

Grads-2-Grads

Christian
Postgraduate-led
Ministry

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No. 8

Becoming Human: Veritas Forum at Cambridge

What does it mean to be human? Are we just biological machines or is there something more to us? Do human beings have an intrinsic dignity and value? If so, where does it come from?

These were some of the questions explored during the third Veritas Forum in Cambridge, which took place in November. In a busy week of events, speakers with expertise in literature, philosophy, science and medicine helped us to engage these questions and to consider whether a Christian worldview has something useful to contribute to the discussion.

The forum was opened with a talk by Dr Michael Ward, a C.S. Lewis scholar best known for his

book *Planet Narnia*. Dr Ward began by speaking about the power of stories to shape how we see ourselves in relation to the world around us, and, through this, to shape who we become. He went on to outline his surprising discovery of an imaginative structure which he believes underlies Lewis' children's books, the



Chronicles of Narnia. This subtle hidden imaginative pattern points beyond Narnia to Lewis' view of our lives and the universe as a whole:

that there is a divine presence in the universe which is so all-pervading that, ironically, it is easy to miss it. Lewis'

“Are we just biological machines or is there something more to us?”

approach to writing reminds us that Christianity is not just a set of belief statements to sign up to, but a story, in which we can find ourselves if we look more closely.

From Tuesday onwards, the forum took a more scientific turn. Professor Nigel Cameron is a bioethicist who hails from Scotland but is now based in Washington, DC, working on the ethical and public policy implications of new developments in biotechnology. Professor Cameron's talk took us behind the scenes of the sometimes murky world of public policy formation and focused especially on the questions thrown up by

transhumanism, the quest to use technology to modify human beings and perhaps even to transform them into a new kind of post-human being.

Professor Cameron expressed concern that this technology, which may have some genuine beneficial applications, has been hijacked by a dubious ideology

which suggests that it might be a good thing if computer technology takes over from humans. He then drew attention to the biblical teaching that human beings are made in the image of God, and suggested that a good way of navigating technological progress is to distinguish between using technology to enhance human abilities and using technology to leave our humanity behind.

After a rest on Wednesday, we were disappointed that our keynote speaker for Thursday, Professor Rosalind Picard, had to drop out due to illness. However, we are immensely grateful to Rev Dr Fraser Watts for saving the day. Dr Watts heads up the Psychology and Religion Group in Cambridge University and stepped in at short notice to take Professor Picard's place in our lunchtime panel discussion, asking the question "Did my neurons make me do it?". Dr Watts has a background in psychology and so effectively comple-

mented our other panellist, Alisdair Coles, a Cambridge neuroscientist who was recently ordained in the Church of England and ministers part-time at a local church alongside

"From a biblical perspective, every human being is created in the image of God"

his day-to-day scientific work. The

two Rev Drs were ably chaired by Nicholas Gibson, who asked some tricky questions and didn't let them wriggle off the hook. Dr Watts and Dr Coles agreed that "we" are not separate from our bodies, and so our brains are not something different from "us", but that no part of "us" controls us to such a degree as to remove our freedom of choice completely (although there are some tricky unresolved issues concerning how much freedom we actually have). They also discussed spiritual experience, suggesting that this is not



something that bypasses our brains or involves a special "God" part of the brain, but that we should expect God to communicate with us through our brains because God relates to us as the embodied beings he created us to be.

On Thursday evening, we watched some of the Faraday Institute's documentary on issues of science and faith, *A Test of Faith*, which features interviews with leading scientists who have Christian faith, alongside imaginative and impressively filmed visual analogies for scientific ideas (for example, a goldfish bowl on the beach representing the universe). (The Faraday Institute was one of our supporting partners for the forum.)

Dr Jonathan Chaplin of the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics, another of our supporting partners, moderated our Friday evening panel on medical ethics. This wide-ranging discussion touched on both traditional issues in medical ethics surrounding the beginning and end of life (for instance, abortion and euthanasia) and newer issues involving the use of new technologies to create and modify human life.

For this event, Nigel Cameron returned to contribute his expertise on recent developments in biotechnology. Professor Cameron suggested that, in relation to the moral dilemmas raised in medical care, it is safest to assume that every member of the human species is due our protection, rather than applying criteria which suggest that some

members of the species are more or less human.

We were also joined by John



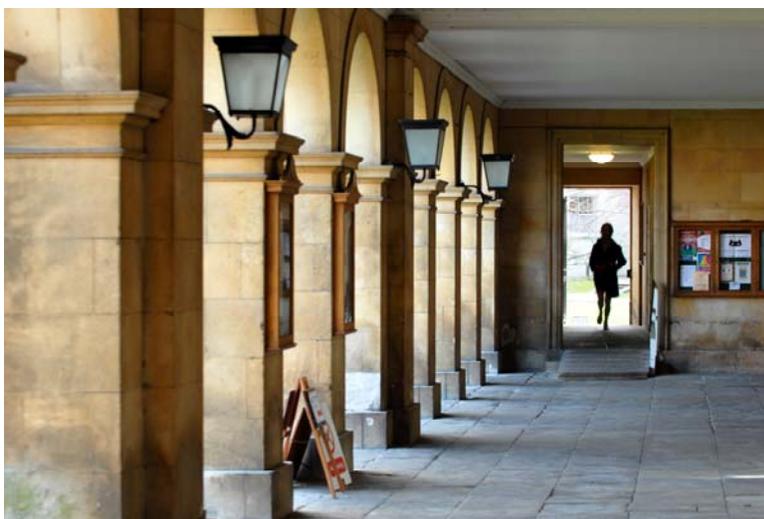
Wyatt, a professor at UCL and a neonatologist – in his words, he is a “baby doctor”. Dr Wyatt’s perspective on the ethical debates in medical practice is earthed in his professional experience of working to protect vulnerable life. He pointed out that babies do not have self-awareness or autonomy (the ability to make their own decisions), concepts which are often used by philosophers to explain what a person is, and yet society clearly believes that their lives have

value. Dr Wyatt suggested that this shows that the ethical theories often drawn on in these debates are inadequate, and that we need to have a

broader, more relational view of what it means to be human.

Our third panellist, Peter Cave, is a philosophy lecturer at the Open University who chairs the Humanist Philosophers Group. He was invited to offer an alternative perspective to our two Christian panellists. Dr Cave expressed his concern that people with religious convictions seem to want to impose their views on others. He felt that it is too simplistic to appeal to a universal moral code and that we have to muddle through these difficult decisions, doing our best to follow our shared human impulses of compassion and fellow-feeling.

Each of the talks and discussions we hosted ended with the opportunity for questions and comments from the audience. The ques-



tions were as wide-ranging as our speakers in the issues they raised, and they reflected a variety of religious and philosophical perspectives.

I would like to mention one of the questions asked on Monday night which went to the heart of things: What does C.S. Lewis mean when he talks about “the new men”, a type of person different from the gen-

“God is restoring his image in those people who trust in Jesus and, in this way, is creating a new humanity”

eral crowd of humanity?

Our theme for this forum focused particularly on what it means to be human and how, from a biblical perspective, every human being is created in the image of God, even though this image is now broken in many

ways. However, this question about “the new men” pointed beyond this towards how God is restoring his image in those people who trust in Jesus and, in this way, is creating a new humanity. In the words of the Apostle Paul, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corin-

thians 5:17) Or, as the band Switchfoot sing, “There’s a new way to be human.”

David Parry

Cardiff Staff & Postgraduate Christian Fellowship: The story so far...

Oxford is a city where things happen for the first time. It's the place where the England's first University was founded; the place where the first authenticated four-minute mile was run



and the first University to copy Cambridge in starting a Christian Union. It's also the place where I first seriously considered being involved in Postgrad ministry - perhaps an event of less considerably less import in the grand scheme of things, but I needed to get your attention somehow...

I was at a regional training day in Oxford with Friends International last year (I was a Reach volunteer in Southampton at the time), where Ard Louis led us in thinking about Postgrad ministry. The potential for God to use Postgrads in reaching their fellows for Christ was clear. I left with a dream I was determined to work towards, and the conviction that I couldn't do it alone. This is, however, the story of the *Cardiff* Staff & Postgraduate Christian Fellowship (SPGCF) so far; we must affectionately leave behind Oxford!

I arrived in Cardiff to commence my PhD in Neuroscience back in September, hav-

ing spoken to Remi Tobler and Rowland Hughes (the Cardiff FI staff worker), in advance. First steps: I needed to find a church to settle in, and decided that my explorative visits could serve the dual purpose of finding much needed collaborators. I was astounded how God blessed these first few weeks... I've met several PGs at Highfields, the church I eventually settled in, some of whom are now key group members. At another church I was invited for lunch with a family, along with two others: An academic, and another new PhD student! When I broached the subject of the currently lacking PG group with the other PG, she responded: "Let's start one!" There we also met a lecturer already involved with international work who will be the first to share with us on the topic "My faith and my subject". At another church I was welcomed by Caleb, a member of the University's administrative staff, it turned out. When asked about life at Cardiff Uni as a Christian he told me of his desire to start a Christian Staff Network, with aims, objectives and plans for going forward that sounded eerily familiar to me... We decided we needed to talk to one another more, and in due course he became my partner in crime. Hence the combined group for staff & PGs. Here is a series of events that are fun to look back on - God really does answer prayer!

Encouraging meetings with UCCF staff, our Anglican Chaplain and CU president followed, with helpful input from leaders of PG groups else-

where in the country. Much publicity later, we've had four meetings, and plan to meet weekly in the early evening on Monday's. We've averaged about 10 people so far, with a core group emerging and many others attending on the occasions they can manage. We're still getting off the ground: Planning events, getting to know each other, looking out for more people get involved. It would be amazing if you could be praying for us, that God would:

- Grow our group in numbers and fellowship
- Guide us in thinking how our faith and subjects interact
- Make us fruitful in reaching out to those around us

Specifically, I'd love to see us start seeker Bible studies, with many of our friends who aren't Christians, especially internationals, encountering Jesus in the gospels. I've been very conscious of much praying going on behind the scenes so far, and would love to see what God will do if you would join us in prayer for this venture!

Mike Newton

Edinburgh Postgraduate Christian Fellowship

As a Master's student in the U.S., I became acutely aware of my need for focused interaction with other Christian postgraduate students for intellectual, spiritual, and emotional support. When my husband and I arrived in Edinburgh in Fall 2007, when I began my PhD, we looked to become a part of this kind of network. Only, as we asked around no one knew of any such group existing, at least not one that was interdisciplinary or would include my field.

As year one became year two, we went from looking for a group to praying and considering beginning one ourselves. We were very encouraged to meet, through email correspondence, Remi Tobler, the UK postgrad coordinator, and Pete Edwards, an Edinburgh resident who desired to mentor the group behind-the-scenes. Perhaps the most valuable advice we received from them was to be praying. David and David from Cambridge's CHAS also met with and encouraged us, answering many initial questions we had about postgrad ministry.

Still, by the end of that year (this is last year), we had made no tangible progress: we had only one potential member besides my husband and me. We felt discouraged, but at the same time we couldn't shake our desire for this, as yet non-

existing, group. We decided to take the leap and commit to starting a postgrad Christian fellowship, beginning Fall 2009.

“Encouraged to see
God's perfect
timing”

Over the summer we received the good news that a newly graduated PhD student, has been appointed as a REACH volunteer and was moving to Edinburgh from Cambridge, where he had been a part of Cambridge's Graduate Society. In fact, he became a Christian though the CGS. His primary aim was to help get a postgrad fellowship started. We were encouraged.

Once Humberto arrived in Edinburgh in

August, he got the ball rolling in terms of potential members. He found many other Christian postgrads who might be interested in this type of fellowship.

Our list of contacts quickly grew. Around the same time, we discovered that Edinburgh's Christian Union was interested to begin a postgrad small group, but lacked the students to lead it. We promptly partnered with them, encouraged to see God's perfect timing in drawing together my husband and me, Humberto, and the CU.

Our first meeting was in mid-September, and to our surprise, we had a robust attendance of around twenty people. Since then, we have been meeting weekly and have developed a strong core group of committed members from many different fields of study and areas of the world.

Among the leaders, we agreed that our goal for this semester was



simply to try to both establish the vision for the fellowship— its purpose and potential— and to foster relationships among our members.

We instituted a monthly potluck dinner to meet the latter need and on the other weeks, we lead discussions that we hope challenge all of us to consider what it means to be Christians in academia— how God might use us and the gifts He’s given us and how we might reach out to our peers.

Currently, we are trying to generate stability for the group and ensure its longevity. We are working to establish a board of elders, Edin-



burgh residents who will help provide consistency and accountability to the fellowship’s leaders. We are also putting together a committee from within the

group from those members who desire to share with us some of the group’s responsibilities. Looking ahead to the next academic year, we are praying that God brings the leaders to whom we can pass the baton, as this is my last year in Edinburgh. Because this year we have seen His orchestration of the birth of the group, we believe that He will also provide what our fellowship needs in the future.

Kim Sasser

Christian Postgraduate Discussion Group York

At the University of York, there are two groups for Christian postgraduates. The Christian Union has Bible study groups in each college, and one of the colleges, Wentworth College, consists mainly of postgrads. So Wentworth CU is a postgraduate Bible study group. In 2008, a small group of people in Wentworth CU took the initiative of forming a second group, known under the rather long name of Christian postgraduate discussion group York. This group is also affiliated with the undergraduate CU, but has a greater degree of independence. We felt a need to have a place where we could discuss the faith-science / faith-culture / faith-philosophy interface, since this is an important area of conversation with our non-Christian colleagues. By getting together with other Christian postgrads, we hope that we can

increase our witness in the academy, shaping our ideas regarding the role of faith in our work, and integrating our faith more closely with our everyday lives.

“This really helps us to clarify our own ideas and enables us to better formulate and explain our beliefs”

The Christian postgraduate discussion group meets every other week during term time and on an ad hoc basis outside term time. We read a book together and during our meetings we discuss what we have read. At the moment, we are reading Roy Clouser’s *The myth of religious neutrality* and we’re quite excited about it! This

really helps us to clarify our own ideas and enables us to better formulate and explain our beliefs. Further, we organise socials during which we watch a movie with a discussion on a topic related to the theme of the movie afterwards, and occasionally we go on a trip to an exhibition on a subject that links with the book we are reading.

One of the exciting aspects of the postgraduate community is its international character. Many postgrads come to the UK with a desire to learn things that they can bring back to their country. It is our prayer that what we do in the discussion group will benefit student groups around the globe. And of course we also hope that God will use our witness to reach our colleagues.

It would be great if you could **pray** for our witness as individuals and as a group. **Pray** that we will have wisdom as we prepare for the meetings, read and discuss. Also, both Wentworth CU and the discussion group are quite small groups. We **pray** that more Christian postgraduates will



and will make time to attend one or both

realise of these groups. Leadership is a continuous challenge since everyone has such a busy life and commitments to their studies. **Pray** that God will provide people with the abilities and the willingness to lead. studies

Eline van Asperen

A note from Remi

It is with Joy and Excitement that I look back to this team, to see all the wonderful things God has been doing in the lives of students across the country. In June postgraduate-led ministry got it's first ever Reach Volunteer worker to focus on postgraduate ministry in Edinburgh. You have read how God is at work there. There have also been some new and wonderful developments in other places, such

as the new postgraduate fellowships in Cardiff and Exeter.

We have a Great God! He is always at work in our lives and in the lives of those around us. I encourage you, as we celebrate Jesus, to look back and remember all His goodness, love and faithfulness to you. "Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done."

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end."

1 Chro 16 : 8 & Isa 9 : 6

Have a Wonder-full Christmas!

In His Grace,

Remi

friends
INTERNATIONAL

Support Centre
3 Crescent Stables
139 Upper Richmond Road
London SW15 2TN

Phone: 020 8780 3511
Fax: 020 8785 1174

E-mail: info@friendsinternational.org.uk
www.friendsinternational.org.uk

www.cpgrad.org.uk

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the postgraduate student
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For your information

Christian Postgraduate-led Ministry Coordinator

Contact

Remi Tobler

7 Ferry Lane

Cambridge. CB4 1NT

01223-566620



remi.tobler@friendsinternational.org.uk

www.cpgrad.org.uk

Resources for Postgrads:

National Christian Postgraduate Conference

A Christian Academic?

What is a 'Christian Academic'? How should you think Christianly about the world? And will that change anything about how you go about your work?

Every year postgrads and postdocs come together from across the UK for a weekend conference to meet, share experiences, and consider these questions. At the 2010 conference—Transforming the Mind: Captivating Thoughts, 18-20 June—the speakers will be well-known writer and academic Alistair McGrath and Edith Reitsema of the L'Abri Fellowship.

What is the conference about?

The vision statement of the conference (based on Romans 12:2) probably best describes the conference purpose: '... our calling is to be Christian academics in the academic world. God's perspective should direct our choices, our premises of research, and our manner of inquiry and learning. We should strive after God's standards of excellence in our pursuit of truth. We are called to be aware of and respond to the world around us, like Paul and Daniel, to think through social and intellectual trends, globally and locally. Most significantly, our calling is to seek God's Kingdom and make a difference both

now and in the future, wherever God places us.' The conference aims to encourage, challenge and equip postgraduates in this calling.

'... our calling is to be Christian academics in the academic world. God's perspective should direct our choices, our premises of research, and our manner of inquiry and learning. We should strive after God's standards of excellence in our pursuit of truth.'

What do you do?

The conference is about the whole person. It is a relaxed but full weekend. Excellent talks from the main speakers provide the structure of the week-



end, but other activities such as meals, worship, student lectures, and social time are just as important for engaging the whole person in these crucial questions. There is also the opportunity to enjoy the Peak District with an energetic walk, a visit to a National Trust tea room, or a shopper's

stroll through Ashbourne.

What is the best part?

Everyone takes away different memories from the conference but the two things that participants most often cite are meeting new people from across the country and the challenging talks. It is both inspiring and intellectually stimulating to meet Christians engaged in the full range of academic study. And it is challenging and encouraging to be taught by Christian academics who are living out this mission. This is why many postgrads return to the conference throughout their years of study.

How can I attend?

To find out more about the conference and to register go

to www.christianpostgrad.org.uk. Conference registration will open in early January. You will want to book early as places are limited and there is a fee reduction for advanced bookings.

Cathi Fredricks