Revisiting the Convergence of Science and Religion

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Charles Townes has had a long-standing interest in physical science. In the 1950s he conceived the idea of constructing devices for amplifying electromagnetic radiation by a process of stimulated emission: masers (with microwaves) and lasers (with visible light and infrared radiation). For this he shared the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1964. Two years later, in 1966, he published an oft-cited essay on “The Convergence of Science and Religion,” another arena of long-standing interest. In 2005 he received the Templeton Prize, an award recognizing exceptional contribution to humankind’s spiritual dimension.

Even a scientist with Townes’ level of accomplishment and renown receives substantial criticism for treading into such territory – sometimes for even using the words “science” and “religion” in the same sentence. That there may be a productive dialogue and even collaboration between such historically distinct ways of viewing the world may be upsetting to individuals in either camp. Yet it is undeniable that if one attends to the really big mysteries in the cosmos – the nature of mind and consciousness, who and what we are and how we relate to everything else we understand about what we call physical reality – one is confronted with questions of interest both to science and to religious and spiritual traditions. This can form the basis for productive dialogue and hopefully even movement toward the development of a worldview that will truly foster the flourishing of the human spirit in every possible way.