

PréCis



2020 CiS Online conference review

A brief summary

At the start of 2020 the idea to host an online conference centred around the theme of pandemics was probably not very high on the list of most Christian organizations. Fast forward a few months however, and we find that this has rapidly become the norm. For many academics, trips have been cancelled and teaching responsibilities shifted online. Similarly for students, exams have been dropped and education has been relocated from the school to the home. Of course, the main reason for these drastic

adjustments is the global viral outbreak COVID-19.

In response to COVID-19 CiS decided to host this year's annual conference on YouTube, focusing on the theme of pandemics. The online conference entitled '**God and Pandemics**' featured three Christian scientists; Prof Bob White - Professor of Geophysics, Dr Mirjam Schilling - a Virologist and Dr Simon Kolstoe - Lecturer in Evidence Based Healthcare. In addition Anna Pearson, a physicist, gave the annual Oliver Barclay Lecture. One talk, with a Q & A session was given each day from the 10th to the 13th of August. On the final day, 14th August, a Q & A panel session was held with all the speakers.

Professor White's presentation included a blend of scientific and theological material. Dr Schilling and Dr Pearson utilized a more scientific approach in their talks whilst Dr Kolstoe employed a more ethics based approach. Anna Pearson, as the Oliver Barclay Lecture Winner for 2020 spoke on her area of specialism, quantum mechanics, in looking at the question of how science can influence one's faith.

Highlights, takeaways and observations

There was no shortage of highlights and takeaways from the week. The first and most revealing thing to me was probably simply realizing how little I knew about viruses as I listened to Dr Schilling. It was particularly eye-opening to see just how complicated viruses are, and in the process, she brought to light that viruses are actually part of our ecosystem and so in this sense, a part of God's creation.

As a humanities student I very much enjoyed Professor White's use of history to contextualize COVID-19 by showing that firstly, the coronavirus is not a novel occurrence, and that secondly, Christianity has always responded to pandemics, not just with prayer, but also action. It is certainly no secret that modern hospitals as well as modern science are indebted to the Judeo-Christian worldview.

Dr Kolstoe's talk was very intriguing. We were treated to a sort of behind the scenes look at the messy processes involved in research funding, integrity, and the complications that routinely arise in relation to decision making between

scientists and politicians. In agreement with the well-known work of Prof Tom McLeish, Dr Kolstoe's challenge to Christians is to endeavour to incorporate a 'theology of science' into their work. This is something that certainly stuck with me.

Finally, Dr Pearson gave a brief overview of quantum mechanics displaying the frankly mind-bending discoveries of physics over the last few decades ranging from wave-particle dualities, to wave function collapses and quantum entanglements. A verse which she raised at the end that I particularly liked (1 Corinthians 13:12) highlighted a key point that perfectly summarized her presentation: both science and faith involve deep elements of mystery.

If there was one brief critical observation to point out, it would simply be that due to the focus on the topic, the Q & A section couldn't properly accommodate for Dr Pearson as much as it could for the other speakers who could speak to the central topic.

Moving forward: concluding remarks

The online setting this year has been very different from previous CiS events years gone. However, as a viewer I experienced a number of benefits such as, watching from the comfort of my own house and being able to pause and play the videos at will.

There are certainly downsides to this method, the primary one being the loss of face-to-face social interactions which regularly lead to networks and friendships. If I am to give my personal take on this style as a whole, I would certainly encourage CiS to continue to make use of the online setting in the future as it has begun to. A balance of online as well as the usual face-to-face events should open up new ways of reaching wider audiences ultimately helping people see that there are Christians in Science.

Written by Nathan Bossoh
UCL/RI Doctoral student
History and Philosophy of Science

The conference talks are available on the CiS YouTube channel -

<https://www.youtube.com/c/ChristiansinScience>

An interview with Dr Mirjam Schilling

Tell us a bit about yourself?

I was born and raised in the southwest of Germany and lived there until quite recently. About 25 years ago my parents gave me a microscope for Christmas and I got excited about discovering a world that has until then been hidden from me.

After studying molecular medicine and a PhD in the field of Virology, I moved to Oxford for my postdoc in 2017.

I love being outdoors for hiking or camping, I cycle quite a lot, but mostly for transportation, and I think there is barely anything better than to immerse myself in a book, any book really. My love for reading and writing probably also encouraged me to start studying theology in my free time. 8 years later I am still doing this and I am now working on my DPhil in science and religion.

I truly enjoy my life between two different worlds and having the opportunity to reflect my scientific life theologically. As you can see from both my scientific lives: I also love viruses, an interest that is probably



less common than reading or hiking. Besides studying viruses, I enjoy travelling a lot and I have been to quite niche countries including Mongolia and Greenland. Once in a while I get immersed in more creative hobbies such as playing organ or piano, photography (mostly when I am hiking or travelling) and building Lego. Maybe one day I can convince Lego to create a virology lab or a giant virus.

What has been the most interesting thing you have discovered or worked on in your research career?

During my PhD in Virology I was working on a cellular protein that gets upregulated as part of an early antiviral response. What was intriguing was the fact that this protein was known for decades and had a very similar structure to a well described protein, but no one knew

what it did. I think I similarly enjoyed chasing this protein and trying to understand what it did as I hated to not know. Eventually several labs discovered that it has antiviral activity against HIV, and I and a PhD student from another institute discovered its antiviral effects against a broad range of herpesviruses.

The protein is called human myxovirus resistance protein B (MxB). I not only enjoyed the scientific chase but also to learn more about exciting mechanistic details. Mx proteins in general are a very exciting example of how one protein can be extremely selective in its interactions but also act quite broadly. One of my professors always compared them to a Swiss Army Knife. Chasing MxB got me interested in the details of interactions between viruses and our immune system, and how both, virus and immune system, constantly learn and adapt through these interactions.

If you could chat with a scientist from the past, who would it be?

I would like to chat to or shadow Friedrich Loeffler and Paul Frosch, two German scientists, who at the same time as Dmitri Losifovich Ivanovski in Russia and Martinus

Beijerinck in the Netherlands, proved the existence of viruses as the causal agents of a specific disease without the high-tech methods we nowadays have. That must have required some impressive out of the box thinking and the willingness to question generally accepted dogmas.



Mirjam cooking

When and how did you become a Christian?

I became a Christian as a teenager. Having grown up in a family that believed in the existence of a personal God and the truth of the Bible, the experience of suffering and personal isolation, challenged what I had been taught so much that I started to pray and read the Bible front to back to find an answer to my most burning question: Is there really a God out there?

To my surprise God responded to my question after a while and in a way that I somehow hadn't

expected. He is a God who is not just out there, but who is with me in the challenges of life. I cannot scientifically prove God's response to my question, but it kick-started a lifelong journey of faith for me. Life didn't suddenly get better, and I also didn't get a lot of answers to my questions about the why or how long. And of course, I still have many (and probably an increasing amount of) questions. But I have experienced a loving God on many occasions and the longer I am a Christian and a Scientist, the more I appreciate the vast amount of good biblical and historical evidence that supports the reliability of key biblical claims.

What challenges, if any, have you come across as a Christian and a Scientist?

Not that many, I must admit. At least not caused by the combination of being both a Christian and a Scientist. Sometimes in life it can be hard to be a Christian, sometimes it can be hard to be a Scientist. I think the most challenging thing has been that usually I am the only Christian in my lab. That can feel a bit lonely once in a while. But I assume this happens in other jobs as well.

How has your faith helped you in your career, or vice versa?

Chasing a protein with no known function during my PhD has emotionally been quite challenging. Being a Christian helped me remember that it is always worth trying even if I don't obviously succeed. I learned to trust that God values me using my gifts and following my interests even if I would have not found out the function of this protein. Being a Christian helped me to know that I am a loved and an important part of society, even when I felt useless as a scientist. Being a Christian also reminded me that everything we have in life is given to us by grace, even scientific discoveries. I think this is important to remember once in a while, because the truth is that science can be quite unpredictable (and I still feel quite useless once in a while). Thank God this can also be a good thing.

Vice versa, I believe that being a scientist has actually also turned out to be quite helpful for my faith. I think by understanding how limited we can be in our methods and our understanding in the natural sciences, I am less stressed by living with tensions in my faith or unanswered questions. I know that for some questions we will find answers at some point, for others it might take longer, and some we might not be able to answer at all because as soon



**Mirjam above
the clouds**

LOCAL GROUP NEWS



as we find an answer the complexity behind it raises even more questions. By experiencing this process in the natural sciences I am more relaxed about it in theological discussions.

Where would you like to see CiS in five years' time?

5 years? That is a very specific time period... First of all, I hope that in 2025 meeting more than 6 people at the same time in real life will be possible and that the CiS conferences will be happening in person again ... but hopefully also with some online opportunity for people who are not local enough to join. On a less administrative note, I hope that CiS in 2025 has enabled more connections between Scientists and Christians/theologians, so that Christians and theologians have become less afraid of the natural sciences and the natural scientists are benefiting from the world view of a larger group of Christians around them.

If you wish to start a Local Group in your area, please get in touch with Steph, our Development Officer, at steph.cis@outlook.com

Details of all events are also available on the CiS App and on our website www.cis.org.uk/events.

BRISTOL

For more information about the Bristol group please contact Christina Biggs cmbbiggs@gmail.com

CAMBRIDGE

For details of events in Cambridge please go to <https://www.faraday.cam.ac.uk/>

DUNDEE

For more details on Dundee events please contact christiansinsciencedundee@gmail.com

EDINBURGH

For more information please email cisedinburgh3@gmail.com

HARROW

For details of future events in Harrow please contact Revd Lyndon North (revlnorth@aol.com)

HUDDERSFIELD

For details please contact Omololu Fagunwa on fagunwaomololu@yahoo.com.

IPSWICH

For more information about future events please contact Dr John Ling (jjling@btopenworld.com).

IRELAND

Thursday 29 October at 8pm – online

The 2020 E.T.S. Walton Lecture on Science and Religion will be presented by Prof. Katharine Hayhoe - "*Climate Change: Facts, Fictions, and our Faith*"

For further information please check their website - <https://www.cis.org.uk/ireland/> or contact Dr Peter van der Burgt (peter.vandербurgt@nuim.ie)

LEEDS

Further details of meetings please contact John Lockwood at jglockwood1@me.com

LONDON

For more details about the London group please email cins.london@gmail.com

MANCHESTER

Monday 02 November at 7pm – online

Dr Rhoda Hawkins - *Order & disorder*

Monday 07 December at 7pm – online

Rev Dr Roger Abbot - *Responding pastorally to the scientific and theological features of a pandemic*

For more information and joining instructions on Manchester events please contact the Secretary on sec.cismanchester@yahoo.co.uk

NORWICH

Monday 16th November at 7.30pm – online

Revd. Dr Rodney Holder - *Science, Reason and Christian faith*

Please contact Nick Brewin on sfnorfolk1@gmail.com to register your interest and to receive meeting details nearer the date.

OXFORD

For more information, please contact Diana Briggs at diana.briggs@wolfson.oxon.org

OXFORD - Students

For details please contact Matthew Patterson - matthew.patterson@physics.ox.ac.uk

READING

For more information please contact Dave Law at dave@readingatwork.org

SHEFFIELD

For more information on the Sheffield group please contact Dr Rhoda Hawkins on rhoda.hawkins@sheffield.ac.uk

SOUTHAMPTON

For information on meetings please contact Peter May on petergeorgemay@gmail.com

SOUTH WEST

For more information on events please email cissouthwest@gmail.com

ST ANDREWS

For details on the Undergraduate group please contact Dr A Torrance (abt3@st-andrews.ac.uk)
Postgraduate group, please contact Dr Rebecca Goss (rjmg@st-andrews.ac.uk).

SURREY

For more details please contact Joy Perkins at joyeperkins@googlemail.com

SURREY HEATH

For more details please contact John Russell at chynoweth.jw@gmail.com

TYNESIDE & NORTHUMBERLAND

For information on Newcastle events, please contact Bill Clegg at bill.clegg@ncl.ac.uk

WEST MIDLANDS

For more information please contact Godfrey Armitage on g.n.armitage@warwick.ac.uk

WORCESTER

For more information please contact Jim Smith on jgsmith29@aol.com

YORK

For more information please email christiansinsciencenyork788@gmail.com