

## 2017 CiS Southern Conference Speaker Abstracts

❖ **Andrew Briggs** - Introduction to *The Penultimate Curiosity*  
**Science and humanities—penultimate and ultimate curiosity?**

Science flourishes in cultures that are also curious about questions which science cannot answer. Time and again, where a culture or a community or even an individual has been interested in ultimate questions about meaning and purpose, and how humans can love and how God can be known, that has proved conducive to the curiosity about the material world which now manifests itself as science. This relationship is exemplified in the dominant new buildings for science in the nineteenth century in Oxford and Cambridge. Each of them has a statement at the entrance which brings together religious and scientific motivations. Why should this be so, and how does it reflect the entanglement since the earliest recorded evidence of human curiosity between what we now think of as religion and what we now think of as science?

*The Penultimate Curiosity—How Science Swims in the Slipstream of Ultimate Questions.*  
Roger Wagner and Andrew Briggs, Oxford University Press (2016).

❖ **Pablo de Felipe** - *Curiosity in the Early Christian Era – Philoponus' Defence of Ancient Astronomy against Christian Critics*

Curiosity is seen today as something good, desirable, as a key tool for discovery and innovation, something to praise and foster from childhood. However, it was not always so. Since the Hellenistic culture started to show signs of perceived decline shortly before the birth of Christ, the attention of ancient scholars started to focus on the past, looking backwards to a golden era of sages. A long era of compilers and encyclopaedists began that would survive until the late Renaissance, when even if new things were discovered, they had to be couched in standardised, canonical terminology and images derived from ancient learning.

The primary interest of Christianity was not the investigation of the natural world, and yet its worldview challenged some philosophical assumptions that were of importance for the scientific conceptions of pagan Late Antiquity, in the domain that should more properly be called 'natural philosophy'. Soon debates raged about the eternity of the world as opposed to the idea of creation out of nothing, about the divinity of the heavens as opposed to the biblical idea of the whole universe being part of the created realm, the astrological determinism as opposed to human freedom, etc.

However, these debates were not about the more 'technical' portion of ancient learning: the sphericity of the earth and heavens, the astronomical epicycle models of planetary movements, the theory of eclipses, etc. Most Christians, even early Christian intellectuals, were not trained in such technical matters that, in any case, were of little interest for their theological concerns. In spite of that, as philosophers became the subject of Christian criticisms, voices were raised in favour of a fully-fledged 'Christian cosmology' to replace the views inherited from Hellenistic natural philosophy. Their stronghold was at the theological school of Antioch that on this topic (as in many others) clashed with their traditional rivals of Alexandria, the cradle of pagan natural philosophy.

By the 6th century, the main exponent of the Antiochene cosmology, Cosmas Indicopleustes, was living in Alexandria and defending a model of the world shaped as a chest with the flat earth at the bottom, inspired by some biblical texts but also by his peculiar typological reading of other texts. His approach meant destroying the legacy of the study of nature that had flourished in Alexandria for centuries, and returning to the cosmology of the early Pre-Socratic philosophers and the Near East mythologies. Not very good news for scientific 'curiosity'... Alexandrian Christians had traditionally accepted the views of ancient natural philosophy that conceptualized the earth as a sphere. Now they were confronted with having to choose between the "Christian theories" and the "error of the pagan theories" "opposed to divine scripture", in the words of Cosmas.

It was in this context that a remarkable Alexandrian Christian scholar, John Philoponus, took up the historical challenge of defending the freedom of investigating nature and the freedom of scientific curiosity, within a Christian world view.

❖ **Pete Jordan** - Attitudes toward Curiosity in the Early Modern Era

*The Penultimate Curiosity* focuses the majority of its attention on one particular manifestation or expression of curiosity: the pursuit of knowledge about nature. In the contemporary western world, this particular form of curiosity—and indeed, curiosity in almost any form—is regarded as a good thing. In the early modern period, by contrast, curiosity was the subject of considerable discussion and debate, not least over the question of whether it is in fact good or bad.

One historian of early modern Europe has even asserted that to broach the topic of curiosity at the time was "to enter an arena within which some of the period's basic anxieties and aspirations about knowledge and behaviour were thrashed out." In this talk I shall describe some of the ways in which curiosity was understood in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, focusing in particular on the consequences of changing perceptions of curiosity for attitudes toward the pursuit of knowledge about nature.

❖ **Jennifer Wiseman** - A Curious Cosmos?

Since the dawn of humanity, the heavens have inspired wonder, awe, humility, fear, and, mainly, curiosity. The ancients pondered, "What is it that we are seeing in the sky, and how does this relate to our lives?" Today, modern telescopes are unveiling an incredible universe, bustling with the activity of black holes, evolving galaxies, diverse planets, and active moons. Observations of space near and far also show a curious sense of progression, from first light to robust life -- on at least one planet. I will discuss how these discoveries, driven by human curiosity, can inspire praise and awe, and are fuelling once again our human quest to understand our connection to an incredible cosmos.

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