

# Teetotaller in an off-licence

Anjana Ahuja finds religion's arrogance hard to swallow

Last month, I went to Lambeth Palace to hear the Archbishop of Canterbury and other speakers deliver some weighty opinions on science and faith. Rowan Williams's central thesis was that there are different ways of 'knowing'; science and religion are two flavours, and neither reigns supreme over the other. And yet it felt as though some speakers were arguing exactly that: that religion is a superior form of 'knowing'.

And, as they spoke, the face of Ellen Gould White kept popping into my head. I wondered how much Rowan Williams et al knew about the founder of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, which boasts 12 million followers worldwide.

## Brain created God

Many years ago, I interviewed a scientist who believed that Ellen Gould White was no prophet of God, but an epileptic. Her vivid visions, her jerky movements during these sacred moments and her copious note-taking all signified, to neurologist Gregory Holmes, the presence of temporal lobe epilepsy. His thesis ran along the same lines as Richard Dawkins's book, *The God Delusion*: your brain created God, not the other way around.

No, of course I didn't stick up my hand and tell Rowan that. I was too scared, because I was just about the only non-believer who had bothered to attend 'Inspiration, Truth and the Search for Understanding' (or who had been invited). I felt like a teetotaller in an off-licence.

I ended up making a wishy-washy point instead, about how the scientific method was accessible to all, unlike religious experience. I also took issue, I announced, with the idea that it is somehow bad for science to be reductionist and materialist.

## Moral superiority

In order to understand complex things, you have to carve them into their constituent parts: you can't figure out how a spark plug works by repeatedly staring at a moving car. The whole tone of the seminar, I ventured, was one of religion-derived moral superiority over science (for example, Simon Conway Morris appeared to draw a direct line between Darwin and Hitler's persecution of the Jews). When I finished making my point, I was accused of not having listened.

I didn't mind the put-down. But I do mind that science is caricatured as a rather empty way of 'knowing', lacking humanity, humility or morality. I mind that reductionism - a necessary part of the scientific process - is ridiculed as a method of understanding the world. And I mind it especially when believers say that science cannot explain such wonderful human virtues as altruism and morality. Evolution does a fine job, thank you (it suggests we evolved mechanisms for altruism and morality, because these raised our chances of survival).

Perhaps most of all, I mind that the panel convened at Lambeth Palace to discuss science and faith included only believers. Where was the token humanist? Richard Dawkins wasn't there in body but he seemed to hover over the proceedings like a demonic spirit.

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## Argue for tolerance

Wrangling over whether science or religion constitutes true knowledge, is the wrong debate to be having. They exist in different, incomparable, irreconcilable realms (except where one might shed light on the other, for example the case of Ellen Gould White). Shouldn't we be arguing for tolerance instead?

*En passant*, my dictionary gives several definitions of what 'to know' means. To know means to 'be aware of something through observation, inquiry or information', which sounds very much like the empirical, trial-and-error, suck-it-and-see nature of the scientific method.

The dictionary also revealed an alternative meaning of 'to know': 'to be absolutely sure of something'. Which sounded rather like the speakers at the seminar.

So yes, the OED does validate science and religion as different forms of 'knowing'. Except, I'm not sure that it's always science that lacks humility.



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# Tales from the water cooler

**Barrie Cadshaw** reveals what's been going on in the public engagement with science community

Much of the talk around the watercooler of late has been around issues to do with science and its relationship with the media.

## Positive story

When Fiona Fox from the Science Media Centre unveiled a hot-off-the-press Academy of Medical Sciences Booklet entitled *Hype, Hope and Hybrids*, examining science policy and media perspectives of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill, she was absolutely effervescent in her enthusiasm. The story became a massively positive one about science and the media, and helped strike a balance with the negativity often cited around MMR or GM foods.

## Spat

However, science and the media were not such happy bedfellows in the public spat between Steve Conner, Science Editor of the *Independent*, and Ben Goldacre, GP and writer, following a run-in at the World Conference of Science Journalists in London.

Ben organized a free pub event as an alternative to what he implied was an overpriced conference, during which he felt journalists 'might not adequately address some of the key problems in their profession, which has deteriorated to the point where they present a serious danger to public health.' This comment was picked up by

Steve Connor. In a piece in the newspaper's Science Notebook, he said: 'lofty medics should stick to their day job' – and so ensued a flurry of tweeting on the topic.

## Not only Russia

In his address to the annual Science Communication conference, Robert Winston commented on issues to do with the governance of science when he made the pointed, and uncontested, remark that 'science is not about improving the wealth of the UK, it's about improving lives. Science driven by commerce is highly dangerous. Don't think it's just Stalinist Russia that abused science. We've done it too.'

## Launching careers

In the same session, Kathy Sykes was pleasantly surprised to hear that she should be grateful to former BBC journalist Sue Nelson for launching her TV career. It was Sue who had recommended Kathy as an ideal participant in BBC's Rough Science series. Although nothing would have given her greater pleasure, Sue felt she couldn't claim responsibility for launching Robert Winston's media career!

## Career change

Talking about former BBC journalists, we hear that one of the national network's most long standing – Christine McGourty – has left the BBC. Pondering her departure, a BBC source wonders whether BBC News, having overspent on wars (or more likely Glastonbury coverage), decided to save money by reducing numbers of

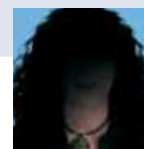
specialist science and environment reporters. Being science correspondent to news is often a frustrating life, as news editors' priorities often lie elsewhere; so perhaps Christine was glad to take a better opportunity. We wish her well in her newly-created job in the energy sector, doing communications across the whole industry. Her new title is Director of External Affairs at the Business Council for Sustainable Energy.

## Singh unheard

Many of you will have heard that science writer Simon Singh is appealing against the British Chiropractors Society's intention to sue him for libel after he questioned their claims about cures for various ailments (see p27 of this issue). Despite the amount of time and personal expense Simon has spent in his campaign to maintain free speech for scientists and writers, sources reveal that when he spoke at the World Conference of Science Journalists, his voice was barely audible over the din that the delegates were making as they networked furiously during the event. Simon should not take this personally however, as delegates vigorously 'networked' throughout all of the speeches.

**To support Simon Singh and the Keep Libel Laws out of Science campaign log on to [www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/project/333/](http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/project/333/)**

Be in touch if you hear any tales at the water cooler that you'd like us to include in the next issue of *People & Science*.



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