

Why the Science and Religion Dialogue Matters: Voices from the International Society of Science and Religion

edited by Fraser N. Watts , Kevin Dutton

Introductory Essay by Munawar A. Anees

This book is the first collection of essays from the International Society for Science and Religion (ISSR) on the relationship of world faith traditions to the science-religion dialog. There are eleven essays representing Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.

The dialog between religion and science is a well-established tradition in the West, perhaps because of the birth of modern science in that part of the world. With new and rapid advances in science and technology, the dialog is gaining momentum. The significance of this work lies not in that it covers some of the new trends in this dialog but its inclusion of the discourse from other major faiths from around the world. In the words of one of its Editors, Fraser Watts, "the present essays...reflect a commitment to pursuing the dialogue between science and religion in an international and multifaith context" [vii].

That there is little dialog or debate between science and religion in some of the non-Christian religions is explained partly by the fact that their respective attributes are believed not to be in conflict with each other. Judaism is a classic example, as in Moses Maimonides' conviction "that both Torah (revealed wisdom) and science (the study of the "works of God's hands") can never be in conflict and in fact offer complementary approaches to an appreciation of God's wisdom and nature" [75].

Islam exhibits a similar trait. In the Islamic tradition, the paradigm of Tawhid (Unity) lies at the heart of the perceived unification of all knowledge. Thus, "free inquiry is not only encouraged but made obligatory as a matter of belief" [89].

A similar stream of thinking is detectable in Hinduism: While there is no apparent decline in faith-based activities of the masses, science and technology are viewed as empowering agents. Elements of confrontation between the two are absent in India.

In Buddhism, the defining factor in pursuit of knowledge, both secular and temporal, is its ultimate goal. Acquisition of knowledge is not meant to be a step towards control but rather a process that facilitates human existence. Hence the emphasis on moving away from the objective phenomenon to the introspective domain.

In a rather neglected area, Asian Christianity, important distinctions are brought into focus by way of "notions of nothingness, vacuity, and emptiness [as they] are worth serious considerations for the science and religion dialogue, as the reality of Non-Being becomes plausible in both the new physics and Christian theology" [129].

As a major contribution to dialog on science and religion from a multifaith perspective, this splendid volume by ISSR has certainly succeeded in offering a broad spectrum of intellectual and cultural currents for this critical discourse. It shows that the complementary nature of science and religion is more real than perceived. This work should become essential reading for any academic program on science and religion.