



Religion and science can have a true dialogue

A popular assumption that there is a conflict between the Church and the research world should be dispelled, says Kathryn Pritchard.

I work for the Archbishops' Council in the Church of England, and this summer I did something that many people would think is impossible. I sat in a dark lecture theatre engrossed in a computationally generated 3D journey through the Universe. Virtual stars whizzed past and seemed narrowly to miss colliding with my head as we accelerated through galaxies and past exploding stars. I listened to cosmologists speak on research into dark matter, particle physics, the rate at which the growth of the Universe is accelerating and the possibility of multiverses. I asked questions and they responded.

According to the popular narrative on the relationship between science and religion, this event should not have happened. The entire audience was made up of bishops and church leaders. Science and faith, we are constantly told, are in conflict and have little in common. Yet in this enjoyable, high-energy context, there was much to tease out together in terms of big questions about human origins, purpose and destiny. What would it mean for belief in God and the story and themes of Christian faith if there were multiverses? Where is the Universe heading, and what does that tell us about human purpose and destiny? The event was transformative in ways that none of us — the cosmologists included — could fully articulate.

Yet when it comes to science, the impression (not, I must underline, borne out by a careful reading of the history of science — but that would require another article) is that the Church has left the conversation or was never properly there to start with. This frustrates those of us in both camps who seek better engagement, and indeed, the perception of conflict itself can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

When a group of church leaders from across the mainstream Christian denominations in the United Kingdom were interviewed in 2014 about their understanding of the science–faith relationship, a clear majority spoke of a desire to see it defined positively (R. Bouveng *Int. J. Sci. Soc.* 5, 1–11; 2014). These leaders spoke using terms such as compatibility, mutuality and complementarity. They applauded scientific endeavour. But they also experienced frustration — not because complex, cutting-edge science was beyond them, nor because of their interpretation of scripture and its relationship to science. They were frustrated by the task of engaging seriously with science against the backdrop of a popular narrative of science–faith conflict that pervades contemporary culture.

Too often, this simplistic claimed tension is used in the media, for instance, to pigeonhole ethical arguments from (even highly scientifically literate) religious figures as being relevant only to those 'of faith', rather than expressing a broader concern for human welfare. This biases the way that their engagement filters into public consciousness.

Meanwhile, the 'trickle down' effect of this popular narrative makes ordinary church members feel unqualified to participate in important public discussions on topics ranging from artificial intelligence to medical ethics. A churchgoing friend of mine raised her eyebrows in astonishment when I told her I was working on a project with distinguished physicists who are passionate about both science and Christian faith. What does my friend's instinctive reaction say about how science has been communicated to her, and her sense of the intellectual robustness of faith? This month, that project — called Scientists in Congregations, and aimed at all mainstream Christian churches (see go.nature.com/2cjdvrj) — has set up a number of pilot schemes intended to challenge this misleading narrative by taking science to the devoted.

This seems impossible for some to believe. When people hear that scientists and theologians have combined to equip Christian leaders for a scientific age, they are either fascinated that the project even exists or stumped. They seem to lack the words to politely express their assumption that science and religious faith have nothing to say to one another.

Among the projects, Ely Cathedral — building on its proximity to science parks and the University of Cambridge — is holding a science festival, 'From Dinosaurs to DNA'. And Church of England parishes across the St Albans diocese are being encouraged to 'Take Your Vicar to the Lab'. Learning about science, and how science and theology interrelate, moves from textbook to one of the coalfaces of scientific endeavour, the laboratory. Scientists will then accompany vicars back to church services, and both sides will talk about what emerged. This is something of an experiment, and I think what is being modelled here is as important as what the

church ministers experience and learn.

Although these projects have an educational slant, I believe their main purpose is to incrementally inform the science–religion climate in this country and to give a higher profile to science in the church. Rather than being inward-looking and churchy, these initiatives are designed with the wider community in mind. Despite what the popular narrative might have scientists believe, there is a genuine hunger in the church to address the questions that contemporary research asks of religious belief. Our projects express the conviction that science and theology — at the church, cathedral and local-community level — can illuminate one another to the benefit of all. We will report on the results. ■

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