

Science -- Friend of Faith

I am writing to you this month about a brilliant lecture I attended at Grantham College in May.

Grantham Churches Together had invited Professor John Polkinghorne to deliver the first of what is hoped will be an annual lecture on the relationship between science and faith. Professor Polkinghorne has worked for many years at Cambridge University studying and teaching theoretical physics. He is one of our top scientists – a Fellow of the Royal Society. He is also an Anglican minister.

Professor Polkinghorne began by saying that he often had to explain how he could both have a faith and be a scientist. Many people thought it was like being a vegetarian butcher. Yet both religion and science were searchers after truth. Science was limited to questions of process -- “how”, whereas religion concerned itself with questions of meaning and value – “why”. As such they complemented rather than battled against each other.

For example he considered the question “why is the water boiling”? Scientifically the answer would be about energy input to the molecules in the water. But that gives only part of the answer. Science could never tell us the other reason that the water was boiling - because I was making you a cup of tea.

Professor Polkinghorne addressed the key question of why such an abstract subject as mathematics could so accurately predict the results of actual experiments before we do them. He gave the example of the famous scientist and science fiction writer, Fred Hoyle.

Hoyle was an atheist -- yet he once had to face a very difficult problem. Theoretical physics had calculated that the only elements in existence after the universe had begun “The Big Bang” were hydrogen and helium. Then, in the the centre of stars like our sun, these elements were transformed into all the other elements, - including carbon -- out of which all life as we know it is made. But how? It would need three helium nuclei to fuse together (via the beryllium phase) to produce carbon. The problem was that two helium nuclei would never stay fused together long enough for a third one to join them.

Hoyle calculated that it could be possible if the nuclei had a certain resonance. He eventually persuaded friends in America to set up an experiment to test his theory and astonishingly the nuclei did have this undiscovered resonance. Hoyle was so amazed that his abstract calculations had been correct that he remarked “It (the universe) is a put up job” ; “some

Intelligence has monkeyed with the laws of nature.”

Hoyle used the word intelligence because, as an atheist, he could not bring himself to use the word God. Okay, what's in a word. The conclusion Hoyle had to admit he had reached, was that the universe seemed too structured to have come about by chance. There was something behind it -- Christians call that something God.

God Bless, Revd Peter.