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Seeing is believing?

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Presenting science in South Africa often faces the challenge of differences between religious views and scientific ones. But, given that over 80 % of South Africans profess to some form of belief (Stats SA), we cannot afford to ignore this factor when promoting science. Ian Barbour has identified four typologies which characterise the relationship between Science and Religion and which are helpful in setting up dialogue between the two sides. These typologies will be presented and discussed and practical suggestions made as to how presenters and lecturers can present science while being sensitive to strongly held beliefs. A practical example is given of a unique series of science shows presented by the author in a place of worship. Derek Fish is Director of Unizulu Science Centre and following from his concern about the perceived gap between science and belief, a series of science shows was presented on Sunday evenings in a place of worship. These covered various aspects of Physics, including electrostatics, optical illusions and perception, sound and music, colour and light, also tackling more controversial topics such as the Big Bang and creation, astronomy vs astrology, luck vs chance and others. Each presentation involved a number of exciting physics demonstrations, appropriate (for a family audience) explanations of the phenomena and a discussion about issues of belief surrounding the topic. As an example, the electrostatics presentation focussed mainly on lightning and a discussion followed on the common belief that lightning can be considered a supernatural act or something controlled by humans rather than merely an electrostatic phenomenon. Response to the series has been excellent with the hall filled out on every occasion. It is hoped that the series will establish more dialogue between science and belief and allow the two sides to establish common ground. Robust debate and discussion on this topic is encouraged.

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Primary author: Mr FISH, Derek (Unizul Science Centre)

Presenter: Mr FISH, Derek (Unizul Science Centre)

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