

LASAR newsletter No. 4 (April 2011)

Dear Reader,

This is our latest termly newsletter about the LASAR project and is emailed to all who requested it and those who are working on the project with us. If this has been forwarded to you and you would like to join our email list, please contact our PI, Berry Billingsley (b.billingsley@reading.ac.uk <mailto:b.billingsley@reading.ac.uk>) or our researcher, Helen Newdick at h.s.newdick@reading.ac.uk <mailto:h.s.newdick@reading.ac.uk>. You will find a section giving background on the project towards the end of this newsletter.

LASAR Summer Conference - Saturday 25th June, 2011 at St. Edmund's College, Cambridge

“Science and religious education in schools: new possibilities”

We do hope you will be able to attend our one-day conference, designed to be of interest to RE and science teachers and others who are concerned with the teaching and learning of science and religion.

Chaired by Professor Mary James, this will be an opportunity to share ideas; hear from lead-researchers; ask questions of an expert panel and to network over a buffet lunch (which is included within the £20 fee).

Speakers:

Professor Colin Humphreys: *Can a scientist believe in miracles?*

Professor Michael Reiss: *How should creationism and intelligent design be dealt with in the classroom?*

Dr Tonie Stolberg: *Teaching Religion and Science: Effective pedagogy and practical approaches for RE teachers*

There will also be a presentation of the LASAR project initial findings.

Questions or comments about the conference can be emailed to Dr Berry Billingsley (LASAR project leader) at b.billingsley@reading.ac.uk or to Dr Keith Taber (LASAR project consultant) at kst24@cam.ac.uk

To register your interest and book a place, visit The Faraday Institute website's conference area at <http://www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/faraday/Conference.php> where you will find a link to the conference on the home page. Registration fee: £20.00 (£10 for trainee teachers/students in higher education).

Website access

Our website is having a presentational makeover. While the new site is being built all resources can still be accessed at a slightly different (temporary) web address, which is www.faradayschools.co.uk (All resources are and will remain free to use).

Workshop news

This month the LASAR team carried out two workshops to support secondary school learners who are looking at the relationships between science and religion.

At Wallingford School in Oxfordshire, pupils explored the natures of science and religion with the help of fingerprint expert, Susan Davis and specialist in religious education, Paul Hopkins.

At Down House and particularly, in Darwin's greenhouse, pupils from Bancroft's School in Essex worked with science specialist, Dr Paul Davies and Dr Dawn Sanders of The Charles Darwin Trust to find out more about the way Darwin understood the natural world.

These workshops were filmed and will be incorporated into KS4 resource material which is being developed for the website.

Please contact us if you would be interested in hosting a workshop at your school. These (like our website) are free.

Research progress

We are pleased to report that a paper submitted to *Science Education* has been accepted for publication. The paper is titled: *Secondary students' responses to perceptions of the relationship between science and religion: stances identified from an interview study*; (Taber, K. S., Billingsley, B., Riga, F., & Newdick, H).

In the paper, we explain that as part of our provisional work for the LASAR (Learning about Science and Religion) Project, we interviewed twelve Year 9 (13-14 year old) pupils from four different English Secondary schools. We asked them about a range of topics including how they understood scientific and religious perspective on the origins of the universe and life on earth, miracles, and prayer, as well as their thoughts about these topics.

In January, we presented a paper at the Education in a Post Secular Society Conference, hosted by The British Education Research Association and the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain. The paper is called, "*One day, we may be able to explain the whole universe using science alone*": *A study to explore pupils' ideas about the limitations of science*.

In January, it was also the ASE (Association for Science Education) annual conference. Fran and Helen ran a session in which they discussed some of our research findings and also presented sample activities from the website. We will be presenting at the ASE conference again in 2012, in Liverpool.

Our second round of interviews with secondary school pupils is now underway. We are very grateful to our research schools for their help with arranging for interviews to take place.

Keep abreast of our research news by visiting www.lasarproject.com (We post presentations, conference papers and our newsletters there.)

Background about the project

The LASAR, Learning about Science and Religion, Project was motivated by a concern that there is a strong public perception (reinforced by some popular media) that science and religion are in some sense opposites, that is that science is an atheistic activity. In particular, we were concerned that school pupils may come to accept this as a normative standard: something that is both incorrect, and which could deter students who hold religious faith from considering science as a suitable basis of future study and

career. Such an effect would not only be unfortunate when there is widespread concern about the limited numbers of young people seriously considering science careers, but in principle could set up a self-fulfilling prophecy. If people of faith are significantly deterred from science, then science could over time become dominated by atheists!

LASAR is looking at this issue from two complementary directions. We are planning research which will help us find out more about exactly what secondary age students do think about science and religion, something of the factors which they feel influence their views, and how their ideas shift over time. We intend to report our findings widely, and when we have results available we will use this newsletter to direct readers to these reports. We are also looking to develop curriculum materials and approaches which can support teachers in engaging secondary age pupils with something of the broad range of opinions and scholarship in the area of science and religion. In this way we hope to make sure that there are sufficient accessible and balanced presentations to help pupils to recognise that this is a nuanced area where there are no simple answers (so scientists hold a wide range of faith positions and views on religious matters), and offer them interesting resources to stimulate their own thinking in this area.

Yours with best wishes

Berry, Keith, Fran and Helen

The Learning about Science & Religion (LASAR) project team:

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Dr Keith S Taber (Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge)

Fran Riga (Associate Researcher, LASAR Project)

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