

CHAPTER 13
PARTIAL THINKING



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from the 6th edition of*

VERDICT

ON JESUS

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About this Extract

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Partial Thinking

*We imagine that we are initiated into Nature's mysteries;
we are as yet but hanging round her outer court.*

Seneca

Human knowledge has become a jig-saw of countless separate pieces, with few knowing enough to fit the pieces together. Specialisation, that has brought humankind so much of worth and excellence, has often resulted in people losing touch with subjects other than their own. It becomes increasingly difficult to 'see life steadily and see it whole'. We consider this as a possible factor that may contribute to the popular fallacy, for such it surely is, that religion and science are at variance.

'I have taken all knowledge to be my province,' wrote Francis Bacon. He was a man of extraordinary achievements and capacity of mind. As author of the *Novum Organum* he is often considered the originator of the modern school of experimental science.

But since the sixteenth century the scope of knowledge has widened. Detail has accumulated. 'The province of knowledge,' even of a single subject, has to be broken up,

and shared out among department specialists. The day of the computer has now come.

The result is not reassuring. ‘We have become,’ said Dr A. S. Russell, ‘increasingly lop-sided in our knowledge. Whole tracts of fertile country are left strangely unexplored, while nearly all of us concentrate, like beavers, on one small part of the field.’

Intensity of focus, specialisation, has resulted in discoveries like those of Jenner, Pasteur, Lister, Alexander Fleming, and Simpson, that will forever bless humanity. The mere mention of names like Darwin, Mendel, Marconi, Einstein and Rutherford, indicate the range and excellence of what specialised science has achieved. What Bacon advocated — ‘a true and patient understanding and interrogation of nature through phenomena and facts’—has had immense rewards.

But concentration on a particular line of study may often be paid for by a narrowing down, or even the total exclusion, of other studies. Individually, few now see more than a tiny aspect of truth, understand more than a little of knowledge in the round.

Consider the absorbed attention that scientific specialisation demands. Science learnt from Christianity the love of truth and order, and that sense of the rationality of the universe that underlies scientific research. It learnt from Aristotle that truth along certain lines could be reached by the accumulation and interrogation of facts. These facts would suggest general laws. We see the method at work in Darwin’s tireless accumulation of the data for his *The Origin of*

Species, and in Mendel, probing the secret of hereditary trends by the elaborate classification of varieties of peas. The method was impersonal, factual, detached.

The scientist piles up facts, as the worker piles up stones, in the hope of building something out of them, and the scientist, like the worker, can only build within the limits of the material they have got together. They may have omitted valuable material, or be using material inadequately sorted out, but they raise their building. Whether that building—in the case of the scientist—is a pleasant or habitable home for people does not concern them.

Scientists, by the very nature of their assumptions, have to leave aside a whole world of values, and even to proceed as if they never existed. But how will men and women fare if they leave aside human values as in history and literature, or aesthetic values as in art and music, spiritual values as in philosophy and religion?

People have seized with enthusiasm the idea of evolution with its happy suggestion that life tends ever to move upwards to the higher and better. But what of Darwin's other theory that under specialisation life may not so much open up as narrow down? What of the law of recession, the dreadful threat of spiritual atrophy, that Darwin also enunciated? Who can read unmoved Darwin's poignant account of how he himself was aware of the working of this chilling law?

'My mind,' he records, 'has become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts.' He speaks of powers perishing for lack of employment, of his

waning taste for art, music, and literature, of the ‘atrophy of that part of the brain on which the higher tastes depend’.

‘The loss of these tastes,’ he continues, ‘is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and, more particularly, to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of one’s nature.’³⁵

Readers will recall the equally well-known supporting statement in the *Autobiography* of John Stuart Mill: ‘For I now saw, what I had always before received with incredulity—that the habit of analysis has a tendency to wear away the feelings when no other mental habit is cultivated, and the analysing spirit remains without its natural complements and correctives.’

These are intimate revelations from people of true greatness, who were themselves deeply conscious of the validity of spiritual values, and of the reality of the spiritual side of humankind’s nature. But are there not some who have followed such scholars in the path of specialisation, who have little or no awareness of the existence and worth of those things, the loss of which Darwin and Mill so movingly regretted? Science for science’s sake can be so immensely absorbing, that it may even obscure consideration of humankind’s welfare, safety and happiness.

Some years ago Sir William Dampier could say, ‘The pure scientist should always stick to pure science, however dull their work may seem to others, let them pile up results regardless of their use.’ But could it be said that science

³⁵ *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, p. 100.

should pile up results, say of atomic fission, and be morally regardless of the consequences?

Robert Jungk recounts in *Brighter than a Thousand Suns* how the atom bomb was made as a work of pure research. But then came the awful realisation of the possibilities of its use and the desperate, and futile, attempts made to banish it from use.

‘Bigger and better scientific laboratories,’ wrote Professor C. A. Coulson in a letter to *The Times*, ‘do not necessarily make for world peace, or a more balanced, harmonious life; a more extensive knowledge of metallurgical technique does not necessarily mean a mature judgment, or a satisfying personality.’ But in indicating the limitations that may beset one approach to reality, the scientific, are we not forgetting that efficiency in any work involves specialisation? The works- foreman, architect, businessman, doctor, minister of religion, all have to say:

*My nature is subdued
To what it works in, like the dyer’s hand.*

Theology itself is a highly specialist sphere, and as capable as any of producing the closed mind. Who, for instance, did more than Bishop Wilberforce to give colour to the idea that religion and science were at variance, when in argument with Thomas Huxley he declared that ‘evolution is absolutely incompatible with the word of God in Genesis’? The irony of the whole situation was that the good Bishop was not only out of touch with science, but out of touch with liberal thought in some contemporary Christian journals, and the very early ideas of St Gregory of Nyssa who lived

from ad 330 to ad 395. 'God in the beginning,' said Gregory, 'only created the germs of life, or causes of the forms of life, which were afterwards developed in natural course.'

Negatively, such an instance is a warning against the closed mind wherever it is found. Positively, it is an invitation to be hospitable to truth from wherever it may speak, confident that God is honoured wherever truth is perceived. We are in a world where all our faculties should be enlisted, and truth from all quarters be freely exchanged and heeded.

It is not within the province of science to vindicate Christianity, the herald of values and insights that are beyond either mere sense perception, or scientific explanation. All the same, as can be easily realised, there are some basic attitudes on the part of science that are more congenial to the acceptance of Christian truths than are others.

Today the nineteenth century idea that science could explain all mysteries has gone. There is a new awareness of the spiritual sense. 'You will hardly find one among the profounder sort of scientific minds,' said Albert Einstein, 'without peculiar religious feelings of their own. Their religious feeling takes the form of rapturous amazement at the harmony of the natural law. It is beyond question akin to that which has possessed religious geniuses in all ages.'

The harmony of the natural law is a great theme. Alone on the steep slopes of knowledge, glimpsing what Darwin called 'the laws impressed on matter by the Creator', the scientists can become aware that their picture of the physical world is far from being the product of their own mind. They face a

harmony that is 'given', that is inherent, that is humbling, so the physicists realise that their formulae and equations are at best but approximations and imperfect representations of what they find. Or the cosmologists may admit with astonished wonder that their inquiries into the nature of the universe bring them answers finer in concept and grander in design than anything they could have imagined.

Nor are there lacking parallel situations in all other approaches to reality. So there are the unwavering laws of mathematics, systems of balances and checks in the order of nature, ultra-microscopic genes and their companions the chromosomes, that are the absolute keys to all human, animal, and vegetable characteristics, permanent factors in the working out of the modern law, even a givenness about the harmonies of music and a 'golden mean' in the constitution of art.

Overarching all partial thinking there are these great beautifying and immutable realities that cry out for religious interpretation.

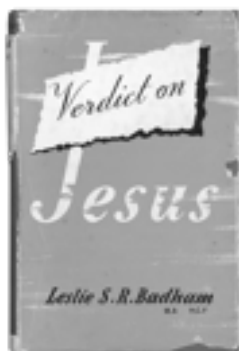
Professor C. A. Coulson in *Science and Christian Belief* is surely right. 'Religion is the total response of man to all his environment. Living the good life is not an endless struggle to balance the conflicting claims of science, art, poetry, philosophy, and worship, as though they warred together, like the tribes in Anglo-Saxon Britain. Living the good life means receiving these partial revelations, reflecting upon them, and responding to them.'

Unfortunately, there is a painful, even dangerous time-lag between the views of leading thinkers, and the mental

attitude persisting strongly in some quarters. Intellectual systems have a knack of surviving their own death. In the next two chapters we comment on the resistance Christianity encounters from the tenacity of old ideas.

7 Decades

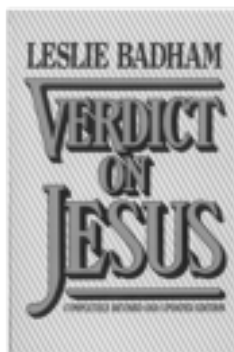
Verdict on Jesus through the years



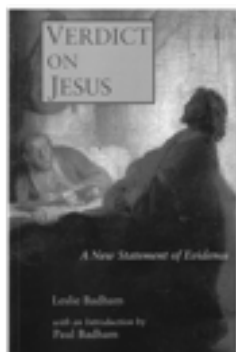
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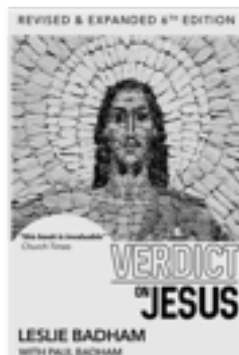
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Leslie Badham

Author of Verdict on Jesus

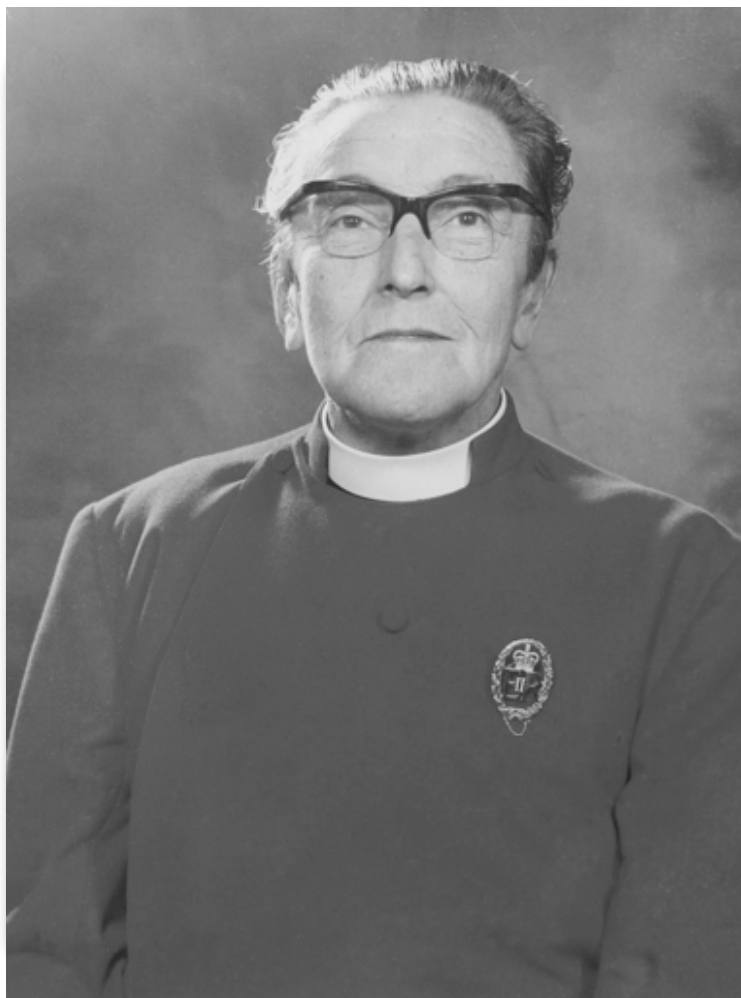


Top left: Leslie Badham with Effie, his fiancée, at her graduation from the LSE in 1935

Top right: Leslie and Effie Badham with their children David, Christine, Clare and Paul in 1963

Middle: Leslie Badham with Queen Elizabeth II at Windsor Parish Church in 1965

Bottom left: Leslie Badham RAF Chaplain 1940-45



Leslie Badham (1908–75)

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