Science, Religion Studies Can Build Vital Bridges

By JAMES PROCTOR

I am often asked how an agnostic geographer ended up as director of UCSB's Science, Religion, and the Human Experience (SRHE) program. It is true that my undergraduate degree was in religious studies, and--just like radio's "Ask Dr. Science"--I have a master's degree in (environmental) science. But people typically don't associate geography with such broad questions as the relationship between science and religion.

Yet the powerful role played--for better and for worse--by institutions of science and religion in shaping the physical, political, cultural, and moral landscapes of our world is indisputable, and many important research questions need to be addressed. As one example, I have just completed a nationwide survey, with follow-up interviews, of adult Americans about their trust in science and religion, as well as other major authorities, and implications for their worldviews, behaviors, and policy concerns.

My reasons for serving as SRHE program director stretch beyond specific research interests, however, ultimately addressing the state of the contemporary university--or, to borrow the term preferred by former UC President Clark Kerr, the "multiversity," given its wide spectrum of disciplines and scholarly concerns. The multiversity's great strength is its inherent pluralism; its great weakness is a gnawing sense of division and fragmentation.

One classic (if oversimplified) division in the multiversity lies between what are generally understood as the truth-seeking sciences and the meaning-attendant humanities. Consider, for instance, talks offered during the first few weeks of December 2002at the Kavli Institute for Theoretical Physics and the Interdisciplinary Humanities Center, located--literally and figuratively--on opposite ends of our fine campus.
At first glance, "Heavy Fermion Superconductivity" and "Speed, Modernism's Pleasure" have little to do with each other, reinforcing the multiple-worlds ethos of the multiversity. But what about "Feminism Meets Multicultural and Postcolonial Studies: Transforming Science and Technology," especially when compared with the KITP talk "Planet Embryos in Vortex Wombs." Perhaps the two realms are not as readily separable as the multiversity manifesto maintains.

This is where the study of science and religion can make a difference, not by inviting nostalgia for the relatively unified, theologically oriented academic institution of old, but by building bridges in the contemporary multiversity that encourage ventures across disciplinary boundaries.

In the past two years, the SRHE program <www.srhe.ucsb.edu> has sponsored 13 major public lectures, each of them stimulating significant scholarly conversation between the sciences and the humanities. In addition, physical and life scientists, social scientists, and humanists have discussed major works in science and religion, and engaged in spirited conversation with the distinguished speakers at monthly lunch seminars.

The recurrent question discussed in each of these venues has been the paradox that both science and religion operate in, yet reach beyond, specific historical, political, ideological, and psychological contexts that define the human experience. We treat science and religion with the respect they deserve, yet without overlooking their inescapable humanness, thus offering opportunities for genuine interaction among widely differing scholarly sensitivities.

For most faculty, the only compelling occasions for rubbing shoulders with such a diverse group are campus committee meetings! My hope is that programs like Science, Religion, and the Human Experience will help faculty participants rediscover their intellectual connections, and thus offer to students and society a more coherent, if unavoidably pluralistic, vision of reality.

James Proctor, associate professor of geography, coordinates the annual Templeton Research Lecture series, Science, Religion, and the Human Experience (see schedule below).