

Religion, science converge at conference - Dalai Lama a guest at Stanford

By Dean Nelson

November 10, 2005

Just as the wedge between religion and science was driven further at the conclusion of the intelligent design trial late last week in Dover, Pa., a convergence of religion and science was occurring in Palo Alto.

The topic at Stanford University was not about creation and evolution, though. It was about how the brain functions, and it brought together the university's Neuroscience Institute with Buddhist scholars and His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama.

Phillip Pizzo, dean of Stanford's Medical School, emphasized that science and faith have something to say to one another, despite the current climate of distrust.

"We are witnessing an anti-science movement in this country," Pizzo said. "Some of it comes from Washington, but it is also across the land, and it comes in the form of rampant fundamentalism. Similarly, there is also a movement in science against religion."

In October, more than 500 members of the Society of Neuroscience signed a petition demanding that the Dalai Lama be uninvited from a similar conference at the society's annual meeting next week. Some of the scientists signing the petition are Chinese or of Chinese descent, which adds a political tension to the debate. Pizzo said that the Stanford conference was an attempt to move from the extremes of both science and faith, where "discourse is impossible," and explore "the boundaries of what they share."

"We are not applying the scientific method to faith, nor are we applying faith to science," he said. "But they are part of the same dimension."

The 1,700-seat Memorial Auditorium audience at Stanford, comprising scientists, Dalai Lama devotees and the general public, was sold out. They came from around the country and paid \$100 each for general admission to hear the groups discuss craving, suffering and "Choice: Spiritual and Scientific Explorations of Human Experience."

Instead of a conflict between faith and science, this was a virtual love fest.

William Mobley, director of the Neuroscience Institute, put the conference together because he said both neuroscience and Buddhism strive to alleviate suffering.

"Both pursue knowledge about the brain and mind," he said. "They just go about it differently. I think we have something to learn from each other."

The Dalai Lama, one of the most ardent supporters of science among religious leaders, often says that if science proves facts that conflict with Buddhist understanding, then Buddhism must change accordingly.

When it comes to understanding the brain and the mind, "Modern science is much more advanced than Buddhism," the Dalai Lama said at the conference. "We have tried to understand the mind for the last 2,500 years, but compared to modern science, we are a bit backward. We have much to learn from scientists."

Likewise, though, Buddhists have methods for introspective inquiry regarding the mind, through meditation, that might inform science, Mobley said.

"We're trying to understand each other to make new knowledge happen and perform better experiments," he said.

Buddhist scholars at the event included Karma Lekshe Tsomo, an ordained Buddhist nun and a professor at the University of San Diego.

The morning portion of the conference focused on the topic of craving. Neuroscientists describe craving as strong motivation for any goal. The goal could be something a person needs, such as air, food, warmth or rest, but the goal could be unhealthy, such as eating too much rich food, drinking alcohol or using tobacco or addictive drugs. Chemical changes occur in the brain that cause a person to act toward the desired object.

The Buddhist concept of craving is that it is a false sense of reality -- that the mind falsely imposes desirable qualities on an object, and then desires that object as a the source of pleasure or well-being. The object could be wealth, sensual objects, praise and the esteem of others.

The Dalai Lama clarified that in the Tibetan language, "craving" is translated as "afflicted desire."

"Desire per se is not a form of affliction," he said. "It can be a neutral state, or even a virtuous state of mind."

The afternoon session focused on suffering, which, from a neuroscience perspective, is the brain triggering emotions associated with distress, such as pain, fear, sadness, depression and anxiety.

The Buddhist perspective on suffering is that, while it either exists from external reasons such as injury, or internal, such as grief, the challenge is in not letting suffering lead one into unhappiness.

For both craving and suffering, the neuroscientists pointed out what happens to the brain when a person experiences those states. Different portions of the brain give off evidence of high activity when one craves or suffers. Those aspects of the brain can be amplified or diminished with proper treatment, they said. The Buddhists explained that, through meditation, one can see the falsehood imposed on the object of the craving, and as a result, will experience a closer picture of reality. As for suffering, they said that contemplation that focuses on compassion and altruism alters the unhappiness associated with certain kinds of suffering.

It wasn't exactly medication versus meditation, but there was plenty of discussion about both.

The Dalai Lama said that Western science teaches people how to investigate and ask questions, which Buddhism values.

"Questions bring about investigation, and investigation brings better understanding of reality," he said.

Pizzo seemed unruffled by the national disagreement over whether joint sessions like this should exist.

"We should make every effort to sustain the future of both faith and science," he said. "Tolerance for each other will preserve the world."

Caption: 1 PIC

The Dalai Lama took off his shoes to become more comfortable during a program at Stanford University on religion and science. Paul Sakuma / Associated Press

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