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Destined to clash? Science and religion in the academic playground

Why has religion refused to die? Are religion and science destined to clash? So why do scientists with biblical faiths persist in academia? This article argues that this simplistic clash has been disputed by serious historians, while below, EDWARD SAWYER discusses religious education in a younger generation



Nick Megoran

THIS spring marks the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of Richard Dawkins' best-selling book on evolutionary biology, *The Selfish Gene*. Dawkins has maintained a fierce attack on religion, which he regards as an irrational belief system that has been superseded by modern science.

It might thus be surprising to learn of the persistent numbers of religious scientists. In 1916, a study of American scientists found some 40% believed in a creator God who answers prayers; when the study was replicated in 1997, almost exactly the same result was returned. Why has religion refused to die? Recent studies in the history of science have highlighted its vital role in the development of modern European science.

Firstly, religion supplied a necessary foundation for scientific thought. Various non-theistic belief systems suggested that the material world was unreal, debased, or the realm of demons and taboos.

Such views of the world do not readily lend themselves to its scientific exploration. Judeo-

overcoming a challenge, but because we are fulfilling our ultimate purpose in worshipping our creator. That is quite a thought when revising for finals or re-editing a paper!

Thirdly, religion has addressed existential questions that science could not. Robert Boyle, the founder of modern chemistry, summed up the Medieval conception that God had given humanity "two great books...Nature and Scripture", which could be studied without contradiction. In this worldview, science and the Bible provide complementary, not rival, accounts of life.

Disciplines such as biochemistry, molecular biology, and physiology can throw great light on being human. However, science cannot itself answer questions about ethics, meaning, and purpose - issues that we experience as profoundly important, and about which theology has much to say.

It is therefore little wonder that philosopher Alfred North Whitehead described modern science as "an unconscious derivative from medieval theology". But recent developments in our understanding of the remarkable fine-tuning of the physical constraints that have resulted in the properties of the universe and our own existence have further strengthened the case for religion.

Referring to this, Paul Davies,



DAWKINS...Maintains his attack on religion as an irrational belief system

If science and religion have such an intimate history, why does the belief that there is a conflict between the two persist?

Christian-Islamic thought, on the other hand, insisted that the world was intrinsically good and rationally ordered by a God who has imbued humans with the intelligence to comprehend it.

Secondly, religion provided powerful motivations for research. Francis Bacon was the founder of the Royal Society and a key figure in the establishment of the modern inductive scientific method. In the preface to his great book, *Natural History*, he prayed that God would "protect the work both in its ascent to His glory and its descent to the good of humanity".

He understood the scientific project not merely as acquiring knowledge, but as worshipping God by observing and admiring his handiwork, and putting that knowledge to the service of humanity. When Johannes Kepler realised that Tycho Brahe's astronomical observations supported Copernicus' theory of a heliocentric universe, he fell on his knees in amazement, gasping, "My God, am I thinking thy thoughts after thee?" Likewise, the exhilaration we feel at finally understanding an equation or grasping some difficult social theory, may not merely be the satisfaction of

formerly Professor of Theoretical Physics here at Newcastle, wrote that he could not therefore believe our existence was the result of chance. After a lifetime dedicated to disproving the existence of divinity, renowned atheist debater Anthony Flew recently announced his conversion, concluding that studies of DNA "have shown, by the almost unbelievable complexity of the arrangements which are needed to produce life, that intelligence must have been involved."

If science and religion have such an intimate history, why does the belief that there is a conflict between the two persist? This question has been studied by the geneticist Denis Alexander, of Cambridge University. He insists that examples of the supposed conflict have been misrepresented by those with militant agendas to push.

For example, many of Darwin's greatest contemporary supporters were Christians, whilst his harshest critics were found amongst fellow scientists sceptical of his work. Alexander contends that

extremists who use evolution to attack religion, as well as Creationists who use the Bible to attack science, misunderstand the purpose and remit of both.

The simplistic idea of a clash between backwards-looking religion and heroic science has largely been rejected by serious historians. Its continued propagation by a minority of extremists like Richard Dawkins is unfortunate.

At a time when rapid developments in research areas such as genetics and weaponry are outpacing our ethical reflection on their implications, the dialogue between religion and the sciences should be encouraged, not stifled. If nothing else, Francis Bacon's "glory of God and the good of humanity" are surely more worthy inspirations for scholars than first-class degree certificates or impressive research CVs.

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>> Your say...

Can science and religion exist alongside each other? Are scientists who have religious beliefs hypocritical?

Email The Courier at courier.news@ncl.ac.uk

"We've heard them all talk about Dust, and they're so afraid of it, and you know what? We believed them, even though we could see that what they were doing was wicked and evil and wrong... We thought Dust must be bad too, because they were grown up and they said so. But what if it isn't? What if it's?" she said breathlessly, "Yeah! What if it's really good..."
- The Amber Spyglass.

Those who argue that Phillip Pullman's *Dark Materials* are simply more intense versions of *Harry Potter* are wrong.

They are certainly publicised as children's books, and this was also how I read them until about halfway through the third and final volume when the penny began to drop. But the gripping underlying themes that emerge in the closing stages of the book are, in fact, embedded throughout the trilogy.

Pullman has written a masterpiece that goes right to the heart of religion, science and the clash between the two. Indeed, a clash that is so great that it even splits the Church in two, over the attempt to discover the source of 'dust' (original sin) and remove it from children before they become impure adults. Such a process is personified in the most horrific of circumstances - a form of circumcision between a child's body and their soul (daemon).

If this is just a manuscript for children, then I am not entirely sure what a 'grown-up's' book comprises. Its publication prompted outrage from various sectors of the Church, and outrage that was only exaggerated when Archbishop Rowan Williams praised the books. In an article in *The Guardian*, he wrote: "What kind of a Church is it that lives in perpetual and murderous anxiety about the fate of its God?"

But while it is phenomenal to see such a figure of religious authority welcome with open arms a manuscript that is challenging the very being of God (darkly referred to in the scripts as The Authority), this should not divert our attention from the fact that religion and science remain deeply embattled.

Indeed, for just one example, Emmanuel School in Gateshead has received strong criticism in the press for allegedly teaching Creationism. Such criticism, in fact, that they refused to comment for this piece and have decided "not to bother and just concentrate on educating our children."

But this should not suggest that the two cannot go side-by-side in the classroom. Indeed, their co-existence can only benefit one another in the world of debate and development. And for those who claim no scientific evidence for Christianity as a basis on which to refute it are missing the fundamental point.

It should not be its existence that is the focus of debate - but the morals which it teaches. Surely these are the basis on which society should base itself? (Although not the same morals on which a certain GW Bush has chosen to run a state on).