

Confusing metaphysics with science a mistake

ODT, 29 MAY 2009

A FEW years ago in England, following a media storm about paedophiles, a mob attacked the home of a paediatrician. It's hard to know whether to laugh or cry at the blunder over the two words. The good doctor was no doubt as concerned for children's welfare as the semantically challenged crowd.

Confusing friend and foe is a mistake that also bedevils the relationship between science and religion, and Christianity in particular. It is however no laughing matter as such confusion potentially has serious consequences. In Colin Blakemore's recent article, "Science set to win the match" (ODT, May 15, 2009) religion is presented as the opponent of science in a "metaphysical chess match" in which science has driven religion into a corner with nothing to do and nowhere to go.

There seems to be some confusion here between metaphysics and physics or science in general. This mistake is so huge it is easy to miss it in the rhetoric of Prof Blakemore's piece. Science, he tells us, has destroyed all religious explanations and is set to win the metaphysical contest. But science is not metaphysics, its advances are irrelevant to the metaphysical questions of the meaning of life or the existence of God. In fact there is no conflict of any kind between science and religion; they are friends not foes.

Prof Blakemore makes a number of metaphysical mistakes and reaches illogical conclusions. Crick and Watson's discovery of DNA's structure, he states, shows that life is just a chemical process. All the artistic and, yes, scientific achievements of mankind, all the heroic endeavour and sacrificial love of men and women down the ages are reduced to nothing more than the random bumping of atoms.

Quoting Richard Dawkins he declares Darwin's theory of evolution "removed the main argument for God's existence". But the origin of life is not the main argument for God's existence. The Bible's account of creation in Genesis is about the nature of mankind's relationship to God, not a

Responding to Colin Blakemore's recent article that set science against religion, **Paul Ewart** argues that in fact there is no conflict between the two. And that "they are friends not foes".

proof that God exists. Nor is it an alternative scientific account of how things came to be as they are. Aquinas, 600 years before Darwin, wrote: "Creation is not change". Evolution is our best understanding of how things change from one form to another. The Bible tells us why there is something rather than nothing. Its message is that we are created to be objects of God's love.

Modern science is a child of Christianity — it grew up in a Christian culture. Christianity's claim that "human rationality is a gift from God" is a profound metaphysical statement that Prof Blakemore misunderstands completely. Astonishingly, he claims that recent research in brain science has shown that free will and conscious intentions, including sin, are illusions created by brain function. So our thinking is nothing but physics and chemistry in the brain.

This is scientifically doubtful and metaphysically nonsense. Martin Heisenberg, also a biological scientist, points out the scientific flaws in such claims in his article "Is free will an illusion?" in the science journal *Nature* (May 14, 2009). The problem of rationality was recognised by J.B.S. Haldane, the great evolutionary biologist, who admitted that if thinking were just the motion of atoms in our brains we have no reason to believe our thinking to be true, and no reason to believe our brains to be made up of atoms. As C.S. Lewis pointed out, the materialist cuts off the branch he is sitting on.

I would add that the validity of our reason cannot be established by an argument based on evolution alone. If reason is in doubt you can't use reason to defend it. The existence of rationality points beyond itself to an underlying rational principle or *Logos* of the whole universe.

There are no knockdown proofs one way or other to the "God Question".

Christianity, however, makes far more sense than atheism. First, it makes sense of our rationality — its source is ultimately God. Second, it makes sense of morality — God provides the ultimate reference of what is good. Third, it makes sense historically. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus is evidence that he was the *Logos*, the Word made flesh i.e. God expressing Himself in human form. Fourth, it makes sense of my personal experience of God's forgiveness, an experience shared by millions of men and women in transformed lives down the ages. Such evidence can't be lightly dismissed.

The great danger in reducing spiritual and moral values to illusions is that moral warnings may be ignored when it's politically expedient. Witness the horrors of Communist and Nazi tyrannies of the last century.

Einstein, the greatest scientist of the 20th century, was neither a believer in a personal God nor an atheist, but he observed, "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind". Science and Christianity need each other if we are to care for each other and our planet. The evil that men do can't be dealt with by science, least of all by imagining sin to be an illusion.

"Come let us reason together, says the Lord, though your sins are like scarlet they shall be white as snow," wrote Isaiah. Only the personal God we know in Jesus could give us rationality and then offer us redemption, reconciliation and relationship. Faith has a solid rational basis; it's the conflict between science and religion that is an illusion.

● *Prof Paul Ewart is head of the department of atomic and laser physics in the Clarendon Laboratory at Oxford University. He is on sabbatical leave at the University of Otago.*