

MIND, MACHINES & MAJESTY: The Boundaries of Humanity

CiS Annual Conference London: 4th November 2006

The magnificent surroundings of St Peter's Church, home to the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity, which is located some 50 metres from the bustle of Oxford Street, was the venue for this year's fully booked conference. CiS chairman, Professor John Bryant introduced the day's proceedings before handing over to the first of five speakers, Revd. Dr John Searle, anaesthetist-turned-Anglican vicar and currently involved in theological education. John's talk entitled: *What it means to be made in the image of God*, provided a very helpful introduction to the conference theme. Focussing on the creation accounts in *Genesis* 1 and 2 he explained how men and women who bear the *imago Dei* are much more than a product of their genes and behaviour. Tragically since *Genesis* 3 that image has been corrupted, resulting in all the dysfunctional activities of humankind. However, as Christians we have hope in full restoration, a process that has already begun with the life and work of Jesus.

Dr Calum MacKellar, Director of the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics in Edinburgh, was the next up to speak, his title: *Embryonic, fetal and post-natal animal-human mixtures*. Beginning with ancient Greek mythology and the centaur (half human-half horse) and the minotaur (half bull-half human), he pointed out our long-standing fascination with chimeras. In the near future, with the rapid developments in biomedical technology, the myths could become reality. Unlike an early failure to make a human/chimpanzee hybrid by Soviet scientists responding to Stalin's requirement for *a new invincible human being insensitive to pain, resistant and indifferent about the quality of food they eat*, the techniques to turn such science fiction into fact may already be here. Calum warned us that the ethical debate is lagging some way behind scientific developments and often all that can be done is to call for a moratorium on particular avenues of research to allow the ethics 'to catch up' (see www.schb.org.uk). The final talk before lunch on *Genetics and humanity* was given by Dr Graeme Finlay, a cell biologist from Auckland. Graeme took us through a number of examples of gene generation (human three-colour vision) and degeneration (loss of function of 60% of our olfactory receptor genes) and related this to the role of God in creation.

The two speakers in the afternoon, in true scientific fashion, conducted experiments on their audience. Professor of Psychology at Birmingham University, David Booth, presented in quick succession 15 random words and asked us to write down all we could recall immediately after the disappearance of the last word from the screen. The total number of people remembering each word was plotted against the order of presentation and it was pleasing to note that we were a normal group who displayed the characteristic inverted U-shaped curve. David used this experiment on memory as a platform for his talk: *Minds, mechanisms and made free*. The final speaker was Professor Bill Newsome (Neurobiology; Stanford University CA) who in *Mechanism, mind and choice* looked at neuroscience's 'hard question' - consciousness. Beginning with the American philosopher Thomas Nagel's most famous quote: *What is it like to be a bat?* [*Phil Rev* 83: 435-450, 1974], Bill described his electrophysiological experiments on visual processing and reproduced one of the tests ('up-down dots tracking') on the screen to see if we were as good as his monkeys. He went on to explain that while our reductionist approach may give a detailed understanding of the biophysics of a single ion channel in the neurone, we know virtually nothing about how that translates into complex behavioural processes and as for consciousness...?

In addition to the questions put to individual speakers immediately after their talks, we had the opportunity to quiz them further in the panel discussion. It is difficult to summarise this 45-minute session so I shall just mention the point made by John Bryant, that our science should be about trying to *restore* the divine image of God in all creation, not to *deface* it further. As scientists it is important to investigate problems with humility and respect for these infinitely complex and God-created systems. As Graeme Finlay said in his concluding remarks, Christians know that the true image of God is defined in Jesus. The conference closed with a summing up and prayer from John Searle, whose hope (and ours) was that science will always be used for good purposes.

My thanks to all those who contributed to the discussion, whether from the front or through questions from the floor; to our Chairman for skilfully steering us through the day and keeping us to time and for the excellent organisation by all the 'behind the scenes' workers.

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