

EDITOR'S NOTE

Science & Religion 2004: Turmoil and Tensions

The articles, columns, and reviews in this special, expanded issue are devoted to "Science and Religion: Turmoil and Tensions." This is the third special Science & Religion issue of SI. The first two (July/August 1999 and September/October 2001) proved provocative and popular with readers. Both are still available as back issues. Many of those articles are also collected (along with ones from other venues) in the book *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?*, edited by Paul Kurtz (Prometheus 2003).

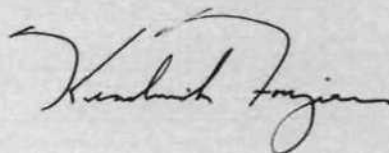
Because we try to take a scientific, empirical approach to all the issues we address, the articles selected for this issue go well beyond opinion and commentary to provide new data, where available, and frequently, deep, instructive insights.

I think the lead article, by Pascal Boyer, a professor at Washington University, St. Louis, and author of *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*, may prove the most surprising for many skeptics. In "Why Is Religion Natural?" Boyer draws on recent findings in psychology, anthropology, and neuroscience to directly address misconceptions skeptics often hold in trying to explain the appeal of religion. Boyer finds that the human sensitivity to religion is a byproduct of the way human minds operate in ordinary, non-religious contexts. That's why religious systems are so widespread and common, even in disparate cultures. "It may seem," he concludes, "prudent and empirically justified to say that religion is a very probable byproduct of various brain systems that are the result of evolution by natural selection."

The subsequent articles are likewise by esteemed scholars and writers, most authors of books on these very topics, each with his or her own viewpoints, approaches, and insights. They include two philosophers, a physicist, an anthropologist, a science educator, and a sociologist. As with our previous two Science & Religion issues, don't look for consensus or unanimity of thought. Do look for good, scientifically valid information and fresh insights, all applied to an area—science and religion—where these two great manifestations of human culture remain in near-perpetual tension and conflict.

I was at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena on July 20, 1976, when Viking 1 landed on Mars and transmitted the first ever images from the martian surface. Late Saturday night, January 3, 2004, via CNN, I was able to watch live from the comfort of my home as the scientists at JPL got the word that the Mars rover Spirit had landed successfully on Mars and was transmitting data. Remarkably detailed photos of the landing site soon followed.

As I did with the Viking scientists in 1976, I shared in the excitement of the Mars rover scientists. How often does a worldwide TV audience get to see mature scientists jumping up and down in relief and jubilation? The scene was repeated Jan. 24 when Spirit's twin, Opportunity, bounced to its successful landing on Mars, helping offset concerns about communications problems with Spirit. Rare moments and events like these, where the very human side of science can be seen and shared with the public in real time, have the capacity for inspiring people. Usually scientific discovery is a more private, solitary matter. But these magnificent occasions really can make us realize that exploration is a fundamental human impulse, a positive aspect of our culture that can, at times, be shared by all.



Skeptical Inquirer

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