

## ROSS McKENZIE

# Guest Editorial

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### Science and theology in the non-Western world

Recently I had the privilege of giving two lecture courses on science and religion in India, together with the Editors, Denis Alexander and Rodney Holder. This wonderful and challenging experience stimulated the following tentative thoughts about the issue of science and Christianity in non-Western contexts.

Major shifts are occurring in the composition and leadership of the global church; these shifts have been characterised as a shift from the North to the South.<sup>1</sup> The social contexts of Christianity can be distinctly different in the North and the South. One must beware of stereotypes and oversimplifications. Broadly speaking, in the North (largely Europe and North America) the context can be one of a materialist world-view, individualism, abundance and prosperity, health and longevity, the rule of law, efficiency, and democracy. In contrast, in the South the context is sometimes one of spirituality, family and community, scarcity and poverty, sickness and death, injustice, inefficiency, and political instability. The world of the South sometimes appears to be much closer to the world Jesus ministered in. Such profound differences must be taken into account when considering the issue of science and theology in the non-Western world. Is the issue even relevant? Isn't this largely a Western issue and preoccupation?

First, globalisation and the internet do make the issue present and relevant. Western ideas, influences and information are more readily available than ever before. During our visit to India it was disheartening to see how in that context the issue is being shaped by some of the tired old voices from the West. We were often asked questions about Richard Dawkins, Peter Atkins, Stephen Hawking, Intelligent Design objections to evolution and creationist arguments for a young earth. These voices need to be countered with the more balanced perspective that *Science and Christian Belief* so effectively represents.

Secondly, the rise of large technically educated middle classes in India and China makes the issue relevant to many. In their distinctly non-Western social contexts, how might they integrate their respect for science and technology with the claims of the Gospel? The struggle for us all is to make appropriate distinctions between the actual content of scientific knowledge, philosophical positions, technology and the ethics of the use of specific technologies.

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1 Escobar, S. *The New Global Mission: Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone*, Leicester: InterVarsity Press (2003); Jenkins, P. *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2006).

Thirdly, the church in predominantly Islamic countries can feel besieged and under pressure to be 'anti-Western', 'anti-science' and to adopt the (often) rigid and literalistic hermeneutic of the surrounding dominant Islamic culture. Such a method of reading and interpreting Scripture can rob it of its power and ultimate theological meaning and lead to an inevitable and unnecessary conflict of Christian faith with science and rational thought. The most appropriate hermeneutic is one which respects the text, the author and the original readers. This means considering the original social and cultural context. Discussions with Indian colleagues about the polytheism of Hinduism and the pluralism of modern India gave me a new appreciation of the original context of the book of Genesis. The Israelites were under pressure to conform to the religions of the surrounding nations, including Babylon. In Genesis the plan, purpose, order and powerful activity of the One True Creator God, YHWH is to be contrasted with the multitude of fickle and impotent Babylonian gods. This theological reading of the text transcends issues about particular scientific theories of the modern era.

In both North and South there is a need to distinguish between what is cultural and what is uniquely Christian. Tragically, in the history of Christian missions this distinction has not been made often enough. These distinctions should not just relate to customs of dress and organisational structures but also to philosophical positions. Considering the relationship between science and theology in different cultural contexts may reveal the underlying presuppositions of different views, questions and emphases. In India I was challenged about how I assume that the best presentation and argument is one where I clearly define some foundational principles and then argue to my desired conclusion in a linear fashion, using examples and quotations from authorities along the way. An alternative approach I had not considered before is to give greater credence to the beauty of nature and of scientific knowledge,<sup>2</sup> and to the awesome grandeur of the Universe.

The issue of science and religion outside the West has been confused by Western writers such as Fritjof Capra (*The Tao of Physics*) who claim that modern science, and particularly quantum physics, is more consistent with Eastern mysticism than traditional Christian belief. Capra's work has been consistently criticised by physicists for its scientific and philosophical shortcomings. But, its influence endures, both inside and outside the West. There are Hindu and Buddhist apologists who attempt to use the 'new science' [relativity, quantum physics, chaos theory] against Christianity. It is claimed that Eastern religions were a crucial influence on Einstein, Heisenberg and Oppenheimer. Christianity is identified with Newton and his absolute space and time, which have been overthrown by Einstein.

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2 Chandrasekhar, S. *Truth and Beauty: Aesthetics and Motivations in Science*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1990).

Arguably, a more pressing concern than the intellectual issues associated with science and theology are ethical issues associated with the use (and misuse) of technology (especially bio and nuclear technology) in the South, often without the legislative restraints present in the North.<sup>3</sup>

We need to be wary of further Western imperialism or paternalism. It is imperative that the dialogue between science and theology in non-Western countries is not shaped by Western preoccupations and history. Although the church in the West may no longer dominate the global church in terms of numbers, growth, or energy it is certainly dominant in terms of financial resources, institutions for theological education and publications. Many non-Western churches and theological colleges are dependent on Western funding, teachers, books and materials. The false dichotomy of the creation versus evolution conflict, which dominates North American debates, is being promoted/enforced/embraced outside the West. Yet this dichotomy is arguably largely irrelevant to apologetics in non-Western contexts. Indians and Africans are not children of the Enlightenment (for better or for worse) who think in terms of an intrinsic conflict between faith and reason. Even Western trained scientists in India appear to be quite comfortable with the notion of a spiritual world and the social value of religion.

I am aware of just a few works, which have explored the issue of science and Christianity<sup>4</sup> and apologetics<sup>5</sup> from a non-Western perspective or context. We need more. Compared to the abundance of books by authors from the USA, this scarcity again reflects the significant disparity of resources in the global church. Hopefully, in a small but significant way *Science and Christian Belief* can encourage a greater dialogue on these issues and promote the work of indigenous authors.

There is much that the North might learn from the South about the limits of 'rationality', a respect and awe of nature, living with 'contradictions', and a holistic view of life. There is also a responsibility to be stewards of abundant resources and humbly to partner those from different backgrounds.

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<sup>3</sup> Ramachandra, V. *Subverting Global Myths: Theology and the Public Issues Shaping Our World*, Leicester: InterVarsity Press (2008).

<sup>4</sup> See e.g., Gosling, D.L. *Science and the Indian tradition: when Einstein met Tagore*, London: Routledge (2007); Henry, S. *The encounter of faith and science in inter-religious dialogue*, Delhi: ISPCK (2005).

<sup>5</sup> Aghamkar, A. 'Christian apologetics in the non-Western world: a South Asian perspective', in McGrath, G. & Campbell-Jack, W. *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics*, Leicester: InterVarsity Press (2006).