

PréCiS

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an occasional communication from
the secretary of *Christians in Science*

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An interview with John Bryant

(A longer, unedited version of this interview is available at www.cis.org.uk)

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.

What have you been doing until now?

After a BA and a PhD at Cambridge, I was a post-doc at the University of East Anglia, after which I got a lectureship in Biochemistry at Nottingham and then at Cardiff, where I spent 11 years. I came to Exeter to take up the new Chair in Cell and Molecular Biology, and I've been here ever since. I have recently taken early retirement in order to concentrate more on writing and speaking, but I am still involved in research and do some teaching.

What do you do for fun?

I love the great outdoors - mountains, marshes, bird watching - cricket, running, music; I am a devoted fan of Crystal Palace FC. Marje and I enjoy films, theatre and travel. I think that's probably enough fun for now!

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

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. 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.

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 ['Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life']).

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 was astonished (and I do mean astonished) to receive the invitation to become Chair. 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.

CiS Development Officer

Dear CiS members,

Ruth Bancewicz took up the post of CiS Development Officer only a few months ago and yet she has achieved so much in that short time, it is almost as if she has been with us for much longer. Those of you who have met her will have been impressed by her enthusiasm, sense of humour, and ability not only to generate good ideas but also to act on them. Ruth very quickly identified the priorities and set about working on them. She has already established a good personal network, raised our profile, made new links and set up new opportunities of various sorts for our organisation. We might ask 'However did we manage without a Development Officer?' But that raises another question, namely 'Will we in the future be forced to manage without a Development Officer?' As I said when we advertised the post, it is a venture in faith. We have enough money in our reserves to employ Ruth for two and a half days per week for two years. It would be really good if she could work for three days per week and if we were able to think longer term than two years ahead. If Ruth's activities lead to an increase in our membership that will certainly help. However, we need to think of other ways of securing our financial position, especially but not only in respect of this post. Your committee will be discussing this matter but I would also like to ask members for their ideas, their prayers, and, if they think it appropriate, their cash.

With best wishes,
Yours sincerely,

John Bryant

News from CiS local groups

Leeds

A group will be starting in Leeds this spring. Contact Richard Dimery at richard@dimery.com for more details.

Cambridge

5.30pm Thurs 10th March 2005, Prof. Andrew Briggs

"Nanotechnology: Grey goo or Great God?"

See <http://www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/cis/> for details.

Oxford

This autumn we launched a local CiS group based at St Andrew's Church, North Oxford, where several members of CiS attend regularly. There are numerous groups around Oxford which cater for more senior members of the university who are well informed about issues of science and faith, but it seemed that there was a real need for a forum where younger scientists as well as members of the public could come to learn more about Christian perspectives on science and new technologies.

With this in mind, we arranged an evening in November with coffee and homemade cakes where Professor Andrew Briggs of Oxford University and Professor Ross McKenzie of the University of Queensland (currently on sabbatical in Oxford) gave introductory talks on the limits of science and understanding the creation stories. There was ample time for both group and open discussion. Although the meeting was only advertised at St Andrew's, about 50 turned up and feedback was extremely positive. It clearly met a need and participants were enthusiastic for the group to continue on a regular basis. The audience ranged in age from secondary school to retired, with a good number of graduates and post-docs from the sciences as well as professional people, many of whom had not studied science at all since leaving school. The two most popular requests for future talks were the big bang and stem cells.

This term we advertised the meeting more widely and by popular demand, Ross and Andrew returned to repeat their talk on Nanotechnology, first presented at the 2004 CiS conference. In the summer we hope to welcome Stephen and Catherine Blundell to talk on the Big Bang. For further information, contact Diana Briggs (dianabriggs2002@yahoo.co.uk).

Could you be the next Membership Secretary?

After nearly ten years service, our membership secretary, Pauline Williams, would like to move on to pastures new. Pauline took over the CiS membership records from UCCF in 1996, and created a new membership database, as well as taking care of all the other aspects of membership and subscriptions since then. This has been a huge job, and we would like to thank her wholeheartedly for keeping everything running so smoothly for so long.

So we are looking for a new membership secretary, to take over sometime after the membership renewal this April.

The membership secretary deals with:

- New members forms and welcome packs
- Membership renewals (April)
- Maintaining membership and speakers directory
- Sending the address list to Packpost for mailings
- Any enquiries regarding membership

It is difficult to predict how much time this will take, with the new commercial mailing company doing the mailings, and membership renewals now taking place in April. At the moment it seems that the job could fill at least one day a week. Pauline would be on hand to help "handover" and help with technical problems, and others would be available to lend a hand at busy times.

So if you have some time to spare, or know someone who would enjoy the job, contact Caroline Berry at cberry@centrenet.co.uk or 4, Sackville Close, Sevenoaks, Kent TN13 3QD.

Pauline would be happy to talk it over, just e-mail subscriptions@cis.org.uk

The C.S. Lewis Foundation, committed to advancing Christian scholarship and the arts throughout the mainstream of higher education and the culture at large, is preparing for our sixth triennial C.S. Lewis Summer Institute in England.

The 2005 meetings will be held July 24-30 in Oxford and July 31-August 6 in Cambridge, on the theme *Making All Things New: The Good, The True and the Beautiful in the 21st Century*. Part of this two-week event is the Academic Conference in which juried scholarly papers are presented. Scholars may attend for either one or both weeks and the organizers are calling for papers to be submitted. More information on www.cslewis.org.

New Developments...



After four months as the CiS development officer, I have had some very positive responses, especially in reply to the questionnaire sent out before Christmas.

I have received nearly 190 completed forms, which is far more than I expected, thank you! So many people sent encouraging messages, ideas and offers to get involved in different ways. In the next few months I'll be following some of those ideas up.

Over 30% of people found out about CiS through personal recommendation. This shows that our most effective instruments for growth are our existing members. Our new leaflet should be sent out in the next mailing, so please pass them on to a friend or colleague that you know would be interested in CiS.

68% asked for resources for non-scientists, and this has been flagged up as a real need as I meet people elsewhere. This is going to be a real priority as we reorganize the web site in the next couple of months.

Many people have expressed an interest in being a member of, or running a local group. You may find the account of the newly formed Oxford group inspiring!

Some people have also expressed an interest in working with students. Some Christian groups have representatives in the main university towns, who keep in contact with students and visit student groups during the year. I would love to set up this kind of network for CiS, as it is the people living in the local area who are able to help students most, with knowledge of local churches, and Christians in different university departments. If you would like to get involved in this, please let me know.

In December I moved into my new office, so you can now contact me at:

St Columba's-by-the-castle Episcopal Church, 14 Johnston terrace, Edinburgh, EH1 2PW. Tel: 0131 466 6827 or 0781 687 3515. E-mail ruthb@cis.org.uk

Please get in touch if you have any more ideas or comments,

Ruth Bancewicz

CiS Northern Conference, Leeds, March 19th 2005



'He also made the stars.'

Book now on the form enclosed.

CiS London Conference: October 1st 2005

A joint conference with the Victoria Institute and the John Ray Initiative on

"A Christian Framework for Sustainability"

Speakers include Sir John Houghton FRS, Sir Ghillelan Prance FRS, and Sir Brian Heap FRS and economist Donald Hay. Dave Bookless of A'Rocha UK will give a theological overview. More details in due course but put the date in your diary now.

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Christ and the Cosmos, one of the fellow organizations mentioned in our prayer diary, was set up in 1987 and focused on an annual weekend consultation, the comprehensive proceedings of which appeared wonderfully soon after the conference. It has now merged with the Science and Religion Forum. (www.sforum.org)

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Change to subscription renewal system

This is related to the new mailing system. At present renewals are staggered throughout the year but with our new mailing agents it will be more efficient if the renewal forms are sent out in a batch once a year. We propose to make subscriptions go onto an annual basis starting from April 2005. Those whose membership renewal becomes due in or after September 2004 will have FREE membership until April 2005 when they will be expected to pay their subscription. Renewal notices will be sent with the general mailing. *As usual, donations are always welcome.*

If you become concerned that the journal and newsletters are not reaching you or others please let me know at:

cberry@centrenet.co.uk or

4, Sackville Close, Sevenoaks, Kent TN13 3QD.

Or contact *Pauline Williams* at:

PaulineAWilliams@aol.com or

The Coach House, Eagle Hall, Swinderby, Lincoln LN6 9HZ.