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CHRISTIANS·IN·SCIENCE

SCIENCE AND CHRISTIAN FAITH IN 2012 AN ENDURING PARTNERSHIP

CiS 2012 Residential Conference Report

During the weekend of 13th-16th July around 150 scientists gathered at Queens' College Cambridge to explore the relationship between science and faith. The age range was wide and though most came from the UK, there were also representatives from Africa, Australia, North and South America, Australasia, Asia and a number of European countries.

After a welcome reception in the Old Dining Hall, Alister McGrath (*KCL*) opened with a public lecture giving a personal overview of the dialogue between Christian faith, history, philosophy, psychology and education, stressing the need for greater input into education. He provided an excellent introduction to next morning's topic of the history of science and religion, which was ably surveyed by John Hedley Brooke (*Oxford*), who promoted the importance of seeing events in their local and political contexts. Ed Larson (*Pepperdine*) then described differing 19th century receptions of Darwinism in the USA and UK.

Allan Chapman (*Oxford*) regaled us by demolishing several myths currently embedded in the public mind with special emphasis on the so-called 'great debate' of 1860 between Huxley and Bishop Wilberforce. Sociologist Elaine Ecklund (*Rice*) then described her study of scientists' attitudes to religion, outlining her findings from the US and her plans for studies in other countries.

The afternoon focussed on neuroscience with Bill Newsome (*Stanford*) showing how understanding the wiring and chemical control of the brain does not make us into mindless automata. We need a multilevel approach involving understanding the interaction between our behaviour, neural circuitry and genetic endowment, thus permitting freedom of choice. Systems that ignore this simply fail to work in real life! Peter Clarke (*Lausanne*) took us through modern views on the soul: dualism and monism or his preference: dual aspect monism. Clinician Alasdair Coles (*Cambridge*) described how temporal lobe epilepsy can give rise to experiences sometimes valued by their recipients as being directly from God. He saw no reason to deduce that such phenomena diminished the reality of more ordinary experiences of God; if different components of religious life are mediated by various brain pathways these findings should not surprise us.

On Sunday the plenary sessions were biologically based. Jonathan Moo (*Whitworth*) showed how Christians have drifted into a secular assumption that creation was made solely for us to use, while scripture clearly shows that it was made by and belongs to God, who appointed us to care for it, taking the humble, sacrificial service of Christ as our model. Peter Harris of A Rocha built on this exposition, arguing that if our Christianity was less anthropocentric and more Christocentric the impact of environmental degradation on the poorest people would have alerted us to the need for creation care long ago. Both of these speakers felt that despite the gloom often portrayed we could and should rejoice in God's world.

Friday evening welcome drinks and canapes in the Queens' College Old Dining Hall

Volcanoes and earthquakes sometimes raise doubts as to the goodness of creation. Bob White (*Cambridge*) showed how the human tragedies associated with natural disasters are often largely due to human behaviour. He gave data linking greater earthquake damage with corrupt building practices, but also showed how God may use these cataclysmic events for His good purposes. Katharine Hayhoe (*Texas*) also emphasised human responsibility in relation to climate change. A culture shift as great as that which abolished

slavery is needed if we are to have any impact on the current exponential rise of global temperature.

In the afternoon Simon Conway Morris (*Cambridge*) briskly refuted some myths surrounding evolution such as the need to search for missing links and the effects of mass extinctions. He reckoned that the latter probably promoted evolution by 'clearing the decks' and allowing more rapid emergence of the creatures of the future.

Alister McGrath presented the opening lecture

Denis Alexander (*Cambridge*) took on a different 'myth', that of nature versus nurture. He suggested that it is the interaction between the two that makes us who we are, giving us the capacity for value judgements and free choice.

Taking this further Gareth Jones (*Otago*) discussed ways in which chemical substances might be used not only to treat mental illness but also to enhance certain behaviours. If they could make us more 'moral' there could be calls for their liberal use, but he warned of their side-effects and the potential for tyranny. The session ended with a review of dying in today's technological world by John Wyatt (*UCL*) who spoke movingly from both his professional and personal experience.

The final day of the conference considered some practical applications. Mike Clifford (*Nottingham*) reviewed the use of imagination and even dreams in science, not only to make innovative steps forward but also to see beyond mere efficiency as the immediate goal of an engineer. John Bryant (*Exeter*) updated us on GM crops and their uses in underdeveloped countries and Joe Perry (*Rothamsted*) opened our eyes to the cumbersome European regulations barricading this technology.

More high tech. applications were considered in the session on computers and Artificial Intelligence by Lionel Tarassenko (*Oxford*) and Peter Robinson (*Cambridge*).

The final session was on Cosmology. Colin Humphreys' (*Cambridge*) masterful combination of biblical study, Jewish history and astronomical prediction convinced us that Jesus died at 3 pm on the 3rd of April AD 33, resolving a long term conundrum of New Testament scholars on the timing of events in Jesus' last week. Rodney Holder (*Cambridge*) reviewed the origins of the universe and re-assessed the general acceptance of a Big Bang. The Universe seemed finely tuned to permit the emergence of life but this raised the possibility of our being in one of a multitude of Universes, although he thought this unlikely. The final speaker, Jennifer Wiseman (*NASA*), after delighting us with pictures of our own galaxy and further afield, told how increasing technical skill made visible numerous exo-planets, some with properties that could perhaps support life. She saw no reason why this should disturb Christians and called us to praise and worship as a fitting conclusion to the conference.

This common thread of recognising the hand of our creator God in our science recurred throughout the conference.

The weekend also contained a discussion session, 3 parallel sessions (containing 16 short papers), and a poster session, providing an opportunity for younger members to present their work. We were treated to a fine gala dinner on Saturday evening, after which Sir John Polkinghorne (*Cambridge*) looked briefly to the past and the future of science and faith.

Worship and praise abounded at a service in the college chapel on Sunday morning. The Anglican communion service brought together those of varying church backgrounds, as a chapel choir sang upliftingly and College Chaplain Jonathan Holmes preached on Jesus healing a man who was mute. As Keith Fox said in his closing words 'to be among so many fellow scientists singing '*To God be the glory*' was a moving experience.'

Sunday morning worship in Queens' College Chapel

The layout of the Queens College venue was good, making for easy conversation so that discussions with speakers continued long after their session, young and old could mingle and new friendships could be made.

Many thanks to Keith, Diana and Becky for all their hard work. They would doubtless join the refrain '*to God be the glory*'.

Dr Caroline Berry, CiS Trustee