

readers' letters:

Relic of the Bedpan Age

Semi-retired ophthalmologist Ralph Heaton sends a reassuring note from Bognor Regis:

I read this article in the latest *Triple Helix* shortly after being discharged from a surgical ward of a nearby hospital, where I had undergone major urogenital surgery. My experience was inevitably anecdotal, but if Ann Bradshaw's words are meant to describe nursing as it is today (even allowing for intentional exaggeration) they are, thankfully, wide of the mark. The nurses were compassionate, competent and professional. As it happened, I only needed a commode once, but if a bedpan had been needed, I am sure it would have been provided cheerfully.

There is however prophetic truth in what Ann Bradshaw writes, and without the driving force of the love of Christ, the standard of nursing (and of all professions) is bound to fall. Thank God there are still Christian nurses setting the pace and acting as salt and light. And thank God that in at least one hospital, and I suspect in many others, the standard of nursing is nowhere near as bad as Professor Powers would have us believe. So, gentle reader (as Angela Plume might have called you), rest assured when you get to the top of the waiting list!

Creation-Evolution Debate

Denis Alexander responds to Antony Latham's letter in the last issue criticising his review of Michael Behe's book 'Darwin's Black Box':

I think Dr Latham and I are in complete agreement that the Bible teaches a 'robust theism' in which a personal all-powerful God has not only brought the whole

created order into being but also sustains it and upholds it moment by moment. We are not deists, who believe in a remote God who established the laws of the universe at the beginning and then left the universe to carry on by itself, but theists who believe in God's immanence as well as his transcendence. Just as the existence of the TV drama depends upon the continual targeting of electrons onto the TV screen to generate the necessary images, and there would be no drama if the flow of electrons ceased, so there would no scientists and nothing for scientists to describe were God to cease his ongoing creative and sustaining activity.

It is precisely for this reason that I am suspicious of the apologetic approach advocated by Michael Behe in *Darwin's Black Box*. I am all for apologetics, but not at the price of undermining the biblical doctrine of creation.

Dr Behe chooses not to start with the biblical doctrine of God, but with a natural theology which depends on: first, a working knowledge of biochemistry; secondly, the advocacy of gaps in our current biochemical knowledge as being in some sense the particular loci of God's 'designer' activity; and, thirdly, a curious division of biochemical events into those 'which appear to be the result of simple natural processes' and others which 'were almost certainly designed' (p208).

In contrast the Bible teaches a rather limited role for natural theology, which is accessible to *all* people with eyes to see, not merely to people with degrees in biochemistry (cf Romans 1:18-20). The wonders of creation are certainly extolled as signs of God's creative power - but when the Bible wishes to draw attention to God as creator, it nearly always does so not by invoking the mysterious, but by reminding its readers of God's creative actions in the mundane and ordinary

events of everyday life in an agricultural society; not looking for God in their gaps in understanding, but pointing to his daily actions in familiar events. Within this theistic framework, 'chance' events, that is events which we are unable to predict, are as much under God's control as any other events.

If Behe was simply claiming, as Dr Latham suggests, that the more science uncovers of the wonders of creation, the more our attention is directed towards God's creative power, then this approach would fit well with such a biblical natural theology. Unfortunately, however, this is not the case. *Darwin's Black Box* clearly states that God's 'designer activity' is restricted to those biochemical pathways for which the evolutionary origins are currently unknown, whereas the 'designer label' is not applicable to those 'natural processes' for which the biochemical origins are better defined. Such a division of the created order into a 'designed aspect' and a 'natural aspect' is quite incompatible with Christian theism. Either God is the Author of the whole 'novel', in all its detail, or not at all.

Pinning apologetic hopes on gaps in our current scientific understanding is a risky business. As it happens, *Darwin's Black Box* is scientifically inaccurate, not in what it describes, but in what it excludes. For example, a recent conference on the evolution of the immune system highlighted several important advances (see *Immunology Today*, 1998; 19: 54-56). Behe's 'god-of-the-gaps' is already shrinking as scientific knowledge advances.

Christians have no hidden theological investments in scientific ignorance. Christian theists will rejoice at each new scientific advance, be it to do with evolutionary origins or anything else, since each advance tells us more about God's activity in creation.

Gordon Wardall, a consultant anaesthetist in Falkirk, also felt that several of Antony Latham's points merited further comment:

It is understandable that Dr Latham should be disappointed by a negative review of a book which he has found enjoyable and helpful, and which has, incidentally, enjoyed considerable popularity, particularly in the USA. Nonetheless, this book has received criticism similar to Dr Alexander's elsewhere¹. I would like to comment on some of the points made by Dr Latham.

First, he suggests that Dr Alexander 'is of the Christian school of thought that feels that God had little if anything to do with the details of creation once he had set up the laws of the universe at the beginning'.

This is precisely the sort of view that Alexander is refuting when he criticises Behe for suggesting that some parts of the created order have been designed, while others occur by natural processes. Alexander states (referring to Psalm 104) that biblically minded Christians believe that every aspect has been created by God and is continually sustained by him.

To point to 'irreducibly complex systems' in cellular biochemistry as evidence for a creator is indeed a classical 'God of the gaps' argument, however elegantly expressed by Behe. I believe we can see evidence for God's creating role as much in those processes for which science can already provide an explanation as in those which are - and may remain for a very considerable time - a 'black box'.

Like most Christians I would take issue with the reductionist attitude and use of language of Richard Dawkins (superbly analysed by Michael Poole²). A more balanced and very accessible analysis of the relationship of evolutionary biology to Christian belief can be found in R J Berry's recently published *God and the Biologist* (Apollon 1996).

Nonetheless, I can see no reason to doubt Dawkins' ability or integrity as a scientist. The scientific information contained in his books, although selective, is widely - although not unanimously - accepted in the scientific community, and certainly not just his own ideas. To dismiss Dawkins' work as 'made up stories' is, I believe, counterproductive to Dr Latham's case, however worthy his intention.

Dr Latham implies that the element of chance associated with some parts of the evolutionary process is incompatible with creation by design. However, when scientists speak of 'chance', the word does not carry the philosophical implication of lack of design or purpose that it does in everyday use.

In fact, it has been suggested conversely that the operation of chance in biological processes - all of which are continually held in being by God - is a means by which God might produce diversity in lifeforms. Further, Polkinghorne has suggested³ that the unpredictability associated with some of the developments of modern physics - such as the relativity and quantum theories - creates an 'openness' that may help us to understand how human free will can operate at the same time as God's ongoing action in his creation.

Dr Alexander is editor of *Science and Christian Belief*, the journal of CMF's sister society, Christians in Science. The general views (as opposed to those on Behe's book) which he expresses - notably the complementary nature of biblical and scientific explanations, and the rejection of the 'God of the gaps' approach - would I think be shared by most of the scientist Christians who are members of this society. Most importantly, all believe - like Dr Latham - that the universe and all it contains is created and sustained by God. This unifying central belief must surely be borne in mind through all these other arguments in this often divisive subject.

References

1. Roberts M. *Science and Christian Belief*, 1997; 9(2): 191-192

2. Poole M and Dawkins R. The Poole-Dawkins Debate, 1994-5.

3. Polkinghorne J C. A scientist's view of religion, 1990.

(References 2 and 3 are reprints from *Science and Christian Belief* and available from Christians in Science.)

The Living Alternative

Dominic de Takats, a Clinical Research Fellow in Sheffield, urges Triple Helix readers to get involved in secular ethics debates:

A number of old chestnuts have surfaced again in public recently. Abortion and euthanasia have both featured in several recent issues of *Hospital Doctor*, and the *BMA News Review* recently carried a staunch defence of an ethical position on iatrogenic death, arguing how the motivation for an act rather than its consequence defines its morality¹.

I write to exhort the many readers of *Triple Helix* who no doubt hold strong views on such subjects to get involved. I myself and many others are heartened to read a well-argued defence of a Christian position in the medical press, and it is an important reminder to bystanders that there is a legitimate living alternative to the post-modern liberal consequential system of ethics reached by default or consensus, which seems so all pervasive.

Reference

1. Carmichael R. Double effect no excuse to kill patients. *BMA News Review*, May 1998

The Editor welcomes original letters for consideration for publication. They should have both Christian and health-care content, should not normally exceed 250 words, and if accepted may have to be edited for length.

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