniqueness
- 2:50pm: Closing remarks

2020 Annual Meeting

Summary

The Forum's annual meeting was held remotely via Zoom on Sunday, November 8, 2020. Fourteen Forum members were in attendance. President Dan Winske presented a summary of the year's activities. Treasurer Gerry Wood presented a financial summary. A lively discussion of possible topics for next summer's lecture series occurred. A copy of the agenda for this meeting is attached in Appendix B.

Election of Board Members

Board members of the Forum are elected to two-year terms by vote of attending members. At the annual meeting elections for board members to serve for 2021-2022 were held. Nelson Hoffman, Glenn Magelssen, Morrie Pongratz, and Dan Winske were chosen for another two-year term. Neil Goodman completed his term; we thank him for his service on the board. In addition, three new board members were elected: Amy Birnbaum, Eric Ferm, and Michelle Stump. They join Board members who are serving the second year of their 2020-2021 term: Robert Dryja, Chick Keller, Robert Reinovsky, Susan Sprake, Gary Stradling, and Gerry Wood. In January 2021 the Board of Directors will elect new officers for the year.

Discussion of Possible Topics for 2021 Summer Series

At the end of the Annual Meeting there was a lively discussion concerning possible topics for next year's summer lecture series. These topics include:

- Quantum mechanics: uncertainty, reality, free will
- Chaos theory: does God know the future?
- Emergence
- History of Science
- Ethics
- Soul/spirit/consciousness
- Adam and Eve: what happened, impact, purpose
- Viruses, epidemics and reaction of religious people
- Dead sea scrolls – Book of Enoch

Nothing has yet been decided for next year, and new ideas are always welcome (contact any board member). The challenge is always how to include the faith connection in talks that focus on science. As usual, a series of planning sessions will start in January.

Appendix A: Organization of the 2020 Los Alamos Faith and Science Forum

Board of Directors

- Robert Dryja; Member, Unitarian Church of Los Alamos
- Neil Goodman; Member, Unitarian Church of Los Alamos
- Nelson Hoffman; 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 (Secretary); Member, Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church
- Robert Reinovsky (Vice President); Elder, White Rock Presbyterian Church
- Susan Sprake; Member, Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
- Gary Stradling; Member, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints
- Dan Winske (President); Member, Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church
- Gerry Wood (Treasurer); Elder, Los Alamos Church of Christ

Committee Chairs

- Budget – Gerry Wood
- Membership – Chick Keller
- Strategic Planning – open
- Planning for 2021:
 - Curriculum – Gerry Wood
 - Logistics – Nels Hoffman (acting)
 - Publicity – Morris Pongratz
 - Visiting Speaker – Nels Hoffman

Appendix B: Agenda for the Annual Meeting (Nov. 8, 2020)

Meeting held remotely via Zoom

- 2:00 pm Welcome
- 2:02 Introduction of attendees
- 2:08 Comments on the 2019 Annual Report
- 2:10 2020 Annual report – Dan Winske
- 2:28 Financial report – Gerry Wood
- 2:30 Comments from committee chairs
- 2:35 Planning activities for 2021
- 2:40 Comments from Forum members
- 2:55 Election of board members
- 3:00 Adjournment