

The trouble with reason

Religion may be irrational, but simply attacking it flies in the face of science

SCIENCE and religion: just seeing the two words in the same sentence is enough to make some people apoplectic. The commingling of the two has been one of the most contentious educational and intellectual issues of the decade. Can they live together? Can a rational person be religious? Or should scientists be campaigning to rid society of what Richard Dawkins calls these “juvenile superstitions”?

To address such questions, some of the world's leading scientists met in La Jolla, California, last week for the second Beyond Belief symposium. The idea was to see how rational thinking fits with the distinctly non-rational religious beliefs that billions of people hold. Last year's meeting resounded with rallying calls from atheists determined to replace faith wherever they found it with a scientific world view. This year things were more conciliatory, with speakers recognising that we need many tools to make sense of the world besides the strictly rational (see page 6).

The change of tone is welcome. While the overbearing influence of religious groups in politics, especially in the US, is worrying and needs tackling, the idea that science can simply replace religion in the public consciousness is not only fanciful, it's also bad for science. Trying to tell people how they should think is likely to alienate them.

There is still a tendency among some scientists, however, to view religion as an irrational distraction and to presume that eradicating it would end a host of abuses.

Witness the claim, repeated by one participant in La Jolla, that religious schools are more likely to produce extremists, and the refrain repeated ad infinitum since 9/11 that religion is a sufficient incentive for suicide bombing. Such talk should be discouraged. It is based on no evidence whatsoever. True, terrorists tend to be more educated in religion than most in their community, but they are more educated in everything. Religious education is rarely a key radicalising factor. Likewise, it has been shown over and over that the political aspirations of terrorist groups play a far more critical role in suicide bombing than religion.

Moreover, religious belief is just one of many irrational human tendencies. Our sense of fairness and morality is hardly based on rational thinking. There is a growing conviction that such behaviours are largely innate, and that they evolved because they have survival value in an unpredictable world. Likewise religion. To borrow from a popular biblical saying, humankind cannot live by rational thought alone. To want to cleanse society of religion before understanding its evolutionary roots and purpose seems strangely unscientific.

The problem is not with religion per se – it's with the prejudice, discrimination and backward thinking that can derive from it. The subjugation of women and opposition to condom use are good examples. Far better to tackle these issues as they arise than try to eliminate a belief system in its entirety. ●