

Issue 53

Winter 2007

ISCAST

Christians in Science & Technology

www.iscast.org.au

ISCAST BULLETIN



Mammatus. Docklands, Melbourne 2007

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

*ISCAST is the Institute for
the Study of Christianity in
an Age of Science and
Technology*

A Non-profit company. ISCAST
Ltd. ABN 11 003 429 338.

ISSN 1834-0490 (Print)
ISSN 1834-0504 (Online)

Editorial	2
Letters to the editor	3
From the President	4
Book reviews	5-7

Editorial

The picture on this edition's cover is of mammatus cloud below the anvil of a cumulonimbus (thunderstorm) cloud. The anvil is the upper part of the thunderstorm, made of ice crystals. Mammatus cloud can form in a variety of environments and cloud types, but the common element in its formation is gradients of temperature, moisture and momentum (wind shear). They are often indicative of potentially severe weather when associated with a thunderstorm (as this one was). They are associated with instability below the cloud base. It was a nice change to see it in the city.

The interesting thing about mammatus is not only the meteorology, but also the etymology. Mammatus comes from the Latin *mamma*, meaning breast. The lumps reminded someone of a woman's breast! Of course, they don't really look like breasts, but they look a little like breasts. This isn't merely a sign of sexual preoccupation, but also of the human ability to find patterns and similarities (whether they are there or not). Most people can find patterns in clouds; resembling faces, mythological beasts, or even in the impact cloud of the September 11 plane explosions, the face of the devil! Most of the time, we are aware of the fact that what we see isn't really there.

This reminds me of something that Richard Dawkins wrote in *Unweaving the Rainbow* and then recycled in *The God Delusion*. Dawkins has refers to a hollow face that rotates. When the outward side rotates, we see it moving the way it actually moves. When the reverse side rotates, the brain fools us into thinking that it is actually rotating the other way. Anyone with an interest in M C Esher will be familiar with other sorts of optical illusions. For Dawkins, this is illustrative of the 'fact' that God is a cognitive illusion, and—joining the growing list of 'hairy chested' atheist books of late—a harmful illusion.

Of course, Dawkins commits a couple of mistakes here. He seems to fall prey too much to the power of his own analogy. The illusions he lists do not fool anyone. We know what we should really be seeing, and the cognitive dissonance which results points out the fact that they are illusions. What is the cognitive dissonance in the case of God? There are some genuine ones, such as gratuitous suffering, death, natural and human evil. However, there have been answers (however unsatisfactory) for some time. Dawkins pays little regard to these issues (apart from a brief and savage aside on the soul-making

theodicy of Richard Swinburne). However, where is the parallel with the rotating face? We have a valid expectation of how things should be (the face will rotate consistently in one direction). What is our valid expectation in the way the universe works? Having recently spent a fair bit of time thinking about Ecclesiastes, it seems to me we don't necessarily have enough information with which to form one. We have eternally placed in our hearts, yet also we don't appear to be able to see the whole divine plan at a glance. What I mean is not that there isn't a genuine biblical teleology (purpose), but that an observation of the everyday means it isn't obvious from an empirical basis—hence making Dawkins' claims seem a bit grand.

Furthermore, one might say that there is a genuine case that beauty (as per Polkinghorne), and the very existence of the universe (ontology) suggest that the idea of God not existing is the illusion!

I'd also add that if God uses natural processes to achieve his ends (and I take issue with Dawkins quoting Peter Atkins approvingly of describing such an idea as depicting a lazy God), then one might expect human beings to have all of the cognitive equipment to envisage God, not as some sort of wish fulfilment, but as the necessary tools to seek after, find and worship God.

This is all off the top of my head, but I am hoping that by the time of COSAC, and the delivery of my paper, some of these thoughts will be clearer.

On other fronts, I want to encourage readers to seek opportunities to serve the wider church whenever they can on issues of science and faith. I have had a few opportunities of late to speak to groups on climate change and a theological response/framework. I spoke over two weeks to the Melbourne University Christian Union. I have also been able to write some material for TEAR, being on their climate change working group.

Brian Edgar and I went to Tasmania recently to address a church group and the Synod of the Anglican Church on climate change. Many thanks to the Victorian branch of ISCAST for the many useful comments to come out of the draft of the presentation of the talk we were able to give to them. Climate change is certainly a topic with currency and something that the church needs to address.

Letters page

I should finish the editorial by thanking Helen Joynt for her ongoing efforts at fixing my FORMATTING, my typos and spellink mistakes.

Ed

To:

Bulletin Editor

Dear Dr Pope

The Summer issue of ISCAST Bulletin was, as usual, very useful!

Comments on 'Intelligent Design' recent books to note. *The Language of God* and the editor's remarks gave me pertinent information. I cannot say the same about "The McGrath—Dawkins debate"!

I read both, (McGrath and Dawkins) with a mounting frustration that was levelled, (equally), at both of them. Two intelligent people having a school yard squabble; a very noisy squabble devoid of usefulness. (TOTALLY DEVOID OF USEFULNESS.)

Atheism and Christianity are personal viewpoints based on belief, both of these 'viewpoints' are, I believe, valid provided that each party acts sensibly and turns the other cheek appropriately; or would we prefer WAR?

Yours sincerely,

Glen Marshall

Some Booklets Available from ISCAST

The following booklets exploring issues arising out of the interface between science and faith are available for sale:

- A Seamless Web** a collection of pieces by prominent scientists and thinkers on aspects of the interface between science and faith. Edited by Dr Graeme Findlay \$15
- God Created the Heavens and the Earth** by Donald Nield, Associate Professor of Engineering Science at the University of Auckland, NZ where he presents 'science from a Christian perspective'. \$10
- Gods Books: Genetics & Genesis** by Graeme Findlay of Uni-

versity of Auckland in which he explores the compatibility of science with the Christian faith. \$10

- Evolving Creation** by Graeme Findlay of University of Auckland celebrating 'the essential compatibility between natural science and Christian theology'. \$10
- Genesis1 – 3 Science? History? Theology?** by Dr J A Thompson formerly of Melbourne University. This classic Tyndale Lecture was given in 1966 and is still on ISCAST's 'best seller' list. It is now available in booklet form. \$3
- Notes on Science and Christian Belief** edited by Prof. Allan J Day. These are the notes Professor Day produced for his Ridley College course on science and faith and are available in hardcopy \$20
- Collected Papers** by Prof. Allan J Day. Professor Day has produced many papers on issues relating to science and faith. These have been compiled into this collection. \$20
- Also available is a printed version of Professor George Ellis' lecture to the Friends of the Church of St John the Baptist, Canberra on Sunday 17 July 2005 on **Science and Religion**. This is available free of charge or make a donation to the work of ISCAST.

Contact Details:

Name:

Address:

Phone number:

Email address:

Please indicate the number of each booklet you require, provide your contact details and send this form (or a photocopy) to ISCAST, c/-Stockdale ACS, 300 Huntingdale Rd, Huntingdale, Victoria 3166 or email vic@iscast.org.au or phone 03 9535 7045.

An additional cost of \$2.50 for every two articles for postage and handling will also be applied. Please make cheques payable to ISCAST Limited Vic. You may also contact us to arrange EFT payments

From the President

On reading my last 'From the President' (ISCAST Bulletin #52) I realise I have a number of things to report.

With regard to the application to the John Templeton Foundation for funds to upgrade the ISCAST Website, I regret to inform you that at the time we applied we were not aware the Foundation was in the process of rewriting their grant guidelines and they were not in fact accepting applications! The application will be reworked in line with the new guidelines and submitted when completed.

During a visit to the UK during March and April I was able to have a number of significant meetings with key representatives of Christians in Science (CiS) [Prof Andrew Briggs and his wife Diana in Oxford, Dr Ard Louis, the International Secretary of CiS, Dr Denis Alexander co-editor of *Science and Christian Belief (SCB)* & Dr Rodney Holder the other co-editor of *SCB*]. In the context of a Faraday Institute Workshop in which I presented two lectures to a conference of secondary teachers, my co-lecturers included Denis Alexander, Prof John Bryant (ISCAST Lecturer in 1995), Prof Bob White FRS and Dr Vinoth Ramachandra from IFES in Sri Lanka. Meetings were also held in Cambridge with Prof Colin Humphreys and the Rev'd Dr John Polkinghorne. In Oxford I had a very good meeting with Professor Alister McGrath during which we discussed the science-faith landscape as well as COSAC2007. He is very enthusiastic about being with us at COSAC this year. I was also privileged to have an hour and a half meeting with the Acting Director of the Ian Ramsey Centre, Prof Roger Trigg.

These meetings with representatives of CiS, The Faraday Institute and the Ian Ramsey Centre, confronted me with three different models for action in the science-faith interface. CiS has local groups around the UK, an annual conference and publishes *SCB*. The Faraday Institute, established since the start of 2006, with funding from the Templeton Foundation, runs courses for a variety of audiences. I took part in Short Course #5 aimed at secondary teachers in science, religion, philosophy and chaplains. Some who attended were not directly involved in education but saw the advertisement in *The Times*, paid their money and turned up! Not all participants were Christians or even religious and there was, needless to say, a lot of vigorous discussion. Their summer courses run for up to two weeks. The Ian Ramsey Centre runs research projects, all of which until now have been funded by the Templeton Foundation. All three models provide food for thought as we consider future opportuni-

ties for ISCAST.

On another matter, my wife and I are to attend the Forum for Ideas in Adelaide from 21–24th June, being arranged by the Australasian Theological Forum (ATF), one of the four organisations, including ISCAST, that makes up the Australian Science and Theology Network. ISCAST Fellows, Drs Mark Worthing and Greg Pike, are members of discussion panels, as is Prof Gareth Jones from Otago University. I shall report on the Forum in my next *From the President*.

As I indicated in my previous *From the President*, completion of my Discussion Paper on the future of ISCAST had to be put 'on hold' while I prepared talks for the Faraday Institute Course. It is now nearing completion and will be circulated first amongst the Board and then passed on to Fellows for consideration before the Fellows Meeting following COSAC2007.

The Board will hold a face-to-face meeting immediately before the start of COSAC on the morning of Friday 28th November at 10 am. This will provide an opportunity for a wide-ranging discussion of a great many matters including relationships with other organisations.

I end with a plea that all Fellows and Associates of ISCAST make it a priority to attend COSAC2007. More than that, I urge you all to explore your own networks and to encourage others – fellow scientists, clergy, church leaders and key young people – to register. This can be done *on-line*. However brochures are available through Richard and Glenys Gijbbers at vic@iscast.org.au.

The ISCAST(Vic) Annual Lecture will be given the evening before COSAC [Thursday 27th September at Glen Waverley Anglican Church] by Prof Alister McGrath on the topic *The Bankruptcy of Scientific Atheism*. Those coming from Interstate might consider coming a day early in order to hear the lecture.

ISCAST is a Christian organisation, based on biblical Christianity. This is a reminder that we should all be praying for wisdom and guidance as we look for appropriate ways forward for our work, our thinking and our ministry.

John Pilbrow

4 June 2007

Book reviews

The Natural History of the Bible – An Environmental Exploration of the Hebrew Scriptures

Daniel Hillel
Columbia University Press, New York, 2006

The title of Hillel's book is intriguing and one wonders which aspect of natural history is focused on. The subjects covered include geography, climate, landscape form, geology, soil and vegetation; these are always mentioned in relation to the peoples (and their beliefs) who lived in this region. Indeed this book aims to increase awareness of the landscape and its physical attributes that existed for the peoples of Bible times.

Hillel's background as a soil scientist and professional experience in the Middle East makes him well qualified to write this book. This work shows that Hillel has augmented his scientific knowledge with respect and understanding of the Hebrew scriptures. Evidence of this is seen by the attention that Hillel gives to the original Hebrew text, discussion on the meaning of scripture and the etymology of particular key words. The translation of the Bible used by Hillel is not well known and was recently published by the Jewish Publication Society in 2000. Interestingly, the name or names of the Deity were transliterated, thus Elohim was given for 'God' and Yahweh for 'The Lord'. Hillel claims this was done so that the progression toward monotheism would be clearer.

Most of the book is divided into different domains for each chapter. Early on the ecological domains (of the Fertile Crescent) were classified as a region that contains similar climate and topography. There are two riverine domains (one in Mesopotamia and the other in Egypt), a pastoral domain, a desert domain, a rainfed domain and a maritime domain. In addition, two synthetic domains are given: the urban and exile domains. These domains provide the book with a good structure to follow the history and narratives of the Bible in a chronological sequence.

Starting with Genesis, Hillel focuses on the creation story and observes some similarities with Mesopotamian mythology. However, fundamental differences are described between the polytheism of Mesopotamia and 'the unity of God in the Bible'. Again and again as Hillel de-

scribes the narratives of the different domains he emphasises the uniqueness of the Israelites' ethical monotheism.

The pastoral domain (the region between the maritime and desert domains, but not including the riverine domains) was itself a diverse area that was home to the major leaders of Israel, including Abraham, Jacob, Moses and David. The nomadic lifestyle of the shepherds here was a mixture of favourable conditions (green pastures with still waters) and those less than favourable (the harshness of a drought). Thus Hillel notes it is not surprising that the beloved Psalm 23 describes 'the relationship between the people of Israel and their God' as 'his trusting and obedient flock' and 'their caring shepherd'. Living in this region was challenging and farming was risky and only possible in years with above-average rainfall. So when Isaac engaged in farming as well as grazing and it was said that he 'reaped a hundredfold the same year' (Genesis 26:12), Hillel suggests Isaac was at the edge of the rainfed domain. On the other hand, the separation of Jacob and Esau (Genesis 36:7) may have been because the land had 'limited carrying capacity' and Jacob may have feared a clash over pasture and water. This is interesting and is typical of Hillel's continual search for a practical physical explanation for the events of the Bible.

The fertility of the Nile riverine domain and the ability of Egypt to produce abundant food were well described. Hillel describes the annual flooding of the Nile and its benefits, curiously the fluctuations (in time) were measured as Nilometers¹. Current understanding of these dry periods suggests that they 'may be related to phenomena such as El Niño-La Niña cycles'. Thus it makes sense that Joseph's prediction of years with plenty would be followed by a series of low-flow years that would result in famine.

Hillel comes to the fore when explaining (or attempting to) difficult passages of scripture. Presumably his knowledge and familiarity of recognised natural phenomena of land in the Middle East have enabled this. For instance, Hillel suggests that coagulation of suspended matter was followed by settling, when Yahweh showed Moses which piece of wood to throw into the bitter tasting water so it would become sweet (Exodus 15:25). Further, he prefers that the rock which Moses struck with his rod

Book reviews

(Exodus 17:6) was evaporite or travertine. Hillel reports that sometimes when groundwater comes to the surface it evaporates to form a brittle rock-like material containing calcite (CaCO₃) and gypsum (CaSO₄). Thus, it is proposed that Moses broke the crust of this type of 'rock' which allowed water to flow out for the people to drink.

A weakness of Hillel's approach is his tendency to allow nothing except a scientific, rationalistic explanation, or a myth. In Exodus 16 the Israelites received quail and manna, although according to Hillel, only the provision of quails has some basis in reality. As no sensible explanation can be provided for the manna, it 'must be regarded as completely mythical'. This is a dangerous position to arrive at because it may lead to the authority of scripture being reduced and the Bible held *ransom* to contemporary scientific knowledge. In such cases, when our understanding is stretched, I believe that we need to focus on how God is speaking to us. We need to discern what the meta-narrative is.

Endearing features of this book are the illustrations, maps and various figures that are scattered throughout. These are useful in providing further information in a visual manner. At the end of the book there are additional notes that expand upon material presented earlier in the book and there is also an extensive bibliography.

The three appendices given are worthy of reflection too. I recommend this book to a wide range of readers, especially to Christians with an interest in the physical environment which provided the backdrop for their faith. The ethical monotheism of what we today know as the Jewish religion was formed in a beautiful and fascinating part of the world. Hillel concludes that the 'culture and faith' of the Israelites has ultimately influenced 'the entire development of Western civilisation'. This may be so, but more importantly for Christians, it was God's people of the Hebrew Scriptures (i.e. the Old Testament) who received covenants that are the foundation of Christianity. ¶ The footnote given by Hillel states that 'Nilometers are gauging posts used by the ancient Egyptians to measure the level of the river during its flood stage, year after year'.

Religion and Agriculture – Sustainability in Christianity and Buddhism

Lindsay Falvey

2005

Institute for International Development: Adelaide, pp 272.

As a Christian and a soil scientist with a strong interest in agriculture, the title of this book caught my attention. Indeed, the title taps into our zeitgeist with the biggest of all buzz words — sustainability. In addition, the topic was given with a Buddhist viewpoint (which turned out to be its bias).

The book is written in clear language and is easy to read. The chapters are well organised (perhaps too well organised) but it felt as though each chapter has been written in a programmatic fashion that always concluded with a conclusion. This was useful for the longer chapters, however for the shorter chapters there was repetition. Falvey's style of writing makes him accessible to a wide audience.

I recommend this book to a wide range of readers, especially to Christians with an interest in the physical environment which provided the backdrop for their faith.

Falvey commences the book with a general outline of the themes that he will tackle in the rest of the book. There are interesting anecdotes and narrative background to set the stage, such as the proposition that 'our lost natural state may be a desire to return to the garden of Eden (p. 14)'. However, there

were some early statements that revealed a bias towards Buddhist views and an ignorance of Christian beliefs and practices that concerned me. For instance, on the use of scriptures Falvey states that there are those who, 'either limit their understanding to literal interpretations, or ... (are) disappointed (p. 18)'. Fortunately, there are Christians that use scripture in a sensitive and respectful manner which doesn't fall into either of the categories suggested by Falvey.

Following this, Falvey asks why there is currently a fascination with sustainability and then focuses on the link between sustainability and immortality. This is a great point on which to focus on the Christian hope of eternal life; however Falvey cynically describes this Christian belief as selfish rhetoric for 'ensuring the future of our grandchildren'. Despite the lack of respect for Christian beliefs Falvey observes that the increased interest in 'sustainability as a virtue' is due, in western society, to a rise in the adoption of secular values. To give the ap-

Book reviews

pearance that Christianity is being represented Falvey scatters references to scripture verses through the first few chapters of this book. This style may convince some readers that Falvey has captured the essence of Christian doctrines, but those familiar with the Bible will realise that Falvey's exegesis is absent. No serious attempt was made to interpret scripture. This is disappointing as it leads to the abuse of scripture and the meaning of scripture was distorted. Indeed Falvey frequently uses language such as the 'myth of Genesis', 'modern fundamentalist rhetoric' and 'literal interpretations...' which indicates the low value that he places on scripture. On the positive side, Falvey raises the possibility of a scripturally-derived concept that encourages the stewardship of the earth; however, this idea was not developed further. Consequently, Falvey concludes that Christian teachings are really only about personal spiritual transformation, although 'a literal interpretation can seem relevant to agricultural sustainability'.

Falvey's true colours are shown when he states that the modern prophets of the church today are Spong, Cupitt, Tillich and Teilhard de Chardin. Strangely, these 'prophets' are theologians that have taken controversial and hotly disputed positions. The arguments supporting these enlightened theologians are very brief and poorly developed. For instance, the reference supporting Spong was taken from an ABC radio program. The general thrust of Falvey's argument seems to be that Christians should believe in God in a Buddhist way. Thus it was no surprise when Falvey suggested that Eastern Orthodox Christianity has got it right (i.e. a Buddhist style of Christianity), although the evidence for this was superficial. All this leads to a post-modern belief position that contains elements of some Christian beliefs. Indeed Falvey emphasises that the traditional church (which I presume includes evangelicals) has missed the point.

Sadly, orthodox or evangelical theologians are not seriously considered. Instead Falvey would like us to believe that there is an Eastern flavour or influence to Luther's writings. This is a highly questionable proposition and is the product of a deconstructionist approach to theology. The lack of fairness in reviewing Christian thinking is continued by Falvey in a most subjective manner. In concluding chapter 6 Falvey claims that sustainable agricul-

ture can only be 'understood by the wise'. However, who or what 'the wise' might be was not defined, although I suspect that it does not include anything Christian given the criticism that Falvey directs at Christianity.

My unease with Falvey continues when in bold and brief fashion he concludes that there is congruence of spiritual insights across major religions. This claim is not surprising as Falvey seems to change/ interpret scripture in Buddhist terms. It also appears that Falvey sees Christianity not as a genuine faith, but a 'collection of historical facts'. Consequently, it is fitting that Falvey embraces pantheism as a 'maternal... conception of life that fosters positive emotions towards the environment'. The difficulties of trying to achieve sustainability and development are raised, but the contribution that Falvey makes here is minimal and superficial to say the least, e.g. non growth-

My unease with Falvey continues when in bold and brief fashion it is concluded there is congruence of spiritual insights across major religions. This claim is not surprising as Falvey seems to change/ interpret scripture in Buddhist terms.

based sustainable options are vaguely suggested. References to 'wisdom' or 'acting wisely' were given several times through the later chapters of this book.

What Falvey really means by this is hard to tell, but it seems that karmic agriculture (which avoids the extremes) is getting close. However, in the concluding chapter Falvey takes bits and pieces from several religions to form his *sutra* of sustainability. In the end there is little that Falvey contributes to understanding agriculture in any practical sense and all the discussion on sustainability is either superficial or rhetorical. To conclude Falvey advocates a spiritual transformation (in an Eastern sense). Thus, I believe that the aim of Falvey was to discredit Christianity and present Eastern religions (especially Buddhism) as superior faiths.

Dr Jonathan Holland

Coming Event

Darwinism, Creationism, Intelligent Design, and Theistic Evolution: A Comparison (Lecture)
Start Date: 25 June, 2007
Venue: 7.30 pm at New College in the University of NSW.

Contact: Dr Lewis Jones. lewis.jones@reap.asn.net, (02) 9697 2397 or Prof. Peter Barry, p.barry@unsw.edu.au, (02) 9385 1101.

ISCAST

Christians in Science & Technology

www.iscast.org.au

President & Chairman of the Board:

Emeritus Professor John R Pilbrow FAIP
CPhys FInstP
Email: jpilbrow@iscast.org.au

Secretary:

Dr Robert Stening,
5 Savoy Ave, Killara NSW 2071
Ph h (02) 9498 2710 b (02) 9385 4584
Email: r.stening@unsw.edu.au

NSW Contact:

Dr. Lewis Jones
202/35-47 Wilson Lane,
Darlington, NSW 2008 (02) 9519-0189
Email: lewis.jones@reap.asn.au

Queensland contacts:

Prof. Ross McKenzie,
Dept. Physics, University of Queensland
Email: mckenzie@physics.uq.edu.au
Secretary, PO Box 1462, Kenmore 4069

Victoria/SATAS contact:

Richard and Glenys Gijbers, 300 Huntingdale Rd, Huntingdale, VIC, 3166
Tel.: (03) 9535 7045.
Email: vic@iscast.org.au

Bulletin Editor:

Mick Pope
Email: bulletin@iscast.org.au

Online Journal Editor:

Bruce Craven
Email: onlinejournal@iscast.org.au

For circulation concerns, contact the state representatives. To submit articles contact the editor. For news of forthcoming meetings please consult the web page.

The views in this Bulletin are those of the individual authors or the editor. They do not necessarily reflect the official views of the ISCAST board.

ISCAST is the Institute for the Study of Christianity in an Age of Science and Technology

ADVERTISEMENTS

COSAC 2007 What is Real? Conversations in Science and Christianity

28–30 September

Main speaker:
Dr. Alister McGrath

Geelong Conference
Centre

Registration for the conference and Thursday night lecture available online at www.iscast.org.au

Contact: vic@iscast.org.au

The deadline for submissions for the next issue of the Bulletin is the end of COSAC (or shortly thereafter). Please submit to Mick Pope at bulletin@iscast.org.au