

2000 CiS Conference Report

Time, Eternity and the Cosmos

The annual Conference of Christians in Science was held at St. Pauls Church Robert Adam St. London W1 on October 7th. The theme was Time, Eternity and the Cosmos. 106 people attended from a wide range of disciplines including theological and science students, practising scientists, ex-scientists, science teachers and retired scientists. The chief imbalance was the sex ratio with women making up only 10% of the total, perhaps a reflection of CiS membership.

The first paper was given by Justin Marston, Chair of Christian Students in Science who used his study of Hebrew to examine the views of the Jewish people and the early Christians on the relationship of God to the Creation and to concepts of time and Eternity. He emphasized that a purely literalistic understanding of the Bible narratives would not have been appropriate for the ancient Hebrew scholars who were addressing issues totally unrelated to those of 20th century scientists. This paper has just been published in *Science & Christian Belief* 12.(2).127-150.

He was followed by Ernest Lucas, vice principal of Bristol Baptist college. He explored the early chapters of Genesis from the perspective of a present day theologian, drawing out their literary structure and showing that the language used is similar to that used in religious liturgies. He argued that the Creation stories could be regarded as a polemic showing the Creator God as far superior to the gods depicted in other contemporary accounts where creation arises out of conflict between gods. The Genesis stories have no element of dualism. He went on to discuss the Biblical Flood which has similarities with Mesopotamian flood stories; here again the major concerns of the text are religious and social rather than geological.

Geology came into its own in Bob White (Professor of Earth sciences Cambridge)'s presentation. He described current views on the age and development of the earth and his computer simulation of continental drift caught everyone's attention. A theme which emerged several times during the day was the amazing creativity of God who through cataclysms and long continued processes prepared and sustained the world in such a state that we could inhabit it and have a relationship with himself.

People were now ready for a break and an excellent cold lunch was provided. The continuous heavy rain kept most indoors but there was plenty of space for catching up with friends or questioning the speakers.

After lunch John Polkinghorne masterfully guided us through the complexities of time, multiple dimensions, predestination and free-will, making all these imponderables seem quite manageable. He insisted that God was omniscient about past and present but (more controversially) did not know the future. He was followed by Tony Stone who explained his ideas on the differing sorts of time distinguished by the words *chronos* (space-time) and *kairos*, the latter being more fundamental and concerned with events ordered as past-present and future.

Finally Cambridge theoretical Physicist Paul Shellard took us back billions of years, with brief pauses on the way to explain what was happening. We reached one hundredth of a second after the Big Bang and continued back to 10⁻⁴³ seconds, before which nothing is known. Throughout this journey he showed how the events happening were so finely balanced to enable existence to be possible and again we marvelled at the way the Creation produced a world just right for human habitation.

There were opportunities for questions after each talk and a final session of open discussion. Questions ranged from coping with cynical young scientists to the anthropic principle and freewill in relation to chaos theory and relativity. All agreed that modern developments in physics and astronomy could not of course prove the existence of God but by no means made Him unnecessary. All the wonders of the universe were put into perspective by the Empty Tomb.

The day was chaired by Derek Burke who kept the proceedings running smoothly and contributed to the positive and friendly atmosphere of the debate. It was good to hear all this amazing science discussed humbly in a Christian context.