

Being a Christian in Research

Although research can encompass a broad range of activities within the different disciplines, there are common themes that unite most researchers. Research involves exploring aspects of creation – either natural or human – and generating new knowledge or perspectives. Most researchers worry about funding, maintaining positive collaborations, how to report their results and where or how their research should be conducted. In this competitive environment Christians face the challenge of conducting excellent research whilst also remembering their calling to honour God, and finding time to balance family and church life.

About the Authors

Helen Moore is currently researching circadian rhythms in the zebrafish brain as part of her PhD at University College London. This has involved collaborating with a lab in Hong Kong, where she lived for 6 months. She graduated from Surrey University with a BSc in biochemistry. Helen was raised a Christian and has always enjoyed asking questions about faith and science. She enjoys teaching, running, and blog writing.

Simon Kolstoe has recently moved from UCL to the University of Portsmouth where he is establishing a research group in structural biology. He is also vice-chair of an NHS research ethics committee and has an interest in bioethics. He regularly struggles with the challenge of balancing his research activities with being a father to two boys, active in his local church, and a committee member of Christians in Science.

Research as a Calling

Research as Worship and Compassion

The world is a remarkable place and humans have an innate desire to discover how it works. For some this might be cast in the light of adaptation: where a better understanding of the physical and human environment improves the ability to predict and control nature. However others, including Christians, have a more glorious view. Firstly, all Christians are creationists in the sense that they believe in a transcendent and immanent God who both wrote the book of creation and sustains it by his presence. Discovering new facts about creation can therefore be viewed as an act of worship as we “*think God’s thoughts after him*” (to quote Johannes Kepler).

Secondly, as research leads to new technologies, medicines, or a better understanding of how human society works, research can also be viewed as an act of compassion and love towards other humans. It is therefore not surprising to find that many Christians who take

seriously the dual call to worship God and be compassionate towards others also feel a call to become researchers.

Research as Ministry to the Church

When God finished his creation he “*saw that it was good*” (Genesis 1:31). He also commanded man to become a steward of his good creation (Genesis 1:28 & 29). However man sinned and caused evil to enter creation. Christians find themselves in the position of being stewards, but over a creation that contains disease, war and human suffering. From a secular viewpoint such evils can be mitigated through research and education. Christians can go one step further by combining knowledge derived from God’s book of nature, with knowledge found in God’s book of scripture.

By combining truths from both spheres Christians are in the best position to minister effectively to the fallen world. Unfortunately, although most Christians are familiar with the book of scripture, fewer are as conversant with the book of nature. Sadly this sometimes results in well meaning but naïve Christians presenting a distorted view of the gospel that is logically incompatible with other known truths about the natural world. It is therefore vital that Christians respond to the calling of research and excel in an area that is often wrongly seen as being entirely secular. Not only does this provide a powerful witness to the secular world, it also provides an important perspective that is needed for the healthy life of the Christian community.

Common Challenges for the Christian Researcher

The challenges facing a lone researcher pouring over manuscripts in a library are likely to be quite different from those facing a researcher working in a large multidisciplinary team, or a researcher working in governmental or industrial environments. As such, the best support for any Christian researcher is to meet other Christians who are in similar situations - perhaps through Christian workplace organisations, groups of people from similar professions who attend local churches, or more nationally through organisations such as Christians in Science.

The following discussion is no substitute for building relationships with other Christian researchers; however it does try to highlight three common challenges that face many Christians who work in a generic research environment.

The Challenge of Integrity

Although integrity is an issue that faces all Christians, there are specific challenges in this area that face those who work in research.

One problem is an abundance of people who are clever and hard working, but a lack of funds and permanent job positions. This means that to progress in a career people have to plan carefully by calculating which projects they think will lead to funding, deciding on which papers they should (or shouldn't) be publishing, deciding on the collaborators they should (or shouldn't) be working with, and perhaps even being devious with information gleaned from 'confidential' reviewing of papers and grant applications. Such choices can lead to a cutthroat attitude: *"beware of the academic – although they seem friendly from the front they might be holding a dagger behind their back!"* OK, so this sentiment might be a bit extreme, however many careers have been made and broken by a certain level of ruthlessness in pursuing projects or funds, and in the devious management of colleagues, students or research staff.

The challenge for Christians is how to survive in such an environment whilst upholding Christian principles of behaviour and love towards others. Without a sense of divine purpose it could be quite tempting to see successful research as based entirely upon luck: being in the right place at the right time, doing the right technique that provides the right results for the right journal, or grant, or committee, or management review... Such a view can lead to an attitude of fatalism as yet another grant gets rejected or an attitude of cynicism as we start to view the funding system as nothing more than a lottery where any behaviour can be considered acceptable if it weighs the odds in our favour. But if as Christians we believe that God is ultimately in control, and has a plan or purpose for our lives, we must try to look at the system in a slightly different way. Having a sense of God's providence is not an excuse to be lazy or not pursue opportunity, but instead gives us a hope for the future and reassurance that God is in control. Often the closing of one door is God's way of telling us we should be moving in a different direction. We do not need to be afraid of our colleagues or competitors and neither should we feel a need to manipulate or use other people. God will provide so long as we remain personally faithful even if the provision is in completely unexpected areas. If God's will is for us to succeed in research we will do so whilst maintaining our Christian integrity.

The Challenge of Time

Researchers have to be creative in how they use their time. Research is not a nine-to-five job and every day can be quite different. Unfortunately as many experiments fail, or seemingly fruitful paths result in dead ends, it is inevitable that researchers are tempted to take on more work than they can manage.

Research can also be quite difficult to put down once the lab or office door has been closed, and it is not uncommon to find researchers working at night, on weekends, or on family holidays. Although in one sense this is a lifestyle choice, we also need to be mindful of

priorities. From a Christian perspective work should only ever come in third place after God and family. Unfortunately the competitive nature of research means that particularly early in a career people are forced to follow short-term jobs, sometimes in a number of countries, making it difficult to maintain relationships or start a family. The problem can become more acute once marriage and children arrive on the scene. Many successful researchers have sacrificed family lives or relationships in the pursuit of the next grant, paper or promotion. As Christians we should be mindful of our wider priorities and remember that no number of *Nature* papers will replace the need for a healthy relationship with God and our families.

The Challenge of Community

There is a widespread public misperception (for various historical reasons) that religion and excellent intellectual achievement are not compatible. Sadly many sectors of the church are guilty of spreading this misconception through ill-conceived responses towards issues like origins and climate change.* Christian researchers are in the unique position of providing both a Christian voice in the research community and a scholarly voice in the church. This can bring many challenges as we face up to misconceptions based upon ignorance of either Christianity (in our workplace) or science/academia (in our churches). One temptation is to get angry, dismissive or become aloof, however these attitudes will only ever create heat rather than light. In both our professional and church communities we need to follow the example of Jesus in pursuing valuable relationships, meeting people where they are, and perhaps more importantly trying not to become too focused on single issues. If our calling really is into research, God will equip us with the tools to find favour and prosper among all those we meet.

Simon Kolstoe and Helen Moore

**More information about these topics can be found in the other CiS 'Being a Christian in...' leaflets and in the suggested further reading.*

FURTHER INFORMATION

Articles:

The Faraday Papers on Science and Religion: www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/faraday/Papers.php

Books:

Alexander, D., *"Creation or Evolution: Do we Have to Choose?"* (2008) ISBN 978-1854247469

Collins, F., *"The Language of God"* (2007) ISBN 978-1847390929

Berry, R. J., (ed), *"Real Scientists, Real Faith"* (2009) ISBN 978-1854248848

Alexander, D. and White, R. S., "*Beyond Belief: Science, Faith and Ethical Challenges*" (2004)

ISBN: 978-0745951416

Bookless, D. and Frost, R., "*Planetwise*" (2008), ISBN 978-1844742516

Useful Websites:

Christians in Science: www.cis.org.uk

ASA, CiS's US sister organisation: www.asa3.org

Biologos: biologos.org/

Be Thinking: www.bethinking.org/science-christianity/

The Faraday Institute: www.faraday-institute.org

Test of Faith: www.testoffaith.com

A Rocha: www.arocha.org

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