Science and Jewish Orthodoxy

A row in the making

Rehovot

THE Hebrew University in Jerusalem was last month host to a gathering that has brought the subject of Creationism to the fore and stirred up strong emotions. The "First Congress on Inquiries into the Origin of Life and Evolution" was organized by Orthodox Jewish scientists from Israeli institutions of higher education and took place under the auspices of the Israeli Ministry of Education with the support of the Israel National Council for Research and Development and the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities.

A charismatic, ultra-Orthodox Jerusalem rabbi called Mordechai Arnon had previously raised the issue of Darwinism in Israeli secular schools, but since he was a comedian before "seeing the light", his initiative was not taken seriously; now, with leading scientists and official bodies involved, the issue cannot be ignored.

Some participants at the congress, while finding fault with the Darwinian and neo-Darwinian approaches, also said that the other doctrines, including that put forward in *Genesis*, are open to question. However, Professor Alvin Radkovsky, of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Beer-sheba, felt otherwise. In a talk on miracles, Radkovsky said scientific research had already demonstrated "the extreme

improbability that life originated and developed by evolutionary means. This being the case, there is no other possibility than the divine origin of life." His view was echoed by Dr Duane Gish, a leading Christian creationist from the United States.

Professor Cyril Domb, a physicist who some years ago left Kings College, London to join Israel's Bar-Ilan University, took a different line. He asserted that many aspects of the theory of evolution had been refuted, but not in time to prevent the theory from doing "enormous moral damage to Western society" by encouraging a belief in man's animal nature and in a meaningless Universe. At the same time, he saw no point in portraying the *Genesis* account of events as an alternative scientific theory as its acceptance was based on revealed truth, not on experimental evidence; it was thus above science.

The main concern at the congress was the threat of Darwinism in secular schools, but computer expert L.M. Spetner warned that it had also found its way into religious schools. "If Darwinism is to be in the curriculum at all", he declared, "then it should be only as a means of preparing students to confront it."

Most non-observant Israel scientists disagreed with the views heard at the meeting, but so did many Orthodox scientists. For example, Weizmann Institute

Professor Michel Revel, a leading expert on interferon and as an observant Jew, dismisses the organizers of the conference as a vociferous and unrepresentative group. Revel sees the account of creation in *Genesis*, with its progression from lower to higher forms of life, as being in broad agreement with Darwinism. He is disturbed by the growing intolerance he finds in religious circles as well as by the attempts made to pit religion against science. "When a child is told to accept something on faith rather than on the basis of scientific evidence, he is liable to lose that faith when he finds that science was right after all", Revel warns.

Nechemia Meyers

Soviet-Australian relations

Signs of thaw

Canberra

SOVIET-Australian cultural relations are coming in out of the cold after more than three years. The new Labor Government is likely to abandon the sanctions applied against the Soviet Union after Soviet troops moved into Afghanistan. Since 1979, bilateral scientific cooperation has been suspended, all high-ranking Soviet officials excluded and academic exchanges banned. Relations between the two countries reached a nadir last August when the entire team of Soviet registrants boycotted the international congress of biochemistry held in Perth under the aegis of the International Union of Biochemistry, after two Soviet scientists were refused visas (see *Nature* 299, 97; 1982).

Foreshadowing the change in policy, the Prime Minister, Mr Bob Hawke, said last month that there is a "lack of consistency" in Australian relations with the Soviet Union, with sanctions in some fields but business as usual in the export of wool and meat to the Soviet Union.

One of the casualties of the sanctions has been the bilateral science and technology agreement signed in January 1975. The agreement has as one of its aims "the exchange of scientists, technical specialists and delegations with the aim of carrying out scientific research" and as another "the pursuit of joint research activities". Only last week, an ex-chief of the division of entomology at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization, Dr D.F. Waterhouse, was made an honorary fellow of the Soviet Academy of Science in recognition of his contributions towards scientific cooperation with the Soviet Union in entomology.

Fortunately, cooperation, scientific and otherwise, has never been suspended in Antarctica. Recently an Australian supply ship making its last run for the year to Hobart later than usual, found itself caught in pack-ice in Prydz Bay. A Soviet icebreaker from a nearby base responded to a call for help, but as it turned out its services were not needed.

Vimala Sarma

Never on Saturday

Rehovot

ORTHODOX Jewish scientists may disagree on evolution, but all agree that the tools of science should be used to facilitate ritual observance of the Sabbath. The problem is particularly acute in Israel, where vital services must be maintained by Jews throughout the year even though Orthodox Jews will not ordinarily so much as turn on a light on the Sabbath.

When is a 'phone not a 'phone?

Thus religious Jews often install timers in their homes that turn their lights off and on at predetermined times on Saturday. Professor William Z. Low, president of the Jerusalem College of Technology has recently pointed out that this approach of continued action combined with "indirect causation" can be used to solve much more difficult problems where essential work must be carried out by the army, police or hospitals. For instance a set of pre-programmed instruction cards could be inserted on the Sabbath into a processor in a nonoperational mode. The processor would be programmed (before Saturday) to self-activate automatically every few seconds, to read the instructions and to respond, thus effecting complicated changes in factory operations.

Special technological answers to the problems of Sabbath observance are also useful to Orthodox Jews in the political sphere. Israel's Ambassador to the United Nations, Professor Yehuda Blum, has been greatly aided by his special Sabbath telephone, which works on the basis of "indirect causation". When it rings and Blum picks it up, he is not automatically connected with the person at the other end of the line; that happens only when an automatic electronic device "sees" that he has lifted the receiver and activates his line.

Nechemia Meyers