

COMMENTARY

SCIENCE FACES THE PUBLIC

THE annual meeting of the British Association does not seem to have lost its hold on the popular imagination. Yet as Dr Adrian pointed out in his presidential address, science has now entered the very structure of our civilization, and no longer requires to be preached to us, as in the early days of the Association. Perhaps we now rather look to this meeting for some sort of assurance that after all science is friendly and not alien. This is the one week of the year in which the scientist emerges from his laboratory and comes forward to put his case before the public. To use Dr Adrian's words, this is his opportunity 'of showing the layman where the scientific age is leading him'; or as Sir Mortimer Wheeler expressed it, 'of bringing about the adjustment of knowledge, new and old, to the miscellaneous society in which we live'.

A great opportunity indeed; but it cannot really be said that it was taken at this meeting. Of the thirteen presidential addresses to the different sections, for example, scarcely a quarter could be called intelligible to the educated non-specialist. The majority of the speakers remained bound by the narrow horizon of their specializations, and spoke to their fellow-scientists, with only slight modification of their usual manner, about the technical advances of the past year. All too rarely was the implication of these advances for our civilization made the central theme, and it was difficult to avoid concluding that this was because the scientists themselves have little idea of where their discoveries are leading us.

Obviously scientists will be led by their search for knowledge into regions of thought where the layman is unable to follow them; but the use to which this knowledge is being put has a profound effect on the lives of everybody. Hence the proper use of the new knowledge is a legitimate field for discussion between scientist and layman, in which those who have made the discoveries have both the right and the duty to take the lead. Yet the responsibility is all too often evaded; the scientist makes of his laboratory an ivory tower, pretending unconcern for the evil uses to which others are putting his research.



The matter has a certain urgency. It is no longer in anyone's power to restrict the use of discoveries in nuclear physics, where in any case the correct solution was far from clear: but nearly every branch of science is producing its own moral dilemma for our decision. To quote Dr Adrian again, 'a drug or a system of education which would make us all do as we are told, a method of producing radical conversion to a new system of belief, a knowledge of new ways of rousing patriotic ardour, all these might be used with consequences almost as grim as the genetical deterioration in a radio-active world'. Equally menacing will be the power of the biologist to control the production both of our children and of our food in a world for which the problem of over-population is soon going to be all-important.

How is the Church concerned in all this? The old controversies between science and religion on matters of pure knowledge have ended in a reconciliation, as a result of better understanding on either side. In the moral sphere the question of conflict or collaboration yet remains. Here above all the Catholic scientist has an important part to play. In the pursuit of truth he must never allow his judgment to be biased by preconceptions of what he ought to find; but in determining the use to which his knowledge will be put he must judge the issue in the light of his moral principles and speak out fearlessly. A scientist has immense prestige in the modern world; in his hands he holds the future of us all.

NOTICE

The November issue of *BLACKFRIARS* will be specially devoted to St Augustine, in celebration of the sixteenth centenary of his birth.