

PréCis

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an occasional communication from *Christians in Science*

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CONFERENCE 2001

Just over 100 people gathered at St. Paul's Robert Adam Street for a day which was generally agreed to have been a real success, with many saying afterwards that it had opened their eyes and helped their thinking. As scientists we claim to be 'modernists' seeing the world objectively and rationally, but society is increasingly 'postmodern', viewing the world (and science) as subjective with conclusions depending on external factors. By unravelling these everything can be 'deconstructed'. Here are some edited extracts from Bob Carling's report which is available in full on the website.

The day started with an introductory overview by Roger Trigg of what constitutes a Christian basis for scientific reasoning, pointing out that the origins of modern science were founded on the theology of the world being ordered and rational and that it is intelligible to mankind – assumptions largely taken for granted by scientists but questioned by postmodernists.

John Taylor's paper was a critique of the postmodernist's agenda of relativism, deconstructivism and anti-rationalism, making the substantive point that truth when confused with belief, i.e. that 'truth is only consensus', is problematic

Trigg's warning of a false dichotomy (the rejection of postmodernism does not mean an advocacy of a return to modernism) was echoed at several points by Don Carson. He warned that, although the original roots of deconstructivism are withering in France, this does not mean that postmodernism is waning – nor that modernism is dead. This has profound implications for evangelism, e.g. on the use of the word 'sin', on biblical exegesis, on the encouragement of the increase in superstition in culture. Carson emphasized that we must also recognize that it is a fundamental shift in 'world view'. What is the solution? He had two main suggestions to debunk

the postmodernism agenda: first, we need to *work hard* at understanding the trends and become better communicators – because no truth (even culturally transcendent truth) can ever be articulated in a culturally transcending way. Second, although postmodernist writers accept the intrinsic contradictions of their position – and even revel in them – we can challenge them at a deeper level by exposing their false antithesis: either we can know absolutely (which is self evidently impossible) *or* we die in a sea of relativism. The 'or' is the key here, but we must be clear about the terms.

Colin Russell's historical perspective on science and values made the distinction between positivistic scientism (as argued by the likes of Richard Dawkins) and 'science is nothing but an epiphenomenon' of the postmodernists. Warning us of overreaction to either, he reminded us of the construction of scientific theories as an intensely 'human' experience, rooted as much in inspiration, emotional feelings and in political and fiducial concerns as in logical deductions. But despite the human element and its progressive nature, we do in fact get somewhere with science; he quoted John Polkinghorne "If science cannot get to absolute truth then it gets to a pretty good verisimilitude".

With a realistic and down to earth 'view from the lab bench', Denis Alexander drew attention to the roots of science in Christian thought and its implications in the context of the assumption of honesty and truth-telling when reporting the data of science via the primary literature publishing process – hence the furore when fraud is detected. He also had much to say on other aspects of the practice of science: the 'communal' nature of science (peer review, teams working on a common problem, the international assumptions about repeatability of experiments); the search (and underlying assumption) of 'coherence'; the ability/inability of obtaining 'refuting' data, in both principle and practice, to test scientific theories – each having parallels in the assessment of Christian beliefs.

Complementary to Alexander's approach, Derek Burke's gave an assessment of the outworking of science in the public reaction to the issues of BSE, MMR and GM crops. One major outcome has been a distrust of scientists, particularly in the area of risk communication. By its very nature, the assessment of risk loses arguments in the media and general culture because zero risk is never attainable.

Furthermore, we must recognize the adversarial nature of much of media reporting – opposing points of view are often the format used even if there is consensus. The solution is much more openness in the way we present our science.

Next year's conference on 'How does God act in the world?' is scheduled for September 28th 2002

A northern conference?

Should we hold our conference in different parts of the country? The recent London venue is inconvenient for those in the North but with many venues in the North a daytrip from the south or west becomes daunting. Birmingham would be a possibility and we have met there in the past. One suggestion is that we should have two conferences every year, one in the north, the other in the south. An autumn one and perhaps a spring one? This would have to wait till 2003 to be implemented. Let me know your views and suggestions, particularly if you live in the north.

CISE

John Bausor has produced the Newsletter for ten years and has provided an amazing amount of relevant material. He said some time ago that he could no longer continue to do this. Efforts to recruit a successor have been unsuccessful so sadly the December issue will be the final one. Many thanks to John for all the work he has put in over the years.

Media polarization

Derek Burke reminded us in his paper at this year's conference that when ethical dilemmas arise the media prefer confrontational approaches, which tend to give a distorted view of the truth. Even so there are often opportunities for those with expert knowledge to put forward a balanced view and as Christians we all have a responsibility to do this. We need not match Denis Alexander's recent contribution to the Testing God series on Channel 4 but openings come up on both Christian and secular local radio programmes. The secretary needs a list of names and topics which can be passed on as appropriate when media researchers who have

discovered our website ask for an informed Christian opinion. Let me know what you can offer or names of those who would be suitable.

The Website

Is our most important shop window. John McKeown is the webmaster but we need someone to review it regularly and make suggestions for its continual updating. Contributions of articles, reviews of books, television programmes etc. are all welcome.

American Scientific Affiliation.

The annual meeting is in Malibu, California from August 2-5 2002. The theme is Christian Pioneers in Science and papers and posters are called for. Deadline for papers: January 10th. More information is available at www.asa3.org

Research News and Opportunities in Science and Theology, a monthly newspaper linked to the Templeton Foundation, included in a recent issue an article by Derek Burke on the UK groups supporting Science and Christianity. CiS members should be able to subscribe at a discount. For more information contact Janet Calhoun on rnews@enc.edu

Recently published

and relevant to many members: [Reconciling Science and Religion. The debate in early 20th century Britain.](#) by Peter Bowler (Chicago University Press 2001).

Restoring Eden

is a Christian environmental stewardship non-profit organization. Their vision is to make environmental stewardship a core value in the Christian community. We recently received this request:

“Restoring Eden will be publishing short essays describing ways in nature can build our faith. We call this “W3”- the wonder, wisdom, and whimsy of God revealed in Creation. The goal is to help Christians to understand the intrinsic value of nature and to feel theologically safe in feeling awe and love for it. We would greatly appreciate you, as Christians in the science profession, to contribute short essays to share with our members and to use in outreach. Send to: PO Box 877 La Center, WA 98665

This Precis includes a number of requests for information. Please reply to the Secretary, 4 Sackville Close Sevenoaks, Kent. TN14 3QD or cberry@centrenet.co.uk