

What is the Sinai and Synapses Fellowship?

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Today's society promotes a false belief in a fixed “either/or” sense of identity. On one side is “science,” which tends to be perceived as being liberal and educated. The other side is “religion,” which tends to be perceived as being conservative and uneducated. Not only that, but there’s also an assumption that once you pick one side, you must choose all the other associations that come along with it. Each side then attacks the other as being wrong at best, and evil at worst. This false dichotomy, and these attacks and counterattacks, prevent real conversations from happening, keep people from working together to solve problems, and deepen the polarization and mistrust in our society today.

With issues like climate change and COVID-19, battles in schoolboards on how we teach both science and humanities, and a basic lack of trust in institutions, the public discourse has simply gotten worse over time. How do we resolve this? Many of us may think that more facts and more knowledge will change people’s minds – and since science is what gives us a better understanding of the world, science is the way to do it.

But people – including scientists – are not disembodied brains, simply pursuing truth for its own sake. Instead, we need to ask people, “What are your deepest values? What frightens you? What gives you joy? What keeps you up at night, and what gets you out of bed in the morning?” Real people are more than soundbites or caricatures, and we need to understand educators, scientists, and laypeople in the fullness of their complex humanity.

That’s what the [Sinai and Synapses Fellowship](#) aims to do. Since its launch in 2013, it showcases people who model constructive engagement across religious, academic, and geographic divides. By bringing together a select group of clergy, scientists, writers, and thinkers, we explore big questions – such the changing role of technology, advances in genetic engineering, and the role of truth and trust in our society – from both scientific and religious perspectives. It’s designed to focus on fostering relationships, and through four cohorts, 55 Fellows have participated in the program, with 100% of them saying that the program impacted them personally, and 92% saying it impacted them professionally. This journal issue represents just a few of the incredible people who have been part of this network and seen its power.

Sinai and Synapses aims to celebrate multiple forms of diversity – not just of gender and ethnicity, but also of geography, professional background, age, and experience. By selecting both strong individual Fellows and a dynamic group, the Fellowship breaks down the many silos we see today and tries to combat the challenges we see in society today. After all, social media has become an echo chamber, simply reinforcing pre-existing beliefs. Academics are feeling lonely and isolated and have become so immersed in their own studies that there is almost no interaction with people from other fields, or even from specialized sub-fields besides their own. And clergy feel burnt out, with constant demands on their time and minimal time for reflection and study. The Sinai and Synapses Fellowship offers rejuvenation and opportunities for cross-pollination.

So, what exactly happens in the Fellowship? First, between twelve and eighteen Fellows are selected through a competitive application process. The Fellows then meet three times per year for two years, and ideally in person (although COVID has forced some of these meetings to be online). We intentionally select people who are not only experts in their field, but also people who are both curious and kind. More than knowledge, we want people who love to learn – both about scientific

subjects *and* about the people who are in the room. We want the Fellows to bring their whole selves to these conversations.

When the Fellows come to the meeting, we focus on a specific subject, such as, *The Cost of Being Right and the Benefit of Being Wrong in Both Science and Religion*. The sessions begin with an opening prompt to spark personal reflection on the theme of the day, such as *Share a story about when evidence changed your mind about a deeply held belief. What prompted you to change your mind and accept this new evidence?* By exploring a particular subject through both religious and scientific lenses, the Fellows can more easily bring their personal experience to bear on the question at hand, which then can spark new ideas or avenues of research, or simply recognize similar points of view that they might not have seen otherwise.

They then learn from an expert on the subject, with ample time for questions and answers, followed by small-group discussion on what they have learned and how it affects them either personally or professionally. These facilitated discussions allow creating a safe enough space to explore challenging – or even dangerous – questions. There becomes a level of trust and openness in these conversations, allowing people to discuss difficult and charged topics without fear of retribution or embarrassment. And as the Fellowship has grown over the years, we’ve also run multiple alumni meetings, where Fellows can ‘workshop’ their ideas before presenting them at a conference or trying to publish a new study. It has become a laboratory to see what we don’t know, what we’re missing, or how we need to communicate more clearly and effectively.

This leads to a second part of the Fellowship, and one that you see in this issue – namely, writing, publishing, and speaking on key issues where both science and religion can bring wisdom to bear on the conversation. Over 400 pieces of content have come out of the Fellowship, ranging from keynote presentations at academic conferences to articles for Forbes and Nautilus to articles in peer-reviewed journals. The essays you see here were inspired by the work our Fellows are doing and explore topics that range from reducing skepticism of science to how fear of death informs our lives to the ways environmental and racial justice intersect to the history of pandemics in Jewish thought. We can only imagine what new ideas will arise from these essays, and what they will spark in others.

We’re also pleased to announce that, with grant funding secured from the Issachar Fund, applications are now open for the fifth round of the Sinai and Synapses Fellowship. They will be open from October 4th through November 16th, 2021, and you can see more at sinaiandsynapses.org/sinai-and-synapses-fellowship. As we describe it, the ideal Fellow is someone who is:

- a professional in either religion or science (e.g. clergy person, working scientist, educator, professor, doctoral student, medical professional, journalist),
- passionate about elevating the discourse surrounding religion and science,
- a believer that both religion and science can have great value in our society,
- deeply curious about new ideas and new perspectives,
- excited about learning from both experts and peers,
- respectful when challenging others, and willing to be challenged themselves,
- searching for new questions, rather than trying to find answers,
- aware that there are often multiple truths on any subject,
- able to create content and run programs in his/her field, and
- active on social media.

If this sounds like you, and if these essays inspire you, raise questions for you, or lead you to think differently about these topics, we encourage you to apply. We are always looking for thoughtful people who believe science is crucial for learning of all ages, and who recognize that values, personal stories, and relationships are a central aspect of what it means to be human.

From a personal perspective, I'm deeply grateful to Mark Bloom and Ian Binns for editing this volume, to all the Fellows who contributed and to the Issachar Fund and the many other supporters of Sinai and Synapses for helping to significantly expand the reach and power of the Fellowship. This is far beyond what I could have imagined in 2013, when I called up a few friends to see if they'd be interested in talking about science and religion, and which ultimately became the Sinai and Synapses Fellowship. It has given me so much joy to see these ideas reaching such a wide audience, and that these relationships and connections – which simply continue to grow – have truly become so much more than the sum of its parts.

May we all go from strength to strength, bringing our values and our insights to inspire more people to love science, and all the ways it gives us life.