

# POINTS OF CONTACT

*Science, Religion, and  
the Search for Truth*

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## *Introduction*

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When I was a young boy in the small town of Wernersville, Pennsylvania, I was outside all the time. My friends and I were always running through the cornfields behind my house, exploring the small creek that wound its way under several bridges along Furnace Road, hiking or biking up South Mountain, or playing endless games of backyard baseball. My personal favorite was the raucous summer games of flashlight hide and seek with the thirty-plus kids from the Franklin and Pearl streets neighborhood. On Saturday afternoons, my father would load my brother Gregg, my best friend Tony, and me into the car and take us to our Catholic religious education classes at the nearby St. Isaac Jogues Jesuit Novitiate where we were taught the Baltimore Catechism of the time. I happened to be very good at memorizing and reciting the catechism and at least one of the Jesuit Brothers who taught us there suggested to my father that I might consider a vocation to the priesthood. Whether we actually liked our classes or not is difficult to recall. But we loved going to the novitiate: 240 acres of rolling hills, expansive lawns, hidden trails, cornfields, and religious shrines. Those grounds were the site of many childhood adventures and misadventures.

My family moved away from Wernersville when I was in the sixth grade. I went on to high school, college, and graduate school and began my professional life as a research scientist. While doing postdoctoral work at the University of South Carolina in Columbia during the 1990s, I became vaguely aware of occasional conflicts between scientific and religious points of view, most commonly centered around the teaching of evolution in public school curricula. I read the newspaper accounts with some interest but was too busy with my research on bone formation and with teaching biochemistry to think much about it. In 2000, I moved to Connecticut with my

wife, Debra, four children, and two dogs to begin a faculty position at Fairfield University, one of twenty-seven Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States. Shortly after arriving at Fairfield, my first dean, Dr. Beverly Kahn, sent me information about applying for the Science and Religion Course Award program administered by the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences (CTNS) in Berkeley, California, with support from the John Templeton Foundation. To this day I don't know why Dean Kahn suggested that I consider applying. I can only guess that the fact that I was raised Catholic might have come up during my job interview with her.

My application to CTNS for the course award was successful, and I developed a course called "God and Modern Biology," which I have been teaching annually at Fairfield for the past twenty years. My biggest surprise in starting this project was that science and religion is an academic discipline, like biology or theology. The field has its own literature, professional journals, and annual conferences. My CTNS course award led to several other projects, including a Fairfield University faculty and staff discussion group supported by the Metanexus Institute in Philadelphia, a delightful trip to Mexico for the Science and Transcendence Advanced Research Series (STARS) program from CTNS, and finally a parish outreach project also named "God and Modern Biology" with the Catholic Diocese of Bridgeport, Connecticut. In all of this work, I have been generously supported by the John Templeton Foundation. The many years of discussions, arguments, and shared insights among students, faculty colleagues, community partners, and participants in these projects has led to this book. It is intended to serve as an introduction to the broad interdisciplinary field of science and religion. It is thus written for non-specialists, though I hope it will be of interest to faculty colleagues of many disciplines and specialties. This book might serve as the text for an introductory course in science and religion like mine, as a starting point for adult discussion groups in churches, synagogues, and Catholic parishes, or even as a change of fare for science or theology discussion groups at colleges and universities around the world.

This volume is organized into two main parts. In part I (Foundations), chapter 1 serves as a general introduction to science and reli-

gion using the pioneering work of Ian Barbour as a starting point to frame the discussion. Chapter 2 considers the virtue of humility as it applies to terms like knowledge, faith, and reason. Too often, one side or the other in the science vs. religion wars will seize one of these terms as their exclusive domain on which to plant their battle standards—I hope to find a way past that type of exchange. Chapter 3 explores why people are drawn to science either as a career, like I was, or as interested members of our larger community. Here the life of the French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin can serve as an illustration. I will also explore why in our modern era, science and religion are viewed by some as oppositional fields. In part II (chapters 4–7) we will examine some of the big questions in the science-and-religion conversation using the lives and ideas of the key historical figures who have shaped this dialogue over the past two centuries. These chapters will tell two stories. First, they will recount the history of our universe and Earth from the Big Bang to modern-day humans as we presently understand it. And second, they will lay out the historical development of the scientific fields that have contributed to our cosmic story, along with the ways in which science has intersected with religion and theology over the centuries. The stories will be framed by the topics of Big Bang cosmology (chapter 4), the origin of life (chapter 5), Darwin and evolution (chapter 6), and the history of life on Earth to the evolution of humans (chapter 7). I hope to provide enough depth on these topics to whet the appetite of you, my readers, for further exploration. However, I do not provide a comprehensive analysis of the scientific fields or detailed theological arguments, as a complete consideration of any of these fields could fill multiple volumes. Finally, interspersed throughout the book, I hope to offer you some guidance on how you might begin to reflect on these topics at a spiritual level. As a spiritual director in the Murphy Center for Ignatian Spirituality at Fairfield University, I am interested in developing and encouraging spiritual growth. The discussions I have had on these topics with students, friends, and colleagues over the years have helped to mold and shape my spirituality. I hope they will do the same for you.

The St. Isaac Jogues Novitiate in Wernersville is now the Jesuit Center for Spiritual Growth. The Jesuit novices are long gone, and

the Jesuit, religious, and lay spiritual directors who work there now provide individual and group retreats for priests, religious sisters, spiritual directors, and anyone else interested in self-exploration and spiritual growth. On the final evening of my first retreat at the Jesuit Center several years ago, I sat on the front lawn looking across the valley at nearby Cushion Peak, where my family would often hike on crisp fall days. As I sat there contemplating the mountain, I imagined my childhood self staring down at the present-day me from the peak and across the years. A flood of memories washed over me—my family, my friends, my mentors, and colleagues who have filled my life with so many blessings and so many gifts. Tears of joy filled my eyes, and I thanked God for all that I have experienced in my life. This sacred place was the start of that journey. I am grateful to you now, my readers, for the opportunity to share a part of my journey with you.

Wernersville, Pennsylvania  
July 29, 2019