

## ANDREW HALESTRAP

# Guest Editorial

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### God and Science – Continuing Challenges and New Opportunities

It would seem that the prevailing world-view in the West is becoming increasingly opposed to religion and this is encouraged by the media coverage given to dogmatic atheists such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett and the late Christopher Hitchens. These four were collectively described in *The New Statesman* as the ‘Four Horsemen of the New Atheism’<sup>1</sup> and their influence is profound, perhaps none more so than Richard Dawkins. He preaches with great plausibility the false doctrine that science has effectively disproved God and this is accepted by many without question. Whilst readers of *Science and Christian Belief* will be well aware of the major shortcomings in Dawkins’s arguments, it cannot be denied that he is an excellent communicator. Indeed, in 2007 Richard Dawkins was listed by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world in that year<sup>2</sup> and was ranked twentieth in *The Daily Telegraph’s* 2007 list of 100 greatest living geniuses.<sup>3</sup>

The belief that religion and faith are incompatible is not helped by some well-meaning Christians who, in their desire to remain true to the authority of Scripture, dismiss mainstream scientific theories in favour of ‘Creationism’ and ‘Intelligent Design’. There is also a worrying tendency for some Christian preachers to appeal to the scientific evidence when they feel it supports their position whilst distorting or rejecting it when it does not. By way of example, cosmology with its big bang, ‘fine tuning’ and sheer immensity of the universe is often promoted as evidence for God, yet evolution, with its reliance on chance mutation and natural selection, is wrongly seen as undermining belief in God and so dismissed or even ridiculed. Yet the science behind both is equally convincing and to those of us who are mainstream scientists and accept the authority of Scripture this inconsistency, if not lack of intellectual integrity, can be incredibly frustrating. But worse than that, it can actively discourage our friends and colleagues from exploring the Christian faith: if Christians promote a false or naive view of science, why should they believe when those same Christians speak about their faith in a creator God who became incarnate in Jesus?

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1 <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2011/12/richard-dawkins-issue-hitchens>

2 [http://content.time.com/time/specials/2007/time100/article/0,28804,1595326\\_1595329\\_1616137,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/2007/time100/article/0,28804,1595326_1595329_1616137,00.html)

3 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1567544/Top-100-living-geniuses.html>

Conversely, some students come up to university as keen Christians who have been lovingly nurtured in their faith by caring and well-meaning Christian parents and church fellowships. Yet if their Christian lives have developed in the absence of balanced biblical teaching on science / faith issues some can arrive at university suspicious of science and scientists or, for those studying science subjects, with an unhealthy disconnection between their faith and their studies. Too often, as they are exposed to the intellectual rigours and new horizons that university life offers, it is their faith that is the casualty.

As I begin my term as Chair of Christians in Science, I see these issues as a major challenge that CiS as an organisation and through its members individually must be at the forefront of addressing. It is vital that we continue to explore ways of influencing the teaching in churches, Christian youth groups and student organisations to ensure that our young people develop a healthy understanding of the harmony rather than the conflict between science and Christian faith. We all have our part to play in this in our local churches but, in cooperation with other organisations and agencies, there is also scope to influence and resource the training given in theological colleges and other channels of Christian teaching. We will also need to explore the most effective ways of engaging with the emerging generation of Christian scientists, providing them with appropriate support in their early careers that will help them maintain and grow their faith in an increasingly hostile scientific environment. This is essential if we are to identify and train up the next generation of well-informed and articulate Christian speakers and writers on science and faith who will carry on this vital work in future generations.

There are undoubtedly challenges ahead, but there are reasons to believe that the rise of atheism has stalled.<sup>4</sup> Those of us who are Christian scientists have the responsibility and privilege of playing our part in aiding its demise and proclaiming the eternal truth of a creator God who can be known through both his works and his word.

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<sup>4</sup> See for example, Alister McGrath's 'The Twilight of Atheism – the rise and fall of disbelief in the modern world', Doubleday, ISBN 1844131556