

## 2001 CiS Conference Report

# Can we be sure about anything? Questions of truth in Science and Christianity

*We are grateful to Bob Carling for some of his personal reflections on this day conference which was attended by just over 100 people*

Postmodernism prevails in popular culture - with films, novels, and magazine/newspaper/web articles exploring themes of 'truth' and it is likely to do so for the foreseeable future. However, there are many scientists who are not aware of the full extent of its influence, a factor which made this conference particularly worthwhile for many participants.

The day started with an introductory overview by Roger Trigg [1] 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.

He warned of a false dichotomy: between modernism, that led to the severe naturalism of the logical positivists/Vienna circle, i.e. that anything not logical is illusory; and postmodernism, which questions the very basis of rationality and the existence of 'truth' - i.e. Christians must not fall into the trap of fighting postmodernism by arguing for a return to pre-modernism. Science cannot avoid a metaphysics, but, echoing the 17th century Cambridge Platonists, he emphasized that science is a path to truth not the path to truth. The key is to see science as a 'candle of the Lord'.

John Taylor's paper [2] 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. All very useful, especially for those of us who have uncritically and unwittingly absorbed the postmodernism agenda. However, although Taylor and Trigg thus dismissed postmodernism, it seems to me that there is a great danger in simply 'postmodernist bashing' - it is increasingly being seen as an easy straw man to knock down.

Although they rightly pointed out its internal inconsistencies, what remains is twofold:

(i) an agenda on how best to engage with those heavily influenced in culture by postmodernism, i.e. a way of convincing folks influenced by postmodernism to accept the legitimacy that 'truth' is important and that their 'inconsistency' is in fact a bad thing - when in fact they revel in the supposed freedom of accepting 'inconsistency' and the lack of 'truth'; and

(ii) the vital need to work on a construction of a convincing alternative to postmodernism (and modernism of course), based perhaps on some of the principles of Trigg's 17th century Cambridge platonists, in turn based on recovering biblical perspectives.

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 the paper by Don Carson [3]. He warned that, although the roots of deconstructivism are withering in France, this does not mean that postmodernism is withering - nor even that modernism is dead. This has profound implications for evangelism, e.g. on the use of the word 'sin', its impact on biblical exegesis, its encouragement of the increase in superstition in culture. Carson emphasized that we must also recognize that it is a fundamental shift in 'world view'.

So what is the solution? He had two main ones whereby we might demonstrate the debunking of 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 live with the inherent contradictions of their position - and even revel in them - we can challenge them at a deeper level, i.e. that we can challenge their false antithesis, i.e. that either we can know absolutely (which is self

evidently impossible) or we die in a sea of relativism. The 'or' can be challenged here, but only if we are clear about the terms that we use and how they are used by those to whom we are communicating.

Colin Russell's [4] historical perspective on science and values, similarly to Trigg and Taylor, made the distinction between positivistic scientism (of the likes of Richard Dawkins) and 'science is nothing but an epiphenomenon' of the postmodernists. Warning us of overreaction to either or both, he reminded us of the construction of scientific theories as an intensely 'human' experience, rooted as much in sudden inspiration, emotional feelings and in political and fiducial concerns as in logical deductions. What he considered therefore is the question: in what sense is 'relativism' true in science? One mistake is to assume that despite the human fallibility element in science and its progressive nature, we do in fact get somewhere with it: 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 [5] also alluded to the roots of science in Christian theology, e.g. in the context of the assumption of honesty and truth-telling in reporting the data of science via the primary literature publishing process - hence the furore when fraud is detected. He also had much that is useful 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);, i.e. the way in which it can go on absorbing data with increasing confidence that it is largely correct, with the coherence of a theistic world view which, while not complete, is sufficient to encourage total commitment to it.

Interestingly, again echoing other papers at the conference about the complicated way in which postmodernism is affecting science, Alexander referred to a straw poll of his laboratory colleagues about whether they knew about postmodernism - to which most said nothing, although Alexander in answer to the question of whether it is in fact affecting them, said that it was because it is affecting us all in general culture (although probably not - yet - in terms of an effect on science funding).

Complementary to Alexander's paper, Derek Burke's [6] paper was an assessment of the practical nature of things - that of the reaction by the public to the issues of BSE, MMR and GM crops. One major problem is the distrust of scientists, particularly in the area of the communication of risk. 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 - where opposing points of view are often the format used even if there is consensus. The solution is much more openness in science.

There followed a short panel discussion with questions from the floor and people departed generally better equipped to make positive contributions to discussions with colleagues.

---

1 Philosophy, University of Warwick, and author of *Philosophy Matters*, Blackwell, 2001.

2 Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture, Regent's Park College, Oxford.

3 Trinity Divinity School, Illinois USA

4 Visiting Research Professor of History of Science and Technology at the Open University