



An interview with Ghilleen Prance

The President of CiS, *Professor Sir Ghilleen Prance* is Scientific Director of the Eden Project in Cornwall, Visiting Professor at Reading University and elected Fellow of the Royal Society in 1993 and awarded the Victoria Medal of the Royal Horticultural Society in 1999. He has served as President of the Linnean Society, the Systematics Association and the Institute of Biology. He is married with two daughters; one lives in Recife, Brazil, and the other is a surgeon.

What have you been doing until now?

After studying botany at Keble College, Oxford, I went to work as a research assistant at the New York Botanical Gardens. The next 25 years were divided (about 50:50) between New York and Amazonian Brazil. I started off studying first plant taxonomy, and then moved towards conservation and sustainable development of rainforest ecosystems. I set up the NY Botanical Garden's Institute for Economic Botany, of which I was the director for seven years. I moved back to the UK in 1988, to become Director of The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

What do you do for fun?

When I'm not working, I enjoy walking, bird watching, and collecting flower stamps. I was also playing squash right up until I left Kew.

Who have been the most important role models in your life?

I became a Christian in my first term at Oxford through the CU, and then grew a great deal through my involvement with both the CU and St Ebbes church, where the rector was Basil Gough. I also gained from lectures, aimed at students, by Dick Lucas.

My interest in botany developed well before I arrived at Oxford; I was interested in plants from a very early age, and I was influenced by many people - I learned a huge amount from field trips while I was at school. It was my future father-in-law who, when I was accepted for ordination, encouraged me instead to develop my God-given gift for botany, and to work at this to the best of my ability.

What challenges have you come across as a Christian and a scientist?

The main challenge was reconciling my faith and science, and this became easier as my career developed. It was made more difficult in the beginning, when I was a young Christian, because of the unreal conflicts that were presented to me, especially to do with evolution. This was especially challenging because I was working in evolutionary biology! I have since come to understand that there is no real conflict here, and my scientific studies have confirmed the complexity and perfection of God's creation.

During my time in the Amazon, I was fortunate enough to carry out several successful expeditions. I always visited the local churches wherever went, because I felt that it was an important way to support them. It was also important to show that one can be both a Christian and a scientist, which is what people really needed to hear at that time. Together with a Brazilian scientist, I was invited to lead some Sunday school lessons at a Baptist church in Brazil. This was a growing church that was losing some of its young people when they went to study at university, and came across difficulties with evolution. We helped them to look at evidence both in the bible and in science. Also while I was travelling, I made a decision with my family that they would travel with me to Brazil, and stay

as close as possible to where I was working. This was difficult for them at times, but we felt that it was important to keep the family together, and it worked out well.

How has your faith helped you as a scientist, or vice versa?

My faith has helped me in many ways. It has made a more disciplined person – both my life in general and my science have been helped in this way. It has helped me to have integrity in my scientific work, and calmness in a crisis. This was especially important in some difficult situations while I was working and travelling in the Amazon.

What science-faith books have you most enjoyed/found most helpful, especially as young scientist?

Mere Christianity and the other writings of CS Lewis were very helpful in my Oxford days. I also appreciated the writings of John Stott. I have, and still do, read many science-faith books, and the ASA journal, *Perspective on Science and Christian Faith*, which started before *Science and Christian Belief*, has been very useful.

Anything else?

Yes - as my career in biology progressed, I became very concerned about environmental issues. This was a professional concern, but very close to my faith too - care for God's creation is very important. I have had a long association with the Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies. This has been a really helpful two-way exchange; I have really valued the fellowship I received there. I have also been involved with the Christian conservation organisations A Rocha and the Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies in Michigan, USA, and took part in the formation of the *Eco-Congregation* project that encourages churches to think about the environment. This and many speaking engagements are my main form of Christian service at present, and takes up a lot of my time now.