

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN SLATTERY, SENIOR PROGRAM ASSOCIATE, AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE



Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “The idea for the project was simple: how can we help religious leaders better understand modern science, and how can we do it in a way that affirms a healthy dialogue between and among scientific and religious communities? Because there were so many examples of unhealthy science engagement with faith communities, a proper engagement ... was imperative.”
- “The world will always need people who can articulate a clear sense of Catholic thought... No one knows what scholarly work will look like in 50 years, but we will always need interpreters of tradition, and we will always need scholars!”

Would you describe your work, and some of the particularities of your organization?

Science for Seminaries is a program whose ideas began over 20 years ago in discussions and conferences of the Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion (DoSER) program at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). In 2010, the DoSER program began a thoughtful, strategic planning process by partnering with the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), the sole accrediting body for nearly all Christian seminary schools in the US and Canada, with over 280 graduate education programs accredited. Science in theological education was of particular importance to ATS leadership because an integral part of the organization’s mission is to adequately prepare future leaders to be culturally relevant on issues faced by modern congregations.

The idea for the project was simple: how can we help religious leaders better understand modern science, and how can we do it in a way that affirms a healthy dialogue between and among scientific and religious communities? Because there were so many examples of unhealthy science engagement with faith communities, a proper engagement, focusing on dialogue and mutual learning,

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, John Slattery, a Senior Program Associate with AAAS who oversees the Science for Seminaries project, shares insights about the work that he received an Expanded Reason Award for. The interview is part of a series on the Expanded Reason Awards.

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was imperative. As such, the AAAS DoSER program explored various ways to implement this idea through workshops and consultations supported by a planning grant from 2010-2014. The input obtained from active seminary faculty, administrators, graduates, and interested scientists sculpted an innovative approach, where every seminary student in an institution would be impacted by relevant science in core required courses, introduced in ways that non-scientist faculty could realistically and confidently integrate into a busy syllabus.

The need for this work was highlighted by a major 2013 public survey, carried out through a parallel DoSER project in association with sociologist Elaine Howard Ecklund at Rice University. This survey found that some Christians (particularly evangelicals) are more likely than people from other religious groups to consult a religious leader or fellow congregant if they have a scientific question. This survey result, combined with years of workshops and planning, paved the way for a project that was both pedagogically focused and open-ended. The best kind of project, the planning team discovered, was one in which seminary professors felt supported, pedagogies were strengthened, and seminaries could tailor the project to fit the needs of their particular community. The difficult planning work paid off in 2014, when AAAS DoSER staff and advisors, with assistance from the Association of Theological Schools, proposed and received a grant from the Templeton Religion Trust that became the first phase of the Science for Seminaries project.

What is your main field of research, and why did you choose that field?

As one of the leaders of the Science for Seminaries project, I focus largely on the field of science communication, but in my scholarly work, I focus on the intersections of science and religion within the last few hundred years of history, especially focusing on the history of evolution, eugenics, and racism.

You are a recipient of the Expanded Reason Awards. What was your contribution for receiving the Award?

I have been leading the Science for Seminaries program since 2018, including onboarding 34 grantee institutions, travelling across the US and Canada (pre-Covid) and digitally (post-Covid) to connect seminary leaders to scientific advisors and counsel them on integrating science into their religious education.

How easy or difficult is it for you to share your values with students when teaching?

This varies widely for the professors throughout our project, but I personally find it an invaluable piece of scientific and theological pedagogy. Best practices in

science communication stress the importance of connecting to the audience emotionally as well as intellectually. It is not just about presenting facts, but letting the students know that the teacher struggles with a topic, finds it compelling, or appreciates how it challenges accepted beliefs.

How do your values affect your research? And what are some challenges you face?

I am a staunch believer in the value of theological tradition as well as scientific fact, yet in my research on the history of science, race, and religion, I find many instances of corrupted tradition and politicized scientific facts that remind me of the necessity of strong moral foundations. Such moral foundations should not change the result of scientific experiments, but should allow us to look toward history and judge fact from fiction, corruption from piety, where possible. When applied to the modern day, it is ever more important for people to understand that science can both be objective experimentally and subjective based on a choice of research program, funding partner, and overall aim. The same, sadly, can be said of faith leaders and traditions.

What is your advice for students who may be Catholic and are contemplating doing graduate work or a PhD?

The world will always need people who can articulate a clear sense of Catholic thought. While the academic job market is constricting rapidly in the US and elsewhere, I think there would be opportunities for graduates of advanced degrees in Catholic theology if the student is prepared to venture into the world that exists, not into a world that existed 50 years ago. No one knows what scholarly work will look like in 50 years, but we will always need interpreters of tradition, and we will always need scholars!

Could you share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?

I joined the military after my undergraduate career at Georgetown University, where I majored in computer science but took a minor in theology. After a few years of active duty service, I left the military to teach and then do full time music and youth ministry at a Catholic Church in Kansas. There I felt pulled to go back to school both to teach as well as to understand the traditions and teaching of Christian theology. I received a Master's Degree from Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, MO, and a PhD from the University of Notre Dame in Systematic Theology and the History and Philosophy of Science.

After completing my PhD, for which I focused on the intersections of evolutionary sciences with the Catholic Church in the 19th and 20th centuries, I was drawn to this unique position at AAAS, where I have been able to

largely run the Science for Seminaries project for the past few years. While non-profit life is not university life, I have been honored to remain close to graduate theological education, and I firmly believe that good pedagogy is good pedagogy, whether scientific or theological.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

I am passionate about reaching those who have given up on the Catholic Church being a voice for justice and peace in the world. There are so many who have left in the US because of scandals or because they feel they can make the world a better place without the Church, even within my own family. I hope that my scholarly and pedagogical work can show how modern science and Catholic theology not only coexist, but thrive together, as they have for hundreds and hundreds of years.



Photo: Participants in the 2019 Science in the Curriculum Faculty Enrichment Retreat receive a behind-the-scenes tour of the National History Museum of Utah | AAAS/Rob O'Malley.

2021 Seed Grants



Drew University
Theological School



Fuller Theological
Seminary



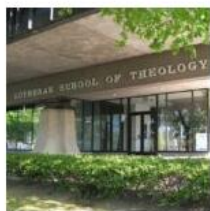
Garrett-Evangelical
Theological Seminary



Holy Apostles College &
Seminary



John Leland Center for
Theological Studies



Lutheran School of
Theology at Chicago



Mount Angel Seminary



Virginia Theological
Seminary



NAIITS: An Indigenous
Learning Community



Providence Theological
Seminary



Regis College



Wycliffe College

Photo: Schools and seminaries that benefitted from seed grants in 2021.