

An interview with John Bryant, From *PreCiS*, February 2005



As well as being Chairman of CiS John Bryant is Professor Emeritus of Cell and Molecular Biology at Exeter University, Visiting Professor of Molecular Biology at West Virginia State University, and President of the Society for Experimental Biology. John is married to Marje, who is a counsellor, and they have two grown-up children.

Tell us what you've been doing until now

I presume that you mean in my work -- well, after a BA and a PhD at Cambridge, I was a post-doc at the University of East Anglia - I stayed there just under two years and then got a lectureship in Biochemistry at Nottingham ... four years later I was appointed to a lectureship at Cardiff with the specific responsibility of introducing teaching and setting up a research group in Plant Biochemistry and Molecular Biology ... and I had a nice setting up grant which was fun. In 11 years there I went from Lecturer to Senior Lecturer to Reader and then came to Exeter to take up the new Chair in Cell and Molecular Biology. I had the specific task of bringing Molecular Biology into what was then a very traditional Biology department (or as the VC said to me, to bring the Department into the second half of the 20th century). Again I had a nice setting up grant and this time there was also a major lab rebuild to accommodate the new activities. And I've been here ever since. I have recently taken early retirement in order to concentrate more on writing and speaking (so technically I am Professor Emeritus of Cell and Molecular Biology) but I am still involved in research and do some teaching.

What do you do for fun?

Life is so interesting ... there is so much to enjoy. I love the great outdoors - mountains, marshes, birdwatching; I am keen on sport. I have played quite a lot of cricket in the past but have hung up my boots since coming here. I am still a keen runner and in the past have been in County teams. I enjoy watching sport too, especially cricket, rugby and football - I am a devoted fan of Crystal Palace - and indeed saw them play recently. Marje and I enjoy films, theatre and travel, exploring Greek Islands (and indeed, sailing catamarans in the Aegean). I like several types of music - Folk (especially real Celtic stuff), Rock, Jazz, Blues, Classical - and the special category, Bob Dylan. I think that's probably enough fun for now!

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

That is an easy question - I have had two role models. The first was my Dad - he left school at 15 with very little in the way of qualifications - for most of my childhood and then on until he retired he was a postman - he was quite a shy, straightforward working class man but also a real Christian gentleman who took his faith into his work and everywhere else too. He had what were then, especially in a working class context, quite advanced ideas about equality and sharing in marriage, about the equality of the sexes and indeed of all people. He also loved sport and was a fine footballer in his younger days. I simply soaked up, mostly unconsciously, much of what he was ... and I still miss him.

The other role model was my PhD supervisor at Cambridge, Tom ap Rees. Tom was killed in a road accident as he cycled home one evening in 1996. This was the same year as my Dad died and the closeness in timing of the two events had quite an effect on me. Tom was a great example as a teacher of undergraduates, as a PhD supervisor and as a scientist. I was his first PhD student after he arrived in Cambridge and he always took an interest in my career and in my family (it made Tom feel old when he taught our elder son at Cambridge).

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

Being a scientist has challenged me to think about why I have faith, to look seriously at evidence and so on. It has also meant that I have thought a lot about what science can and cannot do and at what are regarded by some as incompatibilities between science and faith. These challenges arise again from time to time and one always has to be ready to think them through anew.

I personally have had no problem with evolution, seeing it as wonderful set of mechanisms through which life has unfolded. But Christians who are not scientists have on many occasions challenged me about it, sometimes quite vigorously ... But I continue to be entirely clear in my own mind that accepting the idea of evolution is completely compatible with the idea of a creator-God.

Some Christians have also challenged me about genetic modification, for the fact that we use these techniques in our research and that on the whole I am happy that humans can use science in this way. Nowadays, perhaps lacking a little in humility, I point them at my recent book (and it is interesting that at least one Christian I know has completely changed his view of GM technology since reading it).

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

Faith does help science but in an indirect way ... because in the background to our work we know that we are dealing with the creation of a consistent and non-capricious God - in that context I find the idea presented by some young-earth creationists that God created the universe with the appearance of being old (even down to the details of the fossil record) to be so outrageous. God does not fool us. I also think that faith leads me to experience awe and wonder about, for example, the intricacies of biological systems... but I know that non-Christian colleagues can also experience a sense of awe and wonder (as for example, in Richard Dawkins's latest book).

As for science helping faith, I do not think that we can push the natural theology argument very far when we are explaining our faith. But speaking from a position of faith, the findings of science increase my awe and wonder (back to those words again) of the creator-God ... everything that has DNA praise the Lord!

What science-faith book have you most enjoyed/found most helpful?

Quite a few, over the years: for example, the writing of Francis Schaeffer and other members of L'Abri (not directly science-faith and indeed, some very arts-oriented but very helpful in the intellectual arena) - although I disagree with Schaeffer's rejection of evolution. All of John Polkinghorne's output is good. I have also enjoyed Roger Forster's and Paul Marston's *Reason, Science and Faith* and Rodney Holder's *Nothing but Atoms and Molecules?* Denis Alexander's *Rebuilding the Matrix* is also very good. And doubtless there are others but that is enough to be going on with.

What about CiS?

I joined the Research Scientist's Christian Fellowship a long time ago, when I was a post-grad. In those days, anyone who joined the IVF's Graduates' Fellowship (in today's parlance, who becomes a UCCF Associate) could join the RSCF (which has evolved into CiS) as one of the professional groups. I was not an especially active member but appreciated the general support in matters of science and faith that membership of RSCF provided. I can remember having a very helpful talk with Oliver Barclay on evolution, for example. Over the years I have attended a few RSCF/CiS conferences, done some book reviewing and written one article for *Science and Christian Belief*... but on the whole I thought that my profile within the organisation was quite low. I was therefore astonished (and I do mean astonished) to receive the invitation to become Chair - previously I had not even served on the committee.

But having taken the job there was lot I wanted to see happen ... First I saw it as important that CiS has a noisy presence in the public arena in matters of science and faith - counteracting the pervasive media-fed view that the two are incompatible. This should be done by speaking, writing, taking every opportunity to engage with the media, and by our website etc. I think that all this is happening and that our profile is higher than it used to be. Secondly, I want CiS to be an organisation that Christians who are working in science know about and automatically think of joining. That means that our activities and publications must be geared to what members/potential members need and that we do good marketing. Thirdly, and this is related to the previous point, I want our activities and publications to be exciting - the sort of event you actually want to go to, the sort of material you actually want to pick up and read. Fourthly, and again this is linked to previous points, I think we should provide more support for members as they seek to live as Christians in science. Fifthly, I have been keen to have a more 'professional' approach to our committee work, with set terms of office for committee members, enabling us to receive fresh approaches and ideas. Lastly, I am very keen to see the decline in membership reversed and to get a good balance of age and gender in the membership and on our committee.

Having said all this, I am very conscious that I have not been able to devote nearly enough time to CiS as I should have done. Maybe it was unwise to be Chair during the same four years as being Vice-President and then President of the Society for Experimental Biology. I finish in the latter role in Spring 2005 and hope to give more time to CiS after that, although my term as CiS Chair expires in September 2005 and I am very aware that there is much that I still want to do before then.

Favourite luxury?

I am not sure how to define a luxury ... my tastes are quite simple (except perhaps in clothes where my tastes far exceed my budget) and I can never think what I want for my birthday. But I guess that being able to have two or three overseas holidays every year is luxury.

But perhaps you meant me to suggest a luxury that I might dream of, rather than possess ... how about a 500 gms per week, for life, of the darkest, bitterest chocolate (at least 80% cocoa solids!) ... but fair-traded of course! or a 9 metre sea-going yacht with a mooring in Pythagoria harbour in Samos, plus someone to do all the maintenance work so that all we have to do is sail it ... available for me and Marje (and any of our friends who would want to borrow it) to explore the Aegean.

What question would keep you debating till four in the morning?

Several, actually:

How exactly did God create the universe? What was there 'before' the Big Bang? (recognising that the word 'before' is meaningless in the absence of time).

How did life start?

How can we ensure an equitable distribution of the earth's resources? And what is going to happen, e.g. to global warming, as more nations become developed?

In UK politics ... how will we bring in fair voting? How will we abolish the monarchy?

If you were organising a conference (or a committee away day!), where would it be?

For conference venues, I will assume we are talking of a relatively small, residential conference on science-faith issues: how about Patmos, or Capri or Iona?

My committee away-day venue (assuming that it must be in relatively easy reach) would be Dartington Hall in south Devon ... or if that is bit remote, somewhere like Ashurst Lodge in the New Forest.

Favourite film? (and why!)

This is an impossible question ... I suppose I might say, half-jokingly, anything with Jenny Agutter in it! But actually I have enjoyed so many films at different levels that I cannot name a favourite ... I could give you a list of about 20 ... Now, if you had asked me to name my favourite rock song of all time that would have been easy: it just has to be *Like a Rolling Stone* by Bob Dylan. I have about six different versions on various CDs (including one by the Rolling Stones) and in the most recent Dylan gig that I attended he did a truly amazing live version.

If you weren't a biologist what would you be?

This is another difficult question. I have been keen on biology since I was a small boy growing up on a Croydon council estate (why I should have developed this interest I do not know) ... by the time I was about 13 that interest had turned into a desire to be a professional biologist. The only other career that I considered at all was medicine, but I always came back to biology. Maybe today, with changed financial arrangements, I might have tried to break into serious athletics ... but maybe not. I also enjoy communicating, so perhaps the media might have appealed ... but it really has always been biology.