

Correspondence

Dear Sir,

I am writing in response to the article by Richard Dawkins and reply by Michael Poole that appeared in *Science and Christian Belief* (7 (1), 45–58). Mr Poole wrote a very helpful reply to Dr Dawkins but I would like to comment further on Dawkins's general charge that God 'covered his tracks so brilliantly' that we see no evidence of his activity (p47).

Mr Poole implicitly presents a view of God's activity that so emphasises his immanence through the use of natural laws to achieve his purpose that the miraculous activity of God is overlooked. Yet it is the miraculous that enables us to challenge Dawkins on his own ground—the efficacy of science to explain all that there is and that has happened in the history of the world. To Dawkins, a God who works solely through natural law is indistinguishable in practice from his own position (which he finds perfectly satisfying) and to suggest such an idea is merely an unnecessary complication that Occam's razor must quickly remove.

There are doctrines that are held commonly amongst all Christians that do employ God as an 'explanatory principle'—where we assert that including the supernatural in our world view results in a more coherent explanation of the available data. The concept of creation *ex nihilo* is an example of such a doctrine. Without God there would be no creation (John 1v3). And as we observe creation itself there is something that points to deity which we culpably ignore (and hence something about creation which cannot be understood without such a deity) according to Rom. 1v20. Furthermore, as Christians we would surely argue that science cannot explain the resurrection and its historical repercussions. Here at least, we can all agree that God is an 'explanatory principle' and that Dawkins' model fails to explain the data adequately.

Of course the resurrection is not an isolated example. The Bible is full of such interventions to the natural order. God does act in history in more obvious and direct ways as well as his hidden providence. The New Testament writers seem to see such incidents as the flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Jonah etc. as essential to the Bible's historical story line (in a similar way to the resurrection accounts) and the basis and force of the theological points they make rest crucially on the historicity of these events. While such incidents have proved to be something of an embarrassment to some Christians, in my view they provide us with the only effective challenge both to those who share Dawkins' worldview (where we can discuss the evidence in a rational way) and to those who have a more post-modernist viewpoint who can be shown the objective, historical nature of Christian truth that is unique amongst world religions. If we soften the historical focus of Christian truth then we lend support to

Correspondence

Dawkin's case that we are believing in God merely for existential reasons, whereas in fact we can argue with sceptics such as Dawkins on the objective basis of whether his views or the model of the world history found in the bible make better sense of the available data.

In our understandable desire to avoid 'god-of-the-gaps' I fear we have created what Dawkins rightly criticises as an unchallengeable dogma where God's activity is so carefully hidden as to be undetectable and where biblical revelation makes no difference to the way we view world history. That makes our position intellectually unassailable but also tragically irrelevant to those who believe in the efficacy of science to explain all that there is, and also to those who question whether there is any objective truth that can be known at all. If we adopt such a stance we will see the end to a conflict model between science and Christianity but only at the cost of presenting a god much smaller than any 'god-of-the-gaps'. We owe it to the future evangelisation of our society to take up the challenge of dealing with the conflicts with modern accepted knowledge that a biblical history presents. That is a task that will require all the expertise of scientifically trained Christians to do what the church has largely avoided in the last 70 years.

Dr Stephen Lloyd
Churchill College
Cambridge
CB3 0DS

Michael Poole responds:

Dear Sir,

I am grateful to Dr Lloyd for amplifying the important role of miracles in Christianity, something which received little attention in my written debate with Richard Dawkins.

In writing I was faced with the difficulty of making brief responses to a huge variety of issues which Dawkins had raised. Consequently, since both my articles were already long, I confined myself to one aspect of the matter of miracles by commenting on Dawkins' use of 'probability' in his assertion that 'miracles are not supernatural, but are part of a spectrum of more-or-less improbable natural events'. In another place I replied to his idea that the universe should contain 'traces—evidence of His involvement', by affirming that the whole universe constitutes the 'traces'. It is not that, if God didn't exist, the universe might be somewhat different, but that if there were no God there would be no universe.

However, in rebutting the notion of a 'God-of-the-gaps' I had no intention of leaving the impression of holding a position which 'implicitly presents a view of God's activity that so emphasises his immanence . . . that

Correspondence

the miraculous activity of God is overlooked.' The evidential role of miracles is important and I replied to Dawkins' comment that I appeared 'to be at best equivocal on the role of evidence in evaluating theological truth' by saying that 'I should have thought my quotation of Bruce made it abundantly clear that I count evidence as of fundamental importance, evidence which to use Dawkins' own words, "might be respected by scientists or by lawyers or by historians" '. I also made specific reference to 'that central claim of Christianity, the resurrection of Jesus Christ'. However, on reflection I think I should probably have given more prominence to the miraculous in my article so I am pleased that Dr Lloyd wrote to redress the deficiency.

M. W. Poole
School of Education
King's College London
Cornwall House Annex
Waterloo Road
London SE1 8WA

Dear Sir,

It was with delight that I read the first three articles in the October (1995) edition of 'Science and Christian Belief'. To read the dialogue between Polkinghorne and Peacocke, followed by a most helpful comparison of their views, and those of MacKay, by Doye *et al* was truly a bonus in this issue. I have not seen their views so clearly compared and articulated; occasionally I 'winc'd' at the frankness of some of their comments! While I realise that it is a refereed article—and has therefore undergone some degree of scrutiny—I wonder if Polkinghorne and Peacocke (in the light of the first two articles) regard their positions as being accurately depicted by the authors? One can only presume that if they don't reply to the points raised they do indeed regard it as a fair representation—and criticism—of their views.

I must confess that having followed the work of MacKay and Polkinghorne, in particular, I found the article from the Cambridge CiS group most reassuring. I too pay tribute to the important contributions to the Science and Theology discussion by Polkinghorne, Peacocke and MacKay. However, I also have been a little uncomfortable over the views of Polkinghorne and Peacocke with regard to the relationship between God and time, notably, the self-limiting of God to his (lack of) knowledge of the future. It is indeed right that the wider implications of their positions are illuminated as the science-theology interface has implications for the whole of our thinking about God and not simply over the narrow issues of the nature of creation. For example, it seems to me that the efficacy of prayer is seriously weakened by limiting God to be bound by 'time' and the general sense of His 'Lordship' over his creation is also undetermined. To place God 'in time' does affect our confidence in God who is able to hear and answer prayer. The implication of this temporal self-limitation is that

Correspondence

God has the 'will' to answer our prayers but may be 'incapable' of doing so, even if the answer is consistent with his nature. The price of a more comprehensible, even a more personal, God who is 'within time' is, in my view, too high and not wholly consistent with the revealed God of scripture.

This last point also warrants further comment as there is a general tension between God's self revelation through his dealings with mankind, as portrayed in scripture and finally in Jesus, and that of a more general revelation of the Creator through his 'creation'. It seems to me that Polkinghorne and Peacocke rely too heavily on the latter, placing too much trust in the power of human reason and would appear not to pay enough tribute to the role of revelation (or indeed of religious faith). Such discussions may make *belief* in God more credible to us, but at the expense of weakening one's *faith* in God's capabilities. Within the Bible the role of prayer, prophecy, and God's calling and dealings with *individuals* speaks of both a timeless *and* a personal God who is not bound—in the temporal/spatial sense—by his physical creation. A greater emphasis on God's revealed capabilities would, in my view, redress the delicate balance. Polkinghorne speaks of an unwillingness to introduce mystery prematurely, which I can well appreciate, but it would be interesting to know how he would define a 'mature' invocation of mystery!

Dr T. J. Reddish
Department of Physics
University of Newcastle
Newcastle Upon Tyne
NE1 7RU