

Annual Report of the Los Alamos Faith and Science Forum

November 28, 2019

Summary

At the end of 2019 the Los Alamos Faith and Science Forum completed its third year as an official 501 (c)(3) corporation as well as its 6th season of presenting a summer seminar series. The theme of this year's series was: "Are you a robot? Brain, Mind, Soul". In addressing this question weekly talks considered issues related to consciousness, neuroscience, artificial intelligence and morality. The external invited speaker, Prof. Warren Brown from Fuller Theological Seminary presented two lectures on his research in neurophysiology. In addition, a "local" invited speaker, Dr. Garrett Kenyon, from Los Alamos National Laboratory, spoke on artificial intelligence. 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 2019 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 2019 Activities

The theme of the 2019 weekly summer seminar series was: "Are you a robot? Brain, mind, soul". This theme covered a broad range of topics, including recent developments in understanding consciousness and the underlying recent advances in neuroscience. In addressing such challenging issues on the cutting edge of contemporary science, we recognize that the members of the Forum are certainly not subject matter experts and many attendees of the weekly talks may not even have a strong science background. But through the weekly talks that attempt to present the basic scientific issues, as well as some theological insight, along with the invited lectures, we feel that we are providing a focus for community dialogue and discussion at the interface of contemporary science and religious faith. The continued growth of the summer series in 2019, when the average attendance for the seven local speakers was 47 ± 4 , reinforces this view. The background for the choice of this topic arose from discussions at the end of the previous summer series as well as from reading and discussing books, along with the extensive planning for the summer series that went on during the winter.

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

This summer, the Los Alamos Faith and Science Forum asks:
Are You a Robot? Brain, Mind, Soul

If you use the internet at all, you may have been asked whether you are a robot. Many web sites do this, trying to protect against spurious account creation. On one level, it's an easy question to answer — no, you're not a robot, you're a flesh-and- blood human. But on another level, it's more difficult. Can we be sure our behavior is not programmed by our genetics, life experiences, instincts, and habits — to say nothing of our addictions and psychoses? How free are we, really? The Board of Directors of the Los Alamos Faith and Science Forum announce the theme and schedule for their sixth summer series of lectures by local speakers and visiting scholars on topics at the intersection of science and religion. Please join with the Los Alamos Faith and Science Forum this summer at our weekly presentations during June and July 2019, as our speakers consider these questions. During these sessions, we'll be looking at the phenomenon of consciousness, the progress and discoveries of neuroscience in showing how the brain works, and whether we as humans possess free will and moral responsibility. We'll consider the mind and the soul, and ask what it means to be made in the image of God. We'll examine how emotions affect us, and how our brains change throughout life, in response to our experiences and thoughts. Speaking of free will, we'll take up the topic of evil — what it is, where it comes from, and who if anyone is responsible. And we'll think about the role of miracles in all of this, and why God might be interested in creatures of flesh and blood. In July, we'll hear two lectures by visiting speaker Prof. Warren Brown, a psychologist, neurophysiologist, and author at Fuller Theological Seminary, on his research and writings. We'll also hear from Dr. Garrett Kenyon, an artificial intelligence researcher at Los Alamos National Laboratory. Please check out our website <http://www.lafsf.org/> for more information.

Are you a robot?

BRAIN, MIND, SOUL



The list of the titles and speakers of the weekly presentations was as follows:

June 5	Are You a Robot? The Questions -- Bob Reinovsky
June 12	Consciousness: Material or Immaterial? – ChickKeller
June 19	Neuroplasticity: How the Mind Changes the Brain – Nels Hoffman
June 26	Neuroscience and Emotions – Bob Fuselier
July 3	— No meeting this week —
July 10	Did My Neurons Make Me Do It? – Prof. Warren Brown, Fuller Theological Seminary
July 11	Contextualizing Neuroscience: The Boundaries of Human Intelligence – Prof. Warren Brown, Fuller Theological Seminary
July 17	The Emperor Has No Brain: The reality of AI and the illusion of intelligence – LANL researcher Garrett Kenyon
July 24	Evil: Is Anyone Responsible? – Gerry Wood
July 31	Miracles: Divine Free Will – Dan Winske

Abstracts as well as slides from the presentations can be found at the Forum website.

This summer schedule of talks was put together by the curriculum committee, chaired by board member Gerry Wood, starting with a kickoff meeting in February, followed by weekly meetings in April and May to discuss outlines for, and then conducted dry runs of, all the local presentations before they were given to the public. Just as for the last two years, the consensus was that the preparations paid off in terms of better quality of the presentations. Board member Nels Hoffman chairs the Visiting Speakers committee and was instrumental in securing our two speakers, Prof. Warren Brown and Dr. Garrett Kenyon. The group questions and discussions after each talk as well as the season-end questionnaire indicated this wide range of topics under an umbrella theme of “Are you a robot”, was generally well received and appreciated by Forum members and the rest of our weekly audience.

As in the previous two summers, the Wednesday night sessions (except for Warren Brown’s lectures) were held in the fellowship hall at the Los Alamos Unitarian Church, 1738 N. Sage Loop. The format was similar to previous summers: begin with a light dinner at 6 pm, followed at 6:30 by the presentation (typically lasting 30 – 40 minutes). After the talk the speaker answered questions with discussion from the large group, followed by small group discussions, each with about 6 people around a table, lasting to about 8 pm. This practice has been quite successful over the past seasons, although it has been pointed out that the table facilitators need to be reminded to try to keep the discussions centered around questions provided by the speakers.

This year, the two lectures by our invited speaker, Prof. Warren Brown, were held in the sanctuary of the Unitarian Church, rather than at Fuller Lodge which was unavailable on the nights he was speaking. For these presentations no dinner was provided, although light refreshments and drinks were available. These talks were recorded by PAC-8 and are available on loan to Forum members who wish to view them. Prof. Brown is a psychologist, neurophysiologist, researcher and author at the Travis Research Institute, Fuller Graduate School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena CA. He is a world's expert on agenesis of the corpus callosum, which involve instances where persons are born without the corpus callosum, the band of neurons that connect the two hemispheres of the brain. His talks were very interesting and well received.



Our other external speaker was from LANL. Dr. Garrett Kenyon, leads a research group on artificial intelligence and gave a very stimulating talk on artificial intelligence and the illusion of intelligence (i.e., why you may not want to ride in a self-driving car).

Other Board Activities

Attendance at National Conferences

Several Forum board members attended national conferences on faith and science. These experiences are generally helpful in getting different perspectives on the subject, developing expertise in organizing and running the Forum and in suggesting possible future speakers. Dan Winske attended the Goshen College Conference on Religion and Science. This year's theme was "Christians, Climate and Culture: Relationships, Tensions and Resolutions". The meeting was held on March 29-31, 2019 in Goshen IN. The featured speaker was Prof. Katherine Hayhoe, Climate Science Center, Texas Tech University. Glenn Magelssen attended the BioLogos Conference, March 27-29, 2019 in Baltimore, MD. Dr. Francis Collins gave the opening address, celebrating the 10th anniversary of the founding of BioLogos. Morrie Pongratz and Dan Winske attended the 3rd Annual Meeting of the Society of Catholic Scientists, June 7-9, 2019 at Notre Dame, South Bend IN. The conference theme was "What does it mean to be human?" The keynote speaker was Prof. Marie I. George (St. John's University), who spoke on "What Does 'Made in the Image of God' Mean'?"

Visioning Exercise

The Forum continues to better understand its mission, purpose and role in the dialogue between science and religion, especially at the local level. As stated on our website: "The Los Alamos Faith and Science Forum is a group of scientists, engineers, clergy, and laity helping people to think about science and religion, and the harmony and complementarity of these two modes of being and knowing, by providing information, education, and a framework for dialogue." To this end, two sessions on strategic visioning for board members were held in January 2019, led by board member Laurie Triplett. The underlying questions that we addressed were: Why do we want to do this? Who is our audience? What is the intended outcome?

The discussions centered around our vision and mission statements, our core values, and how this impacts our summer series. While no firm conclusions were reached, the exchange of ideas between board members who were able to attend was quite insightful. Clearly more such sessions, some involving the board as well as some including members of the Forum as well, are needed in the future as we continue to define our role on the community. We briefly summarize some of these ideas that came up during the discussions, from notes taken by Morrie Pongratz.

(1) Vision: the community of Los Alamos is known for our lively discussions of faith, philosophy, and science, formed in part by the interfaith community.

Mission: we share our message that the compatibility of faith and science can enrich faith; we provide a forum for better dialogue between science and religion.

Values: we value scientific results that are repeatable; we have an open mind, not excluding ideas contrary to religious creeds; we value input from all - religious or nones.

Summer Series: we are not academic specialists in most topics of interest -- we mostly report the work of others; our purpose is to raise awareness and direct our audience to sources of detailed research.

2019 Annual Meeting

Summary

The Forum's annual meeting was held in Fuller Lodge on Sunday, November 17, 2019. Sixteen Forum members were in attendance. President Dan Winske presented a summary of the year's activities. Treasurer Gerry Wood presented a financial summary. Vice President Morrie Pongratz gave a summary of the visioning exercise that was summarized previously in this report. A copy of the agenda for this meeting is attached in Appendix B.

Election of Board Members

Board members of the Forum are elected by vote of attending members for two-year terms. At the annual meeting elections for board members to serve for 2020-2021 were held. Robert Dryja, Charles Keller, Robert Reinovsky, Susan Sprake, Gary Stradling, and Gerry Wood were chosen. They join Board members who are serving the second year of their 2019-2020 term: Neil Goodman, Nelson Hoffman, Glenn Magelssen, Morrie Pongratz and Dan Winske. In January 2020 the Board of Directors will elect new officers for the year.

Discussion of Possible Topics for 2020 Summer Series

The following topics were discussed informally at the meeting: consciousness -- mind and body; near-death experiences (NDEs) and consciousness; the Bible and life after death; trans-humanism -- bio-engineered superhumans, brain-machine interface, longer lifespans; quantum mechanics and uncertainty; the problem of evil -- theodicy; concordance: science and Christianity: conflict or coherence; science, religion, and mental health -- Freud vs Jung; Revelation vs science. There was also discussion of the types of topics that might appeal to students and younger members of the community as well as summer visitors. These included climate change, ecological issues, nuclear weapons. Nothing yet has been decided for next year, and new ideas are always welcome (contact any board member):

Appendix A: Organization of the 2019 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 (Vice President); 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 (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 – Laurie Triplett;
- Planning for 2020:
 - Curriculum – Gerry Wood,
 - Logistics – Nels Hoffman (acting) ,
 - Publicity – Morris Pongratz ,
 - Visiting Speaker – Nels Hoffman.

Appendix B: Agenda for the Annual Meeting (Nov. 17, 2019)

Nambe Room, Fuller Lodge

- 4:00pm Welcome
- 4:02 Introduction of attendees
- 4:05 Approve minutes of 2018 Annual Meeting
- 4:10 Annual report – Dan Winske
- 4:25 Responses to summer questionnaire – Dan Winske
- 4:30 Financial report – Gerry Wood
- 4:35 Comments from committee chairs
- 4:40 Strategic visioning – Morrie Pongratz
- 4:50 Planning activities for Summer 2020 – Nels Hoffman
- 5:20 Comments from Forum members
- 5:30 Election of board members
- 5:40 Adjournment