

Today is probably the most auspicious date in the liturgical calendar for us to have our admissions and renewals Eucharist. The feast of the Epiphany could be said to be the moment when science and religion meet and greet.

The wise travellers from the East, using whatever mixture of astronomical and astrological calculation was current, have found and followed a star and arrived at Bethlehem. Not only that but they have the wisdom to know what gifts to bring with them, to offer to the infant Christ. All of that without any grounding in the Hebrew Scriptures. Their brief, one might even go as far as to call it diversionary, visit to Jerusalem only confirms what the star was already leading them towards.

There's a lot of things to see up there in the sky. Even without telescopes, the lack of light pollution 2000 years ago would have given these stargazers plenty to look at. Their skill, the same skill needed by their descendants today, such as those who are seeking out new subatomic particles or observing the different constituents of a human gene, is to turn a massive amount of data into a much smaller amount of knowledge. Wisdom lies in being able to discern the value of the knowledge produced.

Both the scientist and the theologian work in a similar way. Existing theory is studied and tested. Patterns are observed in the world around us. Concepts and hypotheses are proposed and tested. Those that best fit reality survive long enough. So that in turn they become the progenitors of subsequent developments. You could say both science and theology are evolutionary processes. Which, as with modern evolutionary theories, have their moments of rapid breakthrough, as well as long periods of much slower change.

Both science and faith provide the means for producing practical benefits for human living. Whether it's cellphones or support for refugees, both make a difference. And both are equally capable of being distorted in ways that damage the creation. The emergence of ISIS in the last couple of years has as much to do with their effectiveness in putting technology, such as social media, to evil use as it does to their warping and misusing one of the world's great religions. When Donald Trump calls for blocking both Muslims and the Internet, he at least has cottoned on to the fact that both faith and science are being abused. Not that this would make me at all easy at the thought that you guys might elect him as your next president.

So let me, by way of evidence and example, suggest three particular areas where science and religion have overlapping and compatible concerns: one where there's already plenty of good work, one that needs some attention, and one that we don't seem to be tackling, yet in my view very much need to. Please excuse me for drawing much of my examples from the UK.

### **Climate change**

I want to cite as a good example, response to climate change. Dean Mark Richardson drew our attention to his own experience of the Paris Summit this morning, and to the excellent encyclical produced last year by Pope Francis. Well, last summer the Ethical Investment Advisory Committee of the Church of England, of which I am a member, published, with the advance endorsement of the main church investing bodies, a policy paper on how to use our institutional shareholder power to press the energy supply industry towards a greener future. The paper behind the policy statement contained both theological and scientific argument. Not every scientist or theologian would necessarily agree with either part, but it worked with the broad consensus of both scientific and theological enquiry into the topic, and it gained very widespread and favourable report in the secular media as well as in church circles. It's already making a difference. The main church investors, with about \$15B at their disposal, have withdrawn from companies with more than 10% of their assets in tar sands and thermal coal, judging these to be the dirtiest forms of energy, and the companies to be those with little likelihood that they would diversify away. Pressure is now being put on oil producers, to become the kind of energy suppliers we will need in a much lower carbon consuming world.

## **Human genetics**

To me that's a good example of running the theology and science hand in hand in order to deliver a robust answer to a pressing issue. The advantage we had of course was that the work was ours. We could produce and refine it and only let it out into the public domain when we were confident it would stand up to any challenge

Last night Ted Peters spoke to us of his own work on issues of human genetics and especially stem cell research. It was good to hear of how a group had got together and been able to analyse the issues and arguments in advance of political decisions having to be made. However, my next example, from the UK last summer, shows how much harder it is when the requirement is to respond to somebody else's initiative, with relatively little warning.

It came about when a group of British medical researchers issued a press release calling for permission to be given to produce embryos using DNA from more than two people. When a staff officer for the Church of England suggested that there might be significant ethical questions and that this wasn't a matter to be left entirely to be decided by what was scientifically possible, it was immediately reported as evil religion attacking kind scientists who were simply trying to help couples have a healthy baby. It was an example, in Ted's scheme, of the argument from beneficence. One of our Society members, Bishop Lee Rayfield, found himself having to explain the church's position on the BBC, in particular to speak about unintended consequences. He made a good fist of it, and that aspect of the story fairly quickly died away. But damage had been done. The story had spread far wider than the rebuttal ever would.

It's not that the churches in the UK hadn't been thinking about human embryology issues. The problem lay elsewhere.

First, the story was always going to be about how medical science wants to help parents have babies. That's how the group asking for change in the law were promoting it, and it ran much better in the media as a story about childlessness than one about academic science or ethical problems.

Second, we really do need to make sure that the first voice heard from the churches in such a debate is a positive one. As many of you know, Lee had been recovering after a period of serious illness, and I suspect someone thought it not necessary to put him up as spokesperson.

Finally, every journalist knows that a story is sharper if you can put up a contrary opinion. We fell into the trap of letting ourselves become that aunt Sally.

In future we need to be a lot sharper, to be clear about what a media story will look like and respond to it with a strong speaker and in ways that avoid a polarisation that puts us in the wrong corner. But let's note, this wasn't about science being always good and religion always bad. It was never really a science story, it was a "right to have healthy children" story. We missed the central point.

## **Fighting the memes**

It's been said once or twice over this last two days that the "science versus religion" polarisation is passé. Maybe it is among most professionals in both fields, but nobody seems to have told wider society, and that's where it continues to live and replicate itself as a meme.

Several UK newspapers ran a story last week that originated from Colorado. Most ran with the headline "Religion has been causing conflict for over 2000 years, say scientists". The headline did, in fairness, largely replicate that of the university press release, which was about as far as most of the media went in trying to research the story. The one paper that did bother to ring one of the researchers involved discovered that a team of anthropologists had studied two ancient societies. One of them had been unstable, the other had formed a long lasting stable state. In both cases they had argued that religion was at the core.

I presume that US universities, like their British counterparts, all have Public Relations departments dedicated to getting the institution noticed, so that more students will be attracted. I guess most researchers grimace at the headlines they write, just as much as many journalists despair over what subeditors do to their stories. And certainly a headline that read "anthropologists find religion sometimes made ancient societies more stable, and sometimes less" is not going to get much coverage.

But never mind the inaccuracy of the way in which the findings were reported. What inevitably struck me, just as I was doing my packing to come here, was that both the original press release and the subsequent reporting of it went for the "science attacks religion" meme. It's just possible that the University of Colorado has a marketing policy that has identified it will best thrive by attracting students who themselves have negative attitudes towards religion. In a competitive market place for American higher education there must be room for that. What really frustrates me is that the headline so chimed with a conventional view among UK journalists that only one of them thought it worth a phone call to check the story out. More cynically, perhaps the others took the same line that one otherwise highly respected British Religious correspondent did a few years ago with a story. It was getting late in the evening. Her editor wanted her copy immediately. She had worked out that if she checked it, it would probably fall apart. So she submitted it unchecked. The editor was happy. And she got to go to bed at a reasonable hour.

"Science attacks religion" is the dominant version of the meme, but it also has an occasional converse side, "religion attacks science", and not just over the stale issues of creationism versus volition.

The meme about science and religion being at war with each other, constantly launching attacks on the opposition, is one that this society has a prime aim in combatting. Our Members are men and women who have good standing in both the scientific and faith communities, through their academic qualifications, their practice and their ordination to the ministry of their individual denominations. We support each other in that task, uniting in a community that is mostly lived in dispersed mode, but where as many of us as can come together here and in the UK to pray, reflect and have a depth of fellowship that will sustain us for the lonelier tasks in our churches, universities and cities. Those being admitted today, and those renewing their promises, are making a serious commitment.

But let me suggest that in one sense the particular meme is not the problem. The problem is that of living in a society all too vulnerable to memes of all descriptions. Other memes have other victims. "Muslims are not loyal citizens" runs one. "Refugees are almost all young male economic migrants runs another". "LGBTQ people are likely to prey on our children " still gets an airing in the UK, I don't know about over here. There's a famous statement often attributed to the German pastor Martin Neimoller.....

Maybe our true task, is not to focus on one particular meme, but to be associate prepared to stand up to all who are the victims of memes. It may even encourage them to stand up for us.