

# Fighting the wrong battle

Scientists who scoff at religious belief miss the point and damage their cause.

Geoffrey Cantor

When modern science began its rise in the seventeenth century, most of the key figures were convinced that its advance would greatly assist religion. For Bacon, Kepler, Boyle, Newton and many others, knowledge of the physical Universe illuminated God's creation. Therefore, through the expansion of science — knowledge of God's works — they expected humankind to come closer to God.

It is ironic that their convictions now appear so misplaced. Although their arguments continued to attract supporters in later centuries, the progress of science has, in the eyes of many, played an active role in the decline of religion. Indeed, some scientists not only assert that science and religion are totally incompatible, but claim that science was responsible for the decline of religion over the past century or two. But this claim is not supported by the evidence. Historians who have investigated why religion — more specifically, mainstream Christianity — appears to have declined in Britain point to an array of factors which have more to do with social, economic and technological changes than with either science in general or any specific scientific theory.

It has become fashionable among scientists with a high media profile to portray religion as the necessary foe of science. This is surely an unwise strategy, one that seems calculated to make scientists appear unreasonable and dogmatic. The tirades of Lewis Wolpert, Richard Dawkins and Peter Atkins also show them to have a very superficial understanding of religion — they would rightly be horrified if others displayed an equal ignorance of science — and not to have noticed that we live in a multi-faith society; that, along with atheists and agnostics, our world is populated by Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews and Christians of widely different colours, and the many people who possess religious sensibilities but do not subscribe to any organized religion. To attack soft targets in Christianity does not provide an adequate refutation of all forms of religion.

It is true that certain religious groups have been highly critical of science and impeded its advance. We have all heard reports of Southern Baptist preachers inveighing against evolution. Likewise, towards the end of the nineteenth century Roman Catholicism took an anti-science stance. Yet there is another side to the coin — religion has often provided the motivation for pursuing science. Newton and Faraday were two of the many eminent



A confusion of tongues? A babel of arguments obstructs progress across the science–religion divide.

scientists who turned to science to better understand God. They saw no conflict between God's two books — Nature and Revelation. Likewise the vicar–naturalist was a stock character in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, labouring on the local geology, flora and fauna for six days a week and treating his congregation to reflections on God's handiwork in his Sabbath sermon.

Religion has also traditionally provided people with communities, with social values and with emotional warmth — aspects of human experience that science cannot offer. Our publicity-seeking scientific clerisy would appear to want to remove these supports and offer nothing in return. Claiming to represent science through the Public Understanding of Science (PUS) initiative, these latter-day Huxleys do science a disservice. These advocates of PUS need to rethink their mission. Taking cheap and uninformed swipes at religion is hardly the best strategy to adopt when trying to encourage

people to take science seriously and become better informed about its methods and content. Likewise, they should not assume that the public at large should revere science and embrace it enthusiastically.

Those who articulate the conflict between science and religion have set the terms of engagement and have forced many religious people into adopting questionable ways of integrating the two domains. Thus we find religious scientists undergoing contortions trying to bridge science and religion through concepts such as indeterminacy in quantum theory. Whatever their validity, such intellectualized responses also fail to tackle many of the most important topics at the science–religion interface, such as the ways in which the values of different faiths lead their members to understand Western science, technology and medicine or, more specifically, how they respond to both physical and mental illness.

Issues of science and religion are important to our civilization — far too significant to be left to either the devoutly religious physicist or the scoffing atheistical biologist. People holding different beliefs and forms of expertise need to work together in an open, non-confrontational environment accepting both science and religion as valid aspects of human experience. It is a challenge facing the coming millennium. ■

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