

Its decision last year to ask a committee including several distinguished people from overseas to investigate its quality "and to report", at least in part in public, is without precedent in Japan (see page 387). Of course, Tokyo has a high reputation, especially in physics. Professor Akito Arima, who retires this week as vice-chancellor at Tokyo, may have calculated that an inquiry concentrating on this department would prompt conclusions that could only be flattering to the university as a whole, but which would support a cause he has championed for many years — that of persuading the Ministry of Education that even this outstanding academic unit is scandalously housed and poorly equipped.

Predictably but unavoidably, the visiting committee has roundly condemned the physical facilities in the physics department. Just as predictably, it has praised the academic distinction acquired internationally by a large proportion of the department's faculty as well as the quality of the students, both undergraduate and graduate. The question it does not raise is why the Ministry of Education has not yet seen fit (but a new building is being planned) to provide acceptable facilities for a department that would bring honour to any university in the world. The explanation, of course, is the cult of egalitarianism, on this evidence still as strong in Japan as anywhere.

But Arima may have got more than he bargained for in what the committee has to say about the educational pattern found in the physics department. There are neither women nor foreign scientists among the tenured staff. Communications among the ten research groups into which the faculty is organized are much less than good. Students, whether undergraduates or graduates, are too rigidly constrained by the curriculum and by the way in which attachment to a professor is considered irrevocable. Postdoctoral fellows are poorly used, more as dogsbodies for the professor to whom they are attached than as independent investigators, and the same is true of all but the full professors of physics at Tokyo. The committee is on sure ground in asking that these deficiencies should be remedied. Quite what the university will make of the recommendation that there should be regular student evaluation of the effectiveness of individual teachers is another matter; traditional politeness may inhibit even anonymous assessments.

The committee might also usefully have strayed beyond its terms of reference by asking questions about the links between the physics department and the research institutes with which it is associated. They are at present too loose. And those who have already said that the committee overlooked the problem of technical assistance in research are surely correct: do Japanese researchers need the skill in glass-blowing or soldering that circumstances now require of them? Nevertheless, this first venture in external assessment has been a great success. Arima's successor will be able to make good use of it in dealing with a ministry wedded to equal shares for all. He may also use it to good effect internally. Will universities elsewhere (outside enlightened Scandinavia) now follow suit? □

## Religious study

**The University of Cambridge should have thought harder before accepting a donation joining science and theology.**

If further evidence were needed of the lengths to which British universities will go in order to attract endowments from the private sector, it is provided by the announcement two weeks ago by the University of Cambridge of the establishment of a lectureship in Theology and Natural Science thanks to a £1 million donation from best-selling author Susan Howatch. Frequenters of airport bookstands will know of Howatch as the author of blockbusters such as *Penmarric* and the promisingly Dawkinsesque-sounding *Wheel of Fortune*, but it is here, sadly, that her scientific credentials expire. Having realized in 1980 that fame and riches had left her unsatisfied, Howatch decided to follow Cassius Clay and Elvis down the well-trodden road to celebrity revelation.

After six years away from authorship and a school-leaver's certificate in religious studies, Howatch stormed the literary world afresh with a hugely successful novel *Glittering Images*, a story of clerical life in the fictional English town of Starbridge. To everyone's surprise, the novel brought in as much money as her previous secular efforts. Hence the Starbridge Lectureship, welcomed by the university for coming "at a time when the interaction between science and theology can offer much in the search for greater understanding of our current existence". A happy coincidence indeed.

According to Howatch, "science and theology are no longer seen as opposed but complementary, two aspects of one truth". That can be true only in the most superficial sense, that in which some people see one truth and not the other, or vice versa. For the many people who take the scientific and the theological (or at least the religious) view together, it is more common to reconcile the inevitable intellectual conflict on matters such as the after-life by supposing that there are two truths, not two aspects of one truth, or otherwise to suppose that Bible-stories or their equivalents in other religions have an allegorical function of great moral value to believers. There is of course a rich vein of research on the psychology of religious belief, but that is not what Howatch and the university have in mind. What other academic purpose can there be?

It would be churlish to chide Ms Howatch for polluting British universities with the profits of her blockbusters, or even for asking that her money be spent on a venture so empty as the Starbridge Lectureship, but is it proper that one of Britain's leading centres of learning should put a price on its academic rigour and accept her donation? It is not as if the past few years have not seen some happy collaborations between academic institutions and the private sector — most notably the efforts of George Soros in what used to be the communist bloc. Universities everywhere need private funds, but with no strings attached. They should say so clearly or be more persuasive of their academic goals. □