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Some key issues in the Science and Faith debate

The following was written by Oliver Barclay in 1987 as an introduction to a booklet of edited articles entitled 'Science and Christian Belief'. Many of these points are still relevant today and this article is reprinted here with permission.

The RSCF was started in the 1940s. The first conference included subjects that have a very modern ring. It is true that we were not then concerned with genetic engineering or environmental pollution and fresh issues in the application of sciences and technology are arising all the time and need our attention. Some of the basic issues however are the same. 'The relation between scientific and religious knowledge' was one paper at the first conference in 1944, and under another title the problem of 'reductionism' was the main part of the opening session. We were then chiefly research students doing PhDs and chose our programme to meet what seemed to us to be the issues at the time. We were almost entirely concerned with the main apologetic problem – how to present a true view of scientific knowledge and of the natural world to those who thought science and Christian faith were mutually hostile. It was the day of rising Humanism. The fall of Humanism and the rise of Marxism (another form of Humanism) represents a change that will not easily go away. Within Christian circles, there is also now a sizeable body of evangelical Christians who are scientists. They have managed to alter some of the basic attitudes which tended to rule in the 1940s and to make some limited impact upon the thinking of our generation. At the start we said we wanted to change the whole climate of thought about science and faith. Towards that rightly ambitious aim we have made only a little progress.

As the RSCF members have read and discussed more widely (in the early days particularly with the help of Professor Hooykaas), we have become aware of two things. Firstly, many of our problems go back a long way, often to the very rise of science. Secondly, there are basic issues underlying the practically pressing questions of our day and these basic issues need to be tackled first and to be tackled afresh by each new generation. Today in the RSCF we cannot sit back and leave it to the 'old guard'. There will always be need for new Christian men of science to grapple in a fresh way with the old issues and also with new issues that arise within the situation as it actually is. One of the chief things the 'old guard' can do is to show how the new issues relate to the 'basic issues' and to help to keep these in focus as the backcloth of our discussions. One other general point perhaps should be made at this juncture. We have not been very successful in popularising the ideas that have been circulated in the RSCF and it is

clearly time now that we made a better effort in this direction. Some good books have appeared from our members. If this set of papers provokes some to go and do better we shall be delighted.

What then are the basic issues? The following suggest themselves. There is still in Christian circles no widely recognised biblical view of 'nature'. What is the relationship of God to his world and how is it that we can make scientific generalisations that give us control of many aspects of it?

Following on from the first, what is the biblical view of the 'supernatural' and of 'miracles' on the one hand and of 'natural laws' on the other? Many pious Christians still have very strange ideas here and some these are very difficult to justify biblically. Non-Christians do not know what 'the church's position' is.

This leads on to the question about kinds of knowledge. Can man in principle explain everything scientifically? If not, how do we describe the limitation of scientific knowledge and how do we place religious knowledge alongside scientific knowledge? This focuses on the problems of reductionism: 'Is man a machine?' being the foremost example.

There are questions in the field of philosophy of science and related to this the question of our use of language and 'models' to describe things in both science and theology.

There is now a major discussion – as there was not in the 1940s – about the value of science and technology. A basic theological issue concerns a positive evaluation of the scientific enterprise (including the creation mandate). As against near pantheist thinkers on the one hand and the (now less confident) claims that science can solve all problems on the other, we find ourselves needing to stand up for the real but limited value of science and technology. Here the Christian voices are not united and an explicitly biblical stance is needed to counter some other Christian views, and also the popular 'existentialist' denigration of science that finds expression in some Christian and many non-Christian movements associated with the counter-culture mentality and the newly popular Christian 'asceticism'.

This last point leads into many practical questions – the environment debate, genetic engineering, the direction that scientific research should follow and so on. Each has its own inherent problems and raises specific ethical issues but the basic attitude to science and technology and to scientific and technological progress is a fundamental factor in these issues.

The science and ethics discussion has changed. The active lobby that tried to argue that ethics could somehow be based on science is not so vocal, or if it is vocal (some of the ethologists, such as Desmond Morris) does not command popular support as it once did. It has not produced a scientific ethical system that has any appeal and its impact is largely negative – criticising other ethical systems of 'scientific grounds'. Perhaps

there is a vacuum here for Christians of scientific ability to fill – not as scientists but as people who can see the limitations of science and have found that ethics has another foundation. This leads into discussion of the moral and social responsibilities of science and here we shall have to think our position as against the Marxists.

Then there are some very important issues about the Bible, which we have tended to leave on one side or to tackle only in an amateur way that does not carry weight. There are questions of the place of extra-biblical knowledge in helping us to understand the Bible and questions of how far the Bible intends to speak ‘scientifically’, but they are part of the whole question of biblical interpretation. We are sometimes surprised by the ease with which scientists tell us with assurance that a biblical passage ‘is really meant to teach us...’. At least, we are surprised when we do not agree! Scientists, of course, cannot also be experts in biblical hermeneutics, but we could read a bit more widely before we pontificate, and we could often contribute usefully to the discussion. After all, most theologians nowadays are chiefly linguists or philosophers (occasionally sociologists and amateur psychologists) rather than ‘theologians’ in the sense of dealing with biblical teaching.

All thoughtful laymen are, in the New Testament, expected to grasp biblical truth and able to contribute to a discussion of what the Bible means to say.

One of the most relevant theological questions is the scope and validity of positive apologetics. Here there have been over the last two hundred years great swings in evangelical emphases, from Paley to an almost total denial of any witness to God in his creation that we can and should point out to non-Christians. There is now a tendency to a slightly more positive apologetics but often in painfully naive ways. The lack of confidence with which we approach this question has, I suggest, had at least one serious effect. We are not often to be heard speaking of the wonder and awe that we have before God’s handiwork. When all is said and done, the Christian, but not only the Christian, must stand back in profound astonishment at the infinite ingenuity of the creation. The scientist faces this more than others as he discovers increasingly the almost unbelievable complexity of things that look simple, such as mammalian birth or genetic mechanisms or the ability of animals to live between the tide levels on a beach. We express wonder at the achievement of getting man to the moon. We have ceased to express wonder at things vastly more complex and amazing in the creation. How do we do this in the right way as scientists and as Christians?

Evolution is only one good example of some of these issues. For instance, until we have settled what we really find in the Bible and dealt with items two, three and seven and the last part of eight above, we cannot tackle the problem properly.

One final remark. If in the 1940s we took seriously the challenge of so-called 'Scientific Humanism', surely we must take equally seriously the challenge of so-called 'Scientific Marxism'. Even if we think that Marxism will decline as Humanism has done, for somewhat similar reasons, the damage is being done in the meantime and the main seat of intellectual Marxism is among the young academics in the universities both here and in Europe, though it is clever in presenting a case in a popular way to a very wide circle of people with no great education.

This is not to suggest that we need to be spending our time entirely in meeting challenges to a Christian position that happen to be currently influential. We need above all to learn to think biblically about these issues and then we shall have the weaponry to grapple with the new issues that arise. In doing that, we should quickly be able to help those uninstructed Christians who are adopting an indefensible position because they have not thought deeply about the biblical standpoint.

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