Science and religion (contd)

SIR — Hermann Bondi is right when he says that "the human mind is singularly liable to be mistaken on religious issues" (*Nature* **365**, 484; 1993), but to conclude that the less attention given to religion the better is, I believe, to bury one's head in the sand. It is true that differences in religious belief have led to severe conflict throughout history, but might this not indicate the importance of the question and the deep desire of the human heart to know God?

Specific criticisms against Christianity often centre on the Crusades or the Inquisition. This argument, that a discipline which can be twisted and misused towards destructive ends should be avoided, is a familiar one. However, if we scientists feel a sense of *déjà vu*, perhaps it is because this is a criticism more often levelled at science itself — the destructive power of gunpowder, nuclear weapons, or fears of genetic manipulation leading to eugenics for example. But just as the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York was a misapplication of the science of explosives, disasters such as that at Waco are due to the gross distortion of selected ideas from religions. That such disasters occur is an indication of our poor spiritual condition and the inability of many to separate what is true from what is not true, being led by the blind because there is no one else to satisfy their spiritual hunger.

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SIR — In asking why science was for so long "confined" to non-Christian parts of the world, Bondi seems to suppose that Christianity has changed little over the past two millennia and that it is reasonable to homogenize it into one undifferentiated whole. Yet this is manifestly not the case, as may be seen in the very phenomenon he finds so puzzling, the rise of modern science. The (relative) absence of science in 'Christian' Europe before about 1600 may be connected with a general failure of mediaeval Christianity to liberate itself from a-christian categories of thought. When the 'scientific revolution' did take place it was a result of a peculiar combination of social, economic and religious changes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Above all it was the new availability of the biblical text to ordinary people that provided a fresh vision of a wholly demythologized Universe and of a divine mandate to study it. Where that insight prevailed science flourished; elsewhere it generally did not. The Chinese science that developed no deductive geometry or mathematical explanation of planetary motion lacked a belief in a divine creator constructing the Universe on a rational plan; on the other hand the path-breaking work of Kepler and Newton was informed and inspired by a theism that came straight from the pages of the Bible.

Bondi may not like any form of religion; but he can hardly deny a crucial role to that form of Christianity from which sprang the science that unites us all.

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SIR — Bondi's arguments are flawed for two different reasons. First, the claim that religious beliefs have long been used as justification for human conflict is undoubtedly true, but a very similar criticism could be made of science itself. For example, in the nineteenth century, science buttressed beliefs on racial inequality with a wealth of 'data' based largely on anatomical observations. In the twentieth century scientific discoveries have been crucial in facilitating warfare on a scale and with a ferocity never previously witnessed in human history. Large slices of the national income of technically advanced countries are still consumed in using scientific methods for developing ways of killing people more efficiently. Yet, despite these unpleasant facts, we continue to pursue the scientific enterprise because we also recognize its enormous potential for good. Scientists do not give up science because it is widely misused any more than people give up sex because of the existence of rape. Similarly, given the immense hold that religious belief has on a very large segment of the world's population, the appropriate response to misuse of religious belief is not to confront religion *per se* but to oppose its misuse.

Bondi also questions the claim that the Christian belief in an ordered Universe provided the necessary background to science, since the 'home of science' was confined to the non-Christian parts of the world for so long. But the further question then arises as to why science failed to develop any further in these other parts of the world. It is a fact that the enterprise that we now recognize as modern science — complete with journals, scientific societies and investigative ways of thinking — emerged in Europe in the seventeenth century. And anyone who reads the works of the 'early modern scientists' will be struck by their frequent reference to their belief in God as providing a basis and motivation for their investigations. Without doubt religious belief was only one factor among many that led to the emergence of modern science. Nevertheless, the active involvement of so many Christian theists at this critical period of its development is certainly consistent with the claim that their beliefs provided an impetus that was lacking in other belief-systems and allied social structures.

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SIR — Bondi is correct in saying that theologians differ, but disagreements are common in all fields of human enquiry. For example, not every scientist agreed with steady-state theory.

Bondi and Arno Arrak (in the same issue) are also correct in stating that religion has been misused and perverted, but science has been similarly abused. The Nazis carried out hideous experiments on people in the name of science. Physicists of the highest calibre gathered at Los Alamos to develop weapons of mass carnage. Yes, religion has been perverted at times, but so has science, and that abuse says more about fallen human nature than it does about either religion or science.

Arrak and Michaelene P. Llewellyn (also in the same issue) respectively say that religion is "a product of social evolution" and that "[r]eligious beliefs are rationalizations for various behaviours". Both statements presuppose that there is no God and that religion is an invention of man. These are hugely biased presuppositions on which to base any study of religion.

They might do well to consider 1 Corinthians 1:19. The scientific claim that matter and life have natural origins is in direct contradiction to Genesis and these are areas where we might look for science to be frustrated.

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SIR — Josephson (*Nature* **362**, 583; 1993) believes that religion can only gain from being investigated scientifically. But do we want it to gain? Would it not be better for mankind if it were to disappear quietly, forever?

The prime function of organized religions is to retain power and influence, in order to continue their suppression of ideas of which the world is in sore need. Science can function only in a climate of scepticism and open-mindedness, a climate in which religion can only compromise itself and, eventually, be explained away. Truly, science is incompatible with religion.

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