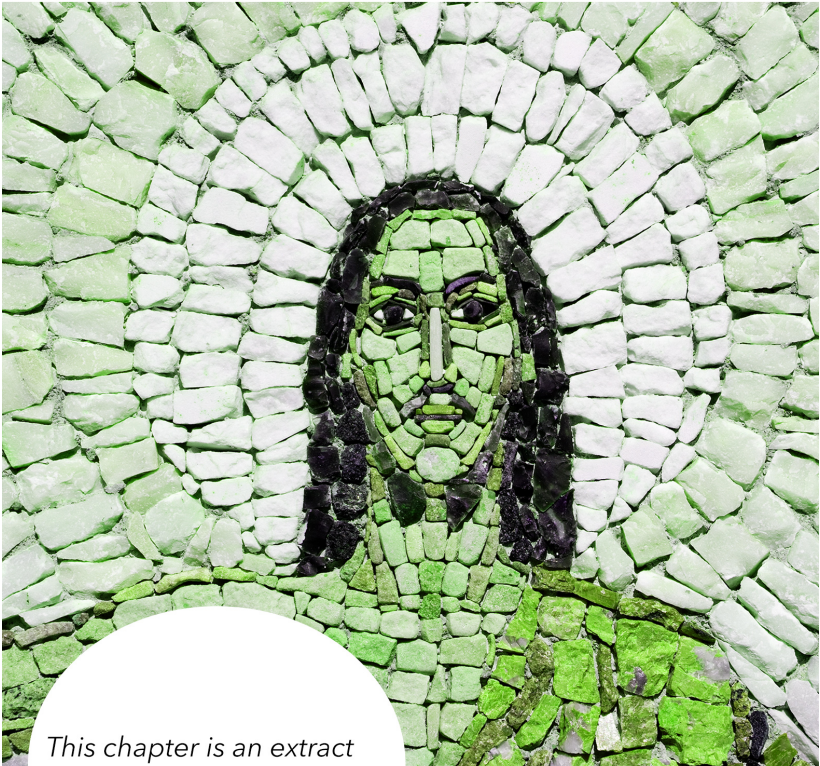


CHAPTER 14
MATERIALISM



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VERDICT

ON JESUS

LESLIE BADHAM WITH PAUL BADHAM

About this Extract

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Materialism

Graceless Western man has turned against the religion that found him a barbarian and that has promoted him to the lordship of the world.

Arnold Toynbee

Religion and natural science are fighting a joint battle against scepticism, against dogmatism, against disbelief and against superstition, and the rallying cry has been, and always will be, 'On to God'.

Max Planck

The attitude of the prisoner who refused to be released from the Bastille is not unique. It has its counterpart in those who display a similar attachment to some narrow ideas that responsible science has discarded.

Ideas have a peculiar knack of hardening around us. We become accustomed to them. They govern our world. Like the prisoner long accustomed to their cell, and long unfamiliar with any other world, we refuse almost subconsciously, to desire the wider air.

This explains the resistance that Christianity encounters in some quarters today. Minds have settled down into frameworks of thought, built some time ago by scientific materialists. True, modern physicists have abandoned the old sites and are building more airy structures elsewhere, but people are refusing to move.

In *Meaning and Purpose* Kenneth Walker writes:

Looking back, I have clearly seen that at different periods of my life my mind became incarcerated within the narrow limits of some doctrine—such as the scientific materialism of the last century, the idea that evolution occurred through the action of blind mechanical forces, or the equally pessimistic systems of psychology sponsored by Pavlov or Freud—and what is particularly apparent to me, now that I have escaped from these mental prisons, is that while confined in them, I was completely satisfied with my surroundings... It is only now that I realise that I mistook tentative theories for absolute truths, and temporary resting places of thought for permanent residences.

It is a helpful exercise at any time to consider the parentage of ideas. Consider, therefore, a few old ideas that although refuted by later thought, continue to hold people's minds today.

Many of our underlying mental attitudes and assumptions today can be traced back three centuries to the scientific materialism that derived from the physics of Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727).

It did not appear to dawn on Newton, who was a devout Christian, that his system of mechanics and his theory of gravitation carried with them two powerful suggestions, which, when taken into philosophy, would violently conflict with Christian beliefs.

In the light of Newton's theories, Nature seemed to appear to human beings as a vast machine with people merely insignificant cogs in it. The implications of his theories were anticipated by Hobbes, a writer of fluent pen. Hobbes gave scientific materialism that place in human thinking which it seems never to have lost.

Nor indeed is this surprising. The idea of the Universe as a super-machine was obviously congenial to generations whose own lives were to be increasingly linked with machinery.

Hobbes taught that matter was the only reality, that events of every kind were simply due to the motion of water, that humans were only a lively material body whose thoughts and emotions were due to the activity of the atoms inside them. Everything was open to mechanical explanation, and the future was set by 'mechanical determinism'.

But here was a theory that seemed supported by the great name of Newton that cut the nerve of the Church's teaching on free-will. 'On his imagined freedom,' said Sir James Jeans in *Physics and Philosophy*; 'had built up his social system and his ethical code. It formed the cornerstone of religion ... but if human conduct was only a matter of the push and pull of atoms, all this became meaningless. Exhorting men to be moral or useful was as foolish as telling

a clock to keep good time when it was pathetically dependent on its works.'

Human beings who had thought themselves the heirs of two worlds—the material and the spiritual—now choose to find what pleasure and profit they could in one: the material. Life had narrowed down with a vengeance.

But Hobbes was wrong. His philosophy is on the scrap-heap—and put there by responsible modern science. 'The scientific bases of the older discussions,' says Jeans, 'have been washed away, and with their disappearance have gone all the arguments, such as they were, that seemed to require the acceptance of materialism and the renunciation of human free-will.'

If the arguments have gone, powerful ideas that they promoted have continued. Released into the mainstream of the world's thinking the ideas of scientific materialism soon became influential. Scientists, for instance, soon spoke with a new assurance and dogmatism. 'One day,' said Tindal, addressing the British Association, 'science will be able to explain everything in terms of the movement of atoms—everything from the evolution of worlds to the proceedings of the British Association itself.' 'Let the Church,' declared Comte, 'take a subsidiary place, and hand over the leadership of humankind to science.'

Philosophers, too, big and little, became more sceptical. In the first thirty years of the eighteenth century the 'Deists', such as Toland, Collins, and Tindal, were allowed to print their views without the opposition they would have encountered earlier. In France, under the influence of

Voltaire, 'Deism' became more uncompromising and more anti-Christian. The road was being cut to the moral scepticism of our day. In France the seeds that were to grow into Existentialism were being sown.

More influential in advancing scepticism in philosophy was David Hume (1711–1776). He envied the seeming finality of Newton's work. He wanted to establish a moral science, to discover the 'Laws' that govern our internal impressions, just as Newton had established the general laws that govern the movement of material particles. Religion and free-will were denied validity. Human beings were wholly parts of nature.

Hume was answered by Kant's great work, *Critique of Pure Reason*, just as the 'Deists' were out-matched in argument by Bishop Butler, Bishop Berkeley, Bentley, and William Law, but patterns of thought were started that were increasingly to grip minds, and send them out on those grey seas of scepticism.

Today there is little comfort, and much that is ironical, in realising the confidence with which the natural philosophers set out, and how inconceivable it would have been to them to imagine that their rigid materialistic concepts, would, in our time, be looked on warily by responsible scientists, if not actually discounted.

Scientific materialism certainly increased the popularity of nineteenth-century Darwinism, the one seeming to lend colour to the other.

It is notable that both Darwin and Wallace took pains to say that *The Origin of Species* (1859) was not irreligious in its implications. Darwin told Wordsworth personally that his theory ‘in no way interfered with Christianity’; while Wallace averred that ‘the Darwinian theory, even when carried to its extreme logical conclusion, not only does not oppose, but actually lends support to, the belief in the spiritual nature of man’.

But minds steeped in materialistic assumptions thought otherwise, Darwinism in a crude form became ‘popular’. The colourful idea of humans descending from the ape was taken with vivid literalism. It became increasingly common to minimise the specifically human qualities of *homo sapiens*. The grandeur of life’s age-long ascent, the diverse branches of the tree of evolution, the awe-inspiring mystery of life itself, the wonder of its strange mutations, the scholarly correctiveness to a harsh literalism in Darwin’s writings—all these were left out of account by lesser minds.

Numerous writers seemed to delight in narrowing, or in ignoring altogether, the gap between human beings and other creatures. The uniqueness of human evolutionary history, the continual nature of the human sex response (as distinct from the discontinuous sex life of the animal world), our biological dominance and variability, our almost infinite capacity for adjustment to environment—these were passed over, while our capacity for conceptual and abstract thought, together with our moral sensibilities and spiritual appreciations, seemed deliberately set aside.³⁶

³⁶ See G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*; Julian Huxley, *The Uniqueness of Man*.

Now, when you get a pseudo-scientific materialism leaving out God, ignoring the validity of ideals, questioning morality, and giving a purely biological account of the place of human beings in the universe, two things are bound to result—people stand defenceless and disinherited in a world that has lost its sanctities, while predatory forces, unchecked by higher law, exploit and strip away their right and liberties.

Phrases from the scientists, like ‘the survival of the fittest’, could suggest to Bernhardt, and then to the Nazi mind, the cult of a girded and aggressive might, while in industry it could condone a profitable sweating of the lower classes. Similarly, the phrase ‘natural selection’ was suggestive to the political ideologist, and lent encouragement to class, national and racial claims, and vanities.

Human’s mental life is a flowing stream into which a variety of currents are continually pouring. As ideas mingle, they tend to lose their identity and to become anonymous in the general thought of an age, and, when this has happened, it is almost invidious to specify the original sources.

It is doubtful, therefore, if many of those who accept Freudianism or Behaviourism in psychology, are aware that beneath these theories are the assumptions of scientific determinism—that we are ‘conditioned’, that we must act in accord with ‘nature’, and so forth. Similarly, many who are impressed with the simplicity of Marx’s teaching about the iron law of economic struggle, may not see that underlying it is a transference into the economic sphere of that idea of conflict, ‘red in tooth and claw’, that evolutionists first found

in the jungle. Still more important, many who from motives of social idealism embrace Marxist communism, may not perceive that underlying the Marxist philosophy are the old concepts of scientific materialism and determinism.

Let us therefore glance at the tremendous social-political movement that, with social justice in the forefront of its programme, is in reality but the rigorous working out in history of the ideas and assumptions of the scientific materialist.

Marx's celebrated 'Manifesto' saw all past history in terms of class-war—masters and slaves in the ancient world, lords and serfs in the mediaeval period, and capitalists and wage earners in the modern period, and the clash between them determined by remorseless economic law.

Very properly Marx drew attention to the important part played in history by competing economic interests, but in emphasising this, he overlooked the causes, other than economic, that have also played a part in engendering bitterness and conflict—for example, the clashes between King and Parliament, or between Church and State, and the numerous ideals, other than economic, that have occasionally actuated society—as when the British taxpayers laid aside their self-interest to meet a bill of twenty million pounds to free the slaves.

But Marx's great motto, 'From everyone according to his gifts, to everyone according to his needs', is one that every Christian would endorse, echoing, as it does, Christ's own words, 'Unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required; and to whom men have committed much, of

him they will ask the more' (Luke 12: 48). But the Christian would not interpret it exclusively in an economic sense.

This distinction explains part of the clash between Christianity and Marxist communism, for communism has the essential nature of a heresy. It takes one value—the economic—and exalts it at the expense of other, and more specifically 'Christian', values.

The Marxist communist acts on the assumption that the Throne of the Universe is vacant, and that religion is a word of no meaning. Material facts alone have relevance. Everything is determined by material laws. In the place of God stands the Process of History. For faith in ideals is substituted confidence in an economic drift. For the Kingdom of God is substituted the utopian goal of a classless society. Before the eyes of a secularised world, men and women are presented, not as children of God, but as virtual slaves of the state. With no belief in anything transcendent in the world of values, truth is regarded as relative and utilitarian, while morality is subordinated to expediency.

The secular mind with its complete submission to materialism seems everywhere to threaten the human spirit, but it is not producing a larger life but a narrower one; not a safe, happier world but one demonstrably more dangerous and unsatisfying. What W. B. Yeats wrote fifty years ago, in *The Second Coming*, is increasingly true:

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;*

*The best lack all conviction, whilst the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

We have sketched in swift generalisations some of the fruits that have grown out of the root ideas of Newtonian physics.

What of the future? The philosophy of any period tends, to some degree, to be related to the science of the period, so that any fundamental changes in science are likely to produce reactions in philosophy, and this must be particularly true at a time when the changes in scientific thought have a distinctly philosophical hue.

With the discovery of quanta, relativity, and the electron, the defects of the older physics have become so obvious that much of it is no longer serviceable to science. Yet nothing except the authority of science, insisting on this fact, can clear people's minds of what the older physics embedded in human thinking.

Sir James Jeans spelt out what he saw as the implications of the new learning in his *Physics and Philosophy*:

Direct questioning of nature by experiment has shown that the philosophical background hitherto assumed by physics, to have been faulty. Determinism and free-will, matter and materialism, need to be re-defined in the light of our new scientific knowledge. We come to conclusions very different from the full-blooded matter, and forbidding materialism, of the Victorian scientist. His objective material Universe is proved to consist of little more than constructs of our own minds. In this, and in other ways, modern physics has moved in the direction of mentalism.

Many scholars would feel that Jeans overstates the case. But it remains true that, as William Temple put it, ‘much in the scientific and philosophical thinking of our time provides a climate more favourable to faith than has existed for generations’. Since Temple wrote those words the situation has grown still more favourable. In the field of philosophy the acceptability of religious discourse has been greatly assisted by the demise of logical positivism; philosophers have simply found it impossible to maintain the principle that for a statement to be meaningful it must be capable of empirical verification. And this of course opens the door to speaking about God, which cannot in principle be subject to the kind of tests which are possible in the natural sciences. At the same time, observations in astronomy which suggest that the universe may have had an absolute beginning, literally from nothing, also encourage a religious perspective. It is important not to overstate the case at this point; science can never vindicate a religious proposition. On the other hand if the scientific community were to arrive at a general consensus that the universe did indeed have an absolute beginning, this scientific conclusion would at least be very easy to combine with the religious doctrine of an *ex nihilo* divine creation.

These developments challenge the Church to proclaim its faith more adequately, to show that changes in modern science and philosophy encourage rather than discourage a reappraisal of the spiritual view of human beings.

7 Decades

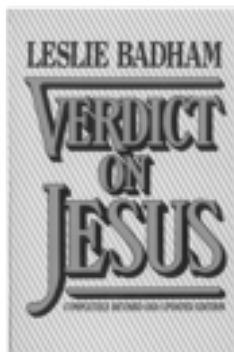
Verdict on Jesus through the years



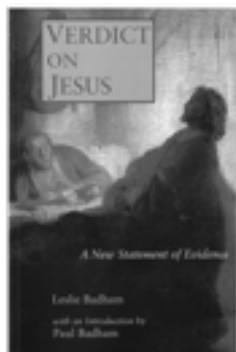
1950



1971



1983



1995



2010



2020

Leslie Badham

Author of Verdict on Jesus

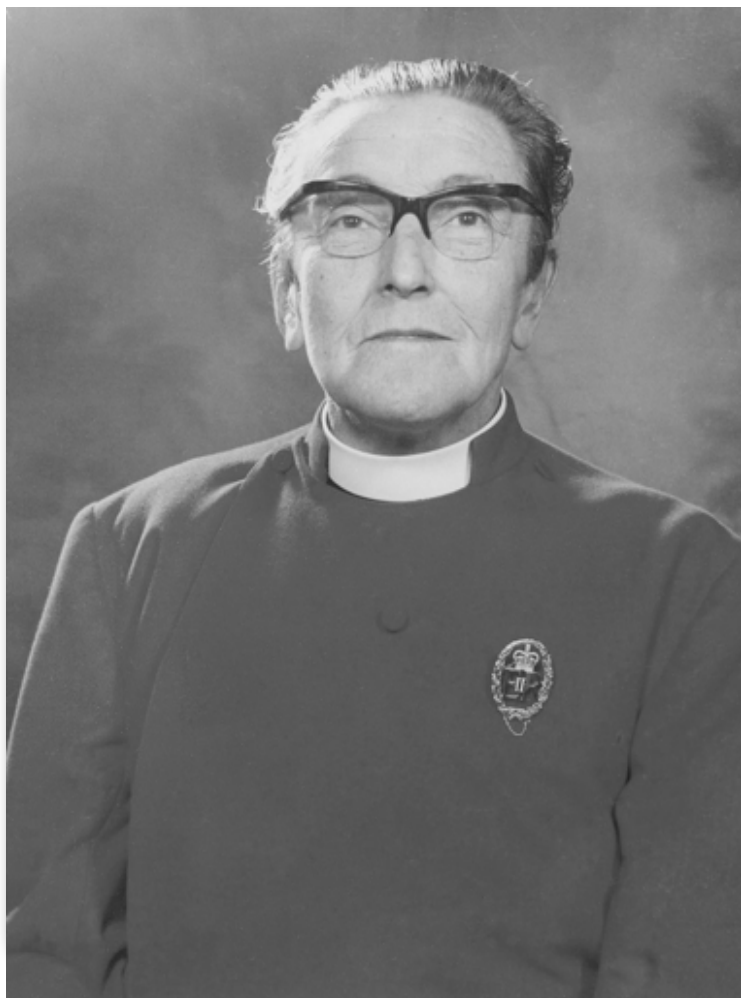


Top left: Leslie Badham with Effie, his fiancée, at her graduation from the LSE in 1935

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

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

Bottom left: Leslie Badham RAF Chaplain 1940-45



Leslie Badham (1908–75)

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