

Teaching science in school

With scientists such as Richard Dawkins ridiculing the claims of Christianity on national TV, we spoke to Dr John Ling, teacher of Chemistry and Physics at Kent College, Canterbury about the modern challenges for Christian science school teachers.

1. What are the areas of tension for Christians teaching science?

As well as the general tensions that face all Christians – the ‘World’, the ‘Flesh’ and the ‘Devil’ – Christian educators do face specific challenges.

In science teaching, one of these challenges is the National Curriculum’s demand that it should promote pupils’ “spiritual, moral, social and cultural development”. Specifically, this touches on the exploration of questions such as “When did life start?” and “Where does life come from?” These are sources of great debate amongst Christians and the scientific community. The predominant scientific position is that life evolved and a process of events unfurled leading to the development of galaxies, stars, solar systems etc. On our planet alone, mankind has identified life.

In practice, science tends to deal with the ‘How’ question and faith, the ‘Why’ question. However, this does not stop many from feeling that science challenges faith. It is useful to see things differently, though. An essential question for the scientist is “How does faith inform science?” It is the working out of a response to this question that assists Christian teachers who are scientists in usefully promoting the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of their pupils and others. Indeed, not only is this a salient perspective, there is, to an extent, a legal mandate for all state sector teachers to explore these issues.

2. Does the belief that ‘only scientific knowledge counts’ make it hard for Christian scientists to share their faith?

Attempts to classify the links between science and faith have come up with three main areas where they inter-relate: the question of origins; the methodology of science including assumptions about the ‘uniformity of nature’; and the applications of science. These are all associated with numerous ethical issues, but they also relate to religious education, citizenship and other cross-curricular areas that are associated with social issues and science and technology.

3. Do many in the church understand the tensions faced?

When in conversation about the different areas of faith–science interactions, many are unaware of the rather specific requirements of the use of language in describing different positions. This is, of course, true of Christian teachers as well as those with no Christian faith. For example, it is often claimed that creation and evolution are incompatible, whereas what is really meant is that ‘special creation’ (species being separately created) and evolution are incompatible. The idea of God bringing into being and providing sustenance is

not so often in question, but it, too, is Creation. For many Christian scientists, therefore, there is no incompatibility between science and faith.

4. How can Christian parents help their children learn science?

Differences and perceptions of language are very important when we consider the nature of science. I think it is therefore important for parents and teachers particularly concerned about science and faith conflicts to appreciate that there is not necessarily a logical incompatibility between faith and science perspectives – there is quite simply room for different types of explanation.

It could be argued that the Christian community spends too much time on the evolution/creation debate and too little time considering the application of science and technology in response to God's Creation. Theories about Origins are of course important, and Christians in Science will be considering Design arguments in a forthcoming conference.* But Christians in Science also recently held a conference on environmental sustainability. I was very pleased we did. And another upcoming conference is dedicated to how Christians should respond to the challenge of education.*

In response to the sustaining grace of Jesus Christ, it is vital that new generations of Christian leaders address the implications of the Christian gospel both in their relationships with their fellows and with their wider context and environment.

'As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead'. James 2:26

* 'Design and Purpose in the Universe', 18 March 2006, St Nicholas' Church, Durham.

**'Towards a Christian Framework for Education', 29 April 2006, Christ Church, Herne Bay.

More details and booking forms at www.cis.org.uk.