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# Editorial

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## Equipping Christian Leadership in an Age of Science

KATHRYN PRITCHARD

Welcome to this special edition of *Crucible*. Each of the contributors has a role within the project funded by Templeton World Charity Foundation: ‘Equipping Christian Leadership in an Age of Science’ (ECLAS). This is an ecumenical initiative based at Durham University and partnered with the Church of England.

Our writers believe there is a vital contribution to be made by Christian leaders to today’s scientific and technological age. In these articles you will learn about an innovative project which is designed to equip church leaders to engage in conversations about scientific endeavour, its implications for society, and the way we understand what it is to be human.

But why should busy Christian leaders dedicate time and effort to engaging with cutting edge science? In April this year, there were three prominent Artificial Intelligence and Robotics-related features in the Guardian. AI and Robotics tend to elicit strong opinions and emotions, and capture the public imagination. However, this cluster of articles usefully illustrates some themes and important conversations that science opens up.

Firstly, *The Guardian*’s Science Editor reported on a successful ‘neural bypass’ which has allowed a man, paralysed from the neck down, to swipe a credit card, and play the video game, Guitar Hero. This technology involves insertion of a chip, implanted in the brain’s movement centre. The brain then sends signals through a cable to a computer. It is the computer’s role to learn to interpret and translate the patient’s thoughts into potential movement. Signals are sent to a device on the patient’s arm which stimulates particular movements.<sup>1</sup> Here is a remarkable account of use of science-technology at the interface of AI and human enhancement. Clearly, too, it heralds technological advances which we need to be prepared and equipped to think about.

Secondly, in a feature about our ‘robot future’, the dramatic focus was

the German scientist Jürgen Schmidhuber who predicts that by 2050, ‘... the smartest and most important decision makers might not be human.’<sup>2</sup> Depending on your perspective, and how keen you are on robots, AI and Robotics are presented in this piece as, at best, ambiguous goods and a possible threat. But what is the truth about advanced computer technologies and their potential? On what basis should we interrogate their benefits? There are high level conversations to be had. There is room for scientifically *and* theologically informed voices in those discussions.

In the third article, Laurie Penny warns that through robotics, gender and racial inequalities will be taken into technological perpetuity: ‘Recent reports have shown that machine-learning systems are picking up racist and sexist ideas embedded in the language patterns they are fed by human engineers.’<sup>3</sup> Here science is depicted as flawed and shaped by society in unintended ways. However, on the positive side, precisely because science is a profoundly human, socially shaped activity, it continuously raises questions about the society we seek to be, and calls forth responses from those of other disciplines.

But how are Christian leaders of different educational and professional backgrounds to be equipped to join in the conversations emerging from scientific endeavour? In ‘Attempting Cultural Change’, David Wilkinson describes the impetus behind ECLAS, a recognition that Christian leaders require specific resourcing in today’s science-oriented world. He describes and reflects on the project’s five strands – each designed to tackle ‘the disconnect between science and theology’. He writes not only from the perspective of a scientist-theologian with PhDs in Astrophysics and in Systematic Theology, but also from the vantage point of a Methodist minister and Principal of St John’s College with Cranmer Hall, the Anglican training college.

What about the approach to science-theology interface underpinning the project? The project’s vision is of a nuanced, mutually enriching and sometimes mutually challenging relationship. Tom McLeish, Professor of Physics at Durham University, is a co-founder with David Wilkinson of the ECLAS project. His article counters fearful accounts of science in relation to Christian belief. He argues instead that science is a profoundly theological activity and intrinsic to the Church’s ministry of reconciliation.

In ‘Take Your Vicar to the Lab’, Tim Bull and Nick Goulding reflect on a bold scheme in the Diocese of St Albans to counter popular simplistic perceptions of science versus faith. Bull has PhDs in Computer Science and Theology and Ethics. Goulding is Professor of Pharmacology and

Medical Education at Barts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry. In 'Spreading the Word: how one Bishop has been equipped in an Age of Science', David Thomson, Bishop of Huntingdon and an academic mediaevalist, provides a personal account of his transformative involvement with the ECLAS project. He describes what a reintegration of science and theology has meant for his ministry and mission.

Today's Christian leaders need as never before to stretch and move beyond theological comfort zones, and be prepared for new modes of thinking and conversation about science and its implications. So the final word goes to Malcolm Brown, Director of the Archbishops' Council's Mission and Public Affairs Division. In 'Christian Ethics and the Problem of Knowledge', Brown explains from his engagement with science-related public policy why the ECLAS initiative is so timely and strategically important to his work.

Our hope is that readers of this issue will be inspired and encouraged to rethink their own interest and involvement in science-related conversations and initiatives. ECLAS comes to an end in March 2018 but we are hopeful of many offshoots and new developments. The project website address is <http://community.dur.ac.uk/christianleadership.science>.

For updates, our Twitter address is <https://twitter.com/christiscience>.

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## References

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