

SPECIAL AGENDA IV

DIOCESAN SYNOD MOTIONS

COMPATIBILITY OF SCIENCE AND CHRISTIAN BELIEF

A background paper from the Mission and Public Affairs Council

Dr Peter Capon to move on behalf of the Manchester Diocesan Synod:

‘That this Synod, concerned at the promotion of a perceived need to choose between the claims of science and belief in God:

- (a) affirm the compatibility of belief in God and an understanding of science; and
- (b) urge the House of Bishops and all dioceses robustly to promote a better public understanding of the compatibility of science and Christian belief.’

1. Introduction to the issues

- 1.1. Albert Einstein famously wrote ‘*science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind*.¹ Many books have been written on the relationship between science and the Christian faith² and a full discussion of the subject would require another one. We therefore concentrate here on providing a background for the two main issues contained in the motion: the *perceived need to choose* between the claims of science and belief in God and *compatibility* between religious belief and an understanding of science³.
- 1.2. Human beings are self-reflective creatures capable of wonder, awe and profound enquiry about themselves, the world, the universe and all that is in it. So it is in our nature to ask fundamental questions such as: why are we here? How did the universe begin and how will it end? Why am I as I am? Is there any purpose to human life? History shows that these questions have been addressed by philosophers, theologians, scientists, social commentators and artists down the ages and tested in many different social and intellectual contexts.
- 1.3. Because such fundamental questions generate all kinds of enquiry, it is not surprising that different *kinds* of answer have emerged. It has been said that science helps us ask the ‘how?’ questions and faith helps us answer the ‘why?’ questions, but this is an artificial distinction.⁴

¹ Albert Einstein, *Science, Philosophy and Religion: a Symposium*, 1941

² A short suggested reading list is appended to this paper.

³ Much of the material for this paper has been drawn from the discussion of both these issues laid out in chapter 4 of *The Search for Faith and the Witness of the Church* by the Mission Theological Advisory Group and presented to Synod in 1996. A continuing watch on the science/faith debate has been maintained by MTAG and we are grateful to the Revd Dr Victoria Johnson, herself an associate member of the Society of Ordained Scientists and a current member of MTAG, for contributing to this paper.

⁴ Pope John Paul II, ‘The Bible itself speaks to us of the origin of the universe and its make-up, not in order to provide us with a scientific treatise, but in order to state the correct relationships of man with God and with the universe. Sacred Scripture wishes simply to declare that the world was created by God, and in order to teach this truth it expresses itself in the terms of the cosmology in use at the time of the writer’ Discourse 3rd October 1981 in *Discourses of the Popes from*

- 1.4. Each can offer: answers of fact in which repeated testing and/or experience returns the same result; answers of accommodation where an accumulation of evidence points to helpful conclusions; and a series of complementary answers from different reference frames and contexts.
- 1.5. Religion and science are not confined to providing only one kind of answer. Both refine understanding and ask new questions as different contexts emerge. Indeed the traditional tools of Christian enquiry - human reason, human experience, study of the scriptures and the accumulation of Christian thought - have all contributed to the wide range of theological understanding and further enquiry we have today. It is right and proper that different strands of Christian theology should interrogate both each other and the conclusions of other disciplines, holding them accountable as to whether they are providing *good* answers to the questions people want and need to ask. It was argued in *The Search for Faith and the Witness of the Church*, that: 'Our very ability to ask questions can be seen as an act of God-seeking or God-pointing, whether we discover God through our questions or not'⁵.
- 1.6. It follows that human wondering requires *satisfying* responses: is this a 'good' answer? Christian faith does not require us to be credulous, nor does obedience to God entail abandonment of reason or will. Scripture reports people asking sharp questions, seeking clarifications from God and even arguing with God. The Virgin does not offer her *fiat* without considering why God has come to her, and then asking God a no-nonsense question about how exactly she is supposed to become pregnant (Luke 1.26-38).
- 1.7. However Christian faith is not just about simple propositions. It provides a framework for understanding origins and end-time, the value, purpose and meaning of existence and the role of human beings throughout history in God's intention. As Bishop Hugh Montefiore said: 'faith in God is different from a mere hypothesis about God'.⁶ Because of this, Christian faith offers both hope and a sense-making process for the human future. So as Christians we don't just have answers to the fundamental questions people ask; we also have confident expectations about what is to come – Christian hope. Because of this we also have a great deal to say about right action and behaviour as a way of conforming ourselves more nearly to what God wants for us. So the answers Christian faith provides do not have to be 'like' scientific answers. They may be complementary but they are not competing for 'best fit'.

2. Having to choose

- 2.1. There are a number of issues prevalent in today's society which create the impression that people have to choose between science and Christian faith and that this is a straight either/or decision. There are a number of reasons for this, but they can be grouped into two: factors which are particular to our twenty-first century society; and some less than adequate perceptions about science and Christian faith.

Pius XI to John Paul II to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences 1936-1986 (Vatican City: Pontificia Academia Scientiarum, 1986), 161-164.

⁵ *The Search for Faith and the Witness of the Church*, (Church House Publishing: 1996) p. 113.

- 2.2. First, where people become divorced from the tradition of church going, Sunday School, and religious upbringing they are likely to have had little or no encounter with the framework of Christian belief and therefore to have real difficulty with ideas active Christians may take for granted. It was argued in *Search for Faith* that if people learn to derive satisfactory answers from other disciplines *before* having any engagement with religious thought and experience then it can be more difficult for them to see how religious truth claims would make any difference⁷.
- 2.3. Second, people are often impressed by ‘scientific’ explanations, even if they have no understanding of the science involved. In marketing, for example, commodities like shampoo may be promoted by reference to wonder working chemicals or that the products are scientifically proven or tested: ‘here comes the science’.⁸ Science becomes the proof that something ‘works’. When scientific research is reported in the popular media it is often offered as a single headline result which does not reflect the complexity or ambiguities of the outcomes.
- 2.4. Third, there has been dialogue and debate between theologians and scientists throughout history and this process continues today. However, those promoting the idea that science and Christian faith are incompatible sometimes draw on those dialogues for their ammunition without acknowledging how science and Christian faith have been enriched by mutual interchange. Professor Richard Dawkins, in seeking to explicate evolutionary biology, has perhaps the highest profile in presenting this either/or situation, setting up oppositions between the Argument from Design versus evolution⁹; faith versus rationality¹⁰; Darwinism versus creationism.¹¹
- 2.5. To readers of Prof. Dawkins’s popular books who do not know very much about the issues and are faced with an ardent defender of Darwin fighting off ‘history deniers’, it is not surprising that they might feel that they are required to choose scientific accounts over faith-based ones. Yet the Church of England’s own web pages on Darwin show that the engagement and dialogue between Christian faith and evolutionary theory is not at all like that.¹² In his latest book, Professor Dawkins argues for a world that is achingly beautiful but driven by a ‘theodicy’ of the bleak and unremitting cycle of suffering, pain and death.¹³ Yet Christians have a view of the future which generates hope; we have a way of understanding that is personal and relevant; we have a way of describing reality in terms of value, purpose and meaning, and a God who really does care when and where a sparrow falls.

⁶ Hugh Montefiore, *Credible Christianity: the gospel in contemporary society*, (Mowbray: 1993), p. 18.

⁷ *The Search for Faith and the Witness of the Church*, pp.115-6

⁸ See especially commercials for L’Oreal Elvive shampoo promoted by celebrities such as Ben Affleck and Jennifer Aniston who both use this phrase.

⁹ *The Blind Watchmaker* (London: Penguin edition 1988), *Climbing Mount Improbable* (London: Viking 1996)

¹⁰ *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press 2006)

¹¹ *The Greatest Show on Earth, the evidence for evolution* (London: Bantam Press 2009)

¹² <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/darwin/>

¹³ *The Greatest Show on Earth*, chapter 12 pp. 373-396

- 2.6. In this context, when as Christians we seek to share our faith and experience with others, we face four particular challenges. First, advancements in cosmology, evolutionary biology, medical technology, mathematical theory, and genetic manipulation challenge us to give a good account of what we believe God is doing. The Mission and Public Affairs division, which carries the brief at national level for many of these issues, has provided the Synod with a range of materials, not least recent work on the human genome.¹⁴ We need to consider not only our response to scientific developments for ourselves, but to learn from the expertise and experience of Christians working in science.
- 2.7. The second challenge is a commonly held belief that science can eventually explain the universe entirely and can penetrate anything strange, mysterious or unknown if only there is enough money for research and the technology is available. So there is nothing sacred. Eventually even the ‘mind of God’¹⁵ will be revealed and reduced to a ‘scientific’ explanation. An offshoot of this can be a ‘God-of-the-gaps’ view where ‘God’ is used to fill in anything science cannot yet explain. A ‘God-of-the-gaps’ theology is not an account which Christians (or scientists) should find satisfactory: it leads to a constant diminishment of the divine which is consonant with neither Scripture nor the Christian tradition.
- 2.8. Third, Christians face the challenge of communicating clearly and persuasively to ordinary people. The churches have sometimes not helped their cause by not responding clearly. Reports in the media about creationism or intelligent design *versus* evolution can heighten the idea in the public mind that a belief in scripture or Christian teaching equals refusal of scientific evidence. We therefore need to match up Christian theological thinking and faith experience with scientific understanding in a way that ordinary people, sharing our faith, can understand. The task is not just for scientists who are Christians, but for Christians to engage with science at whatever level we encounter it.
- 2.9. The fourth challenge is the illusion of the omnipotence of ‘science’. Many people appear to believe – ‘to have faith’ as we would put it - that science will eventually solve all the ills of the world, such as disease, pain and suffering. That belief means that a faith narrative of God’s journey with human beings through a fallen creation seems to them less relevant. Faced with illness themselves or in their family, some people will trawl the internet looking for advances in science that will offer a way out of their situation, rather than face the question ‘How will I cope? Where is this all going to lead?’ Moreover, technological advance may simply mean the creation of other ills: new ways of waging war, or committing crime or damaging the planet. In all these issues concerning the advancement and application of science and technology, Christians can draw on a tradition of moral and ethical thinking and action which needs to be heard more clearly today. If Christian faith is increasingly relegated to the private sphere and excluded from the public forum, then it becomes difficult for the complementary relationship of science and faith across the range of these issues to be understood.

3. The Reality of Compatibility

¹⁴ Mark Bratton (ed), *God Ethics and the Human Genome*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2009)

¹⁵ Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (London: Bantam Press 1988) p. 175

- 3.1. The proposition that faith and science need to interrogate and assist each other is not a defensive position in which we say that no matter how far science advances Christian faith will never go away. Rather, it is a positive matter of saying that as understanding increases in all the scientific disciplines, the more likely it is that scientists will need to start thinking about God and about human faith experience. We can see this in recent thinking about healthcare, where it is increasingly acknowledged that the health of the whole person depends on taking their spiritual needs into account. One of the things we can do as Christians is to make sure that we engage with and offer support to those in the scientific community who are themselves considering fundamental questions in relation to their work. For example, in the medical world it is not just patients who need pastoral support, but doctors and nurses too.
- 3.2. As Christians we will want to go further than simply asserting compatibility between the interests of theology and an understanding of science. We will want to go on to affirm that faith has provided and continues to provide one of the key motivating and driving factors behind scientific endeavour – because that endeavour unfolds for us more and more of the amazing world God has created and of the beauty and glory of God Himself. Why would we want to understand the universe if it ultimately has no relationship to human beings? Why would we want to unravel the human genome if we do not really believe that we are ‘fearfully and wonderfully made’?
- 3.3. So science and faith offer different insights into what we know and these can powerfully enrich each other. For example, Darwin’s own attitude to belief in God and his own response to the growing tension between religion and science were far more generous than his successors allow. In a letter to J.B Innes in 1878 he wrote ‘I hardly see how religion and science can be kept....distinct’, ‘but there is no reason why the disciples of either school should attack each other with bitterness.’¹⁶ People of faith have always been at the forefront of scientific discovery and endeavour.¹⁷
- 3.4. Darwin’s own journeys of discovery, his questions about living things and how they came to be, his researches and conclusions, set in the religious context of his society and his own training do not *just* teach us about evolution, but also about a life lived among the different kinds of questions, answers and accounts offered by science and faith. Darwin’s legacy is not just for evolutionary biologists, but also for people working out what their life in science means for their faith. For many, the story is not one of separation but of *increasing* compatibility.
- 3.5. For example, Francis Collins, Director of the Human Genome Project (HGP) has publicly said: ‘*I think there's a common assumption that you cannot both be a rigorous, show-me-the-data scientist and a person who believes in a personal God. I would like to say that from my perspective that assumption is incorrect; that, in fact, these two areas are entirely*

¹⁶ Nick Spencer *Darwin and God*, (London: SPCK 2009), p124

¹⁷ A good example is Gregor Mendel, a 19th Century Augustinian priest and scientist who proposed ‘a unit of inheritance’ by which characteristics were passed on from one generation to another. This unit of inheritance was found to be DNA, discovered in 1953 by Francis Watson and James Crick.

*compatible and not only can exist within the same person, but can exist in a very synthetic way, and not in a compartmentalized way. I have no reason to see a discordance between what I know as a scientist who spends all day studying the genome of humans and what I believe as somebody who pays a lot of attention to what the Bible has taught me about God and about Jesus Christ. Those are entirely compatible views.'*¹⁸

- 3.6. There are in fact many voices holding the middle ground in a much more holistic way working to promote and affirm compatibility between belief in God and an understanding of science. Individual scientists and theologians patiently argue that science and religion can, in their complementary ways, help humankind understand more about the world, the God who created it and our purpose within it. Alister McGrath¹⁹, Celia Deane Drummond²⁰ and John Polkinghorne²¹ are just a few of the contemporary voices calling for generosity and dialogue between the two disciplines, as Darwin himself did.
- 3.7. With the rapid rate of scientific advances, it is important to encourage and develop a deeper understanding and dialogue between religion and science since both will have an important part to play in the development of humankind in the twenty first century. Developments in science may be able to help Christians understand more clearly the depth and scope of Scripture and the diversity of Christian tradition; a faith perspective may be able to help contextualise scientific discoveries and give ethical and moral guidance on future scientific programmes. Collaboration between religion and science is mutually beneficial and can provide all people with the tools to live in and learn from God's creation.
- 3.8. In responding to the motion we invite synod members to consider the following questions for practical outworking of this debate:
- How the Church of England can continue to promote and affirm the compatibility of Christian faith and science at a parish, diocesan and national level?
 - How can Christians embrace past, present and future scientific discoveries?
 - Where does the Church provide a critical dialogue partner for the ethical and moral questions which such discoveries may raise?
 - Where are the resources and materials to support this work and how can awareness among both clergy and laity can be increased?
 - How can we provide (more) support to Christians who face the challenge of working at the cutting edge of science, sometimes in a hostile cultural environment?

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Chair: Mission and Public Affairs Council
January 2010

¹⁸ Online at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/transcripts/collins.html>

¹⁹ *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*. With Joanna Collicutt McGrath. (London: SPCK, 2007).

²⁰ Professor of Theology and the Biological Sciences at the University of Chester.

²¹ Physicist and Priest-Theologian

Further Reading list

John Polkinghorne, *Questions of Truth: Fiftyone Responses to Questions about God, Science and Belief*, with Nicholas Beale; foreword by Antony Hewish (Westminster John Knox 2009)

Ian Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion*, (New York: HarperOne 2000)

C. Southgate, C. Deane-Drummond, P.D. Murray, M.R. Negus, L. Osborn, M. Poole, J. Stewart and F. Watts, *God, Humanity and the Cosmos; A Textbook in Science and Religion*, (London: T& T. Clark, Second edition 2005).

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