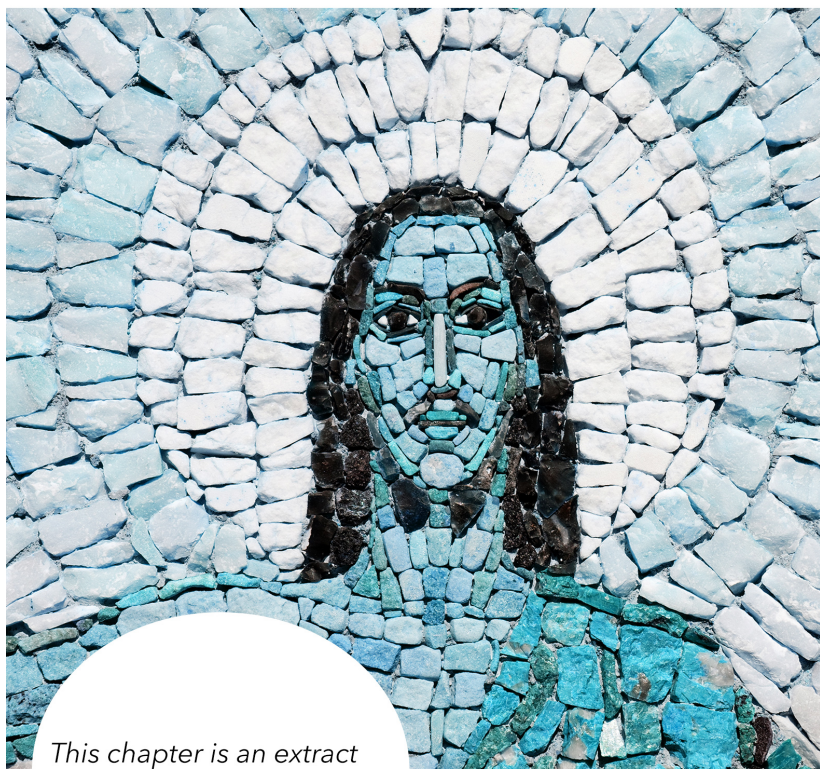


CHAPTER 23  
**THE REASONABLENESS OF BELIEF**



*This chapter is an extract  
from the 6th edition of*

**VERDICT**  

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**ON JESUS**

**LESLIE BADHAM WITH PAUL BADHAM**

## About this Extract

This is an extract from the 6th edition of Verdict on Jesus.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

### *The Reasonableness of Belief in a Creator God in the Twenty-first Century*

Paul Badham

#### *The new atheism*

The twenty-first century has begun badly for Christianity in Britain. There has been a surge of enthusiasm for books highly critical of religious belief. The most influential of these have been Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* and Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great*, both of which topped the best-seller lists for months. Both take for granted that belief in God is incompatible with modern science and that from the perspective of modern philosophy, 'there almost certainly isn't a God.' Dawkins' challenge carries great weight, not only through his former position as Professor for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, but as one whose own pioneering scientific work was profoundly and rightly influential. He is also exceptionally good at presenting his case on television and in the media, and he used the one hundred- and-fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Darwin's great work *The Origin of Species* to revive the old canard that religion is

opposed to science. His book and those of other so-called ‘new atheists’ have been subject to detailed criticism by Alister McGrath, Keith Ward, and many other writers.<sup>47</sup> I do not propose to duplicate their responses here. Instead I shall seek to reply to the central proposition of the new atheism, which is its claim that modern science and philosophy have made the existence of God highly improbable.

### *Christian fundamentalists and Genesis 1*

One reason why the claims of the new atheists seem plausible is that there are today Christians, particularly in the USA, who treat the creation narrative of Genesis 1 as if it were intended to give us factual information about the mode of divine creation. On the basis of this belief they reject all the findings of evolutionary biology. Richard Dawkins rightly criticises such obscurantism. But regrettably he treats such opinions as if they were widespread among Christians and central to Christian believing. He seems unaware of the fact that it is false to the Christian tradition to treat Genesis 1 as if it had been intended to give a scientific account of how things began. Over a hundred years ago Bishop Charles Gore documented that belief in the special creation of each species was not an idea drawn from Genesis 1. Rather it was a scientific theory of the seventeenth century derived from observations about the limits within which interbreeding is possible. It was first taught by John Ray (1628–1705), affirmed as a kind of dogma by Carl Linnaeus in 1751, and

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<sup>47</sup> Alister and Joanna McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion* (London: SPCK, 2007); Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists* (London: DLT, 2007); Keith Ward, *Why There is Almost Certainly a God*.

made a basis for popular Christian apologetic by William Paley in 1802.<sup>48</sup>

Though subsequently fundamentalist Christians have proclaimed the fixity of the species as 'Biblical', it was a belief read into, rather than out of, the Bible. Christians had read Genesis for seventeen hundred years without drawing such a conclusion from it.

### *The speedy acceptance of evolution by nineteenth-century Christians*

The development of geology as a serious science in the nineteenth century and the subsequent formulation of evolutionary theory in biology matter because they showed the falsity of what some nineteenth-century Christians had come to believe both about science and religion. Darwin himself was clear that what his theory critiqued was not belief in a Creator God as such but solely the kind of interventionist God Paley had argued for. The initial opposition to evolutionary theory famously articulated by Bishop Samuel Wilberforce in his debate with Thomas Huxley in 1860 was not derived from theological reasoning but came from the world view that Wilberforce shared with many of his scientific contemporaries. Darwin himself thought that there was no necessary conflict between the theory of evolution and belief in a Creator God. Consequently in the second and all subsequent editions of *The Origin of Species* he amended its concluding sentence to make this clear:

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<sup>48</sup> Charles Gore, *Belief in God* (London: John Murray, 1921), pp. 6-7.

*There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.*

What is more remarkable than Wilberforce's initial opposition is the speed with which the theory of evolution came to be accepted even among 'diehard clergymen'.<sup>49</sup> Certainly by 1884, Darwin's burial in Westminster Abbey was enthusiastically supported by all the religious press as well as by the national dailies, who additionally took the view that Darwin had been 'shabbily treated' by a political establishment which had withheld the knighthood or peerage his achievements so richly deserved.<sup>50</sup> It was therefore particularly significant that the religious establishment gave Mr Darwin the public endorsement of an Abbey funeral and a memorial committee which included the Archbishops of Canterbury and York and the Bishop of London. By the end of the nineteenth century almost all thoughtful Christians had come to take evolution for granted. In the wider Church the watershed came in 1889 with *Lux Mundi*, edited by Charles Gore, a book which presented Christianity wholly within an evolutionary framework.

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<sup>49</sup> Fern Elsdon-Baker, *The Selfish Genius: How Richard Dawkins Rewrote Darwin's Legacy*, cited from a review by Janet Smith in Times Higher Education Supplement, 17-24 December 2009, p. 55.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. the account in Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 671.

## *The ‘monkey trial’ of 1925 and the birth of young earth creationism in the 1960s*

For most of the twentieth century, creation through evolution was taken for granted as the position of educated Christians in Britain and throughout Europe. It was also the position of mainstream churches and academic institutions across most of the USA, though during the 1920s the teaching of evolution in publicly funded schools was banned in Tennessee, Mississippi, and Arkansas. In 1925 John Scopes, a young biology teacher in Dayton, Tennessee, was fined \$100 for teaching evolution. The trial was widely reported because William Jennings Bryan, former Secretary of State and three times Democratic challenger for the presidency of the USA, gave evidence for the prosecution. The defence counsel, Clarence Darrow, showed that Bryan had little real knowledge either of the theory of evolution or of the Bible. Bryan tried to reconcile his belief in Genesis with what he knew to be the great age of the earth by suggesting that each of the Biblical ‘days’ was really a great geological age. Darrow was thereby able to show that Bryan’s supposed defence of the accuracy of Genesis was incoherent.<sup>51</sup> The publicity surrounding the trial seriously weakened popular support for anti-evolutionism, which lapsed into relative quiescence for the next thirty years.<sup>52</sup> According to R. J. Berry, ‘the calm was shattered in 1961 when *The Genesis Flood* appeared, a book written by John Whitcombe, a Bible teacher, and Henry Morris, a hydraulics

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<sup>51</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Jennings\\_Bryan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Jennings_Bryan).

<sup>52</sup> R. J. Berry, ‘Darwins Legacy’, in John Quenby and John MacDonald Smith, *Intelligent Faith* (Winchester: O Books, 2009) p.no.

engineer.’<sup>53</sup> They rejected ‘all the established findings of geology, palaeontology and archaeology’ on the grounds of the flood’s supposed impact and argued for what has come to be known as ‘young earth creationism’, affirming the essential truth of belief in a recent creation and of a universal flood. The impact of their work, and of the subsequent claim by biochemist Michael Behe that some biological mechanisms are incapable of evolution by natural selection and therefore require individual ‘intelligent design’, has been quite incredible.<sup>54</sup> Though rejected by mainstream churches and the academic world alike, ‘young earth creationism’ and ‘individual intelligent design’ have impacted on millions through the influence of televangelism, the internet, and American publishing houses located in the Deep South. This recent and bizarre development poses a major threat to the credibility of Christian believing in the twenty-first century

### *The variety of creation stories in the Bible*

Belief in a single divine creator is one of the key contributions of Biblical theology to human understanding. This belief is celebrated in a wide variety of imaginative pictures, the best known of which is the account of the creation of everything by divine fiat over a six-day period culminating in the creation of a Sabbath rest on the seventh day. But it would never have occurred to the priestly author of this beautiful story that he was either writing or editing a divinely revealed account of how the creation actually came

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<sup>53</sup> J. C. Whitcombe and H. M. Morris, *The Genesis Flood* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1961).

<sup>54</sup> R. J. Berry, ‘Darwin’s Legacy’, pp. 110-112.



about. We know this because in chapter 2 he included an entirely different creation narrative. In this second account, creation is not spread over six days but is all compressed into a single sequence of events. First God made man from the dust of the ground before there were any plants or shrubs (Gen. 2: 5). Then God created a garden for the man, followed by animals to provide him with company. Only when it became apparent that no animal was a suitable partner for the man did God anaesthetise Adam, take out one of his ribs, and build it up into a woman (Gen. 2: 21–22).

Psalm 104 tells a different creation story in which God spreads out the heavens over the earth like a tent and then fixes the earth on a firm foundation. At this point the waters are high above the mountains, so God gets rid of the waters by ordering them to pour down into the valleys (Ps. 104: 8). Another picture is presented in Job 38–41, where God is pictured as laying the foundations of the earth, stretching a measuring line over it like an architect, and ensuring that the world is adequately supported on pillars. God also proclaims the rules that govern the heavens, bringing the signs of the zodiac out in their appropriate seasons (Job 38: 5, 32). Second Isaiah pictures God working like a potter ‘fashioning the earth and everything that grows on it’ and shaping human beings out of clay (Isa. 42: 5; 45: 9, 18; 64: 8).

The poetic character of Biblical creation stories becomes even more apparent when we come across traces of old Babylonian mythology in some of the creation accounts. The books of Job, Psalms, and Isaiah all draw on the ancient myth that creation began with the defeat of a great dragon from whose body the earth was formed. So, as well as the

imagery of the potter and the architect, we hear how God 'hacked the Rahab in pieces and ran the dragon through' (Isa. 51: 9, NEB; cf. Job 26: 12, Ps. 89: 10).

No Christian today would dream of seeking to rehabilitate myths of the great dragon, yet that myth is embedded in at least three Biblical creation accounts. More sophisticated accounts using the imagery of a potter and a pot, or of an architect with a measuring rod, or even accounts of God simply creating by calling everything into being, are all alike human attempts to make sense of the cosmos and of our place in it. At its best the Christian tradition from the earliest days has recognised this.

### *The earliest Christian commentary on Genesis*

The earliest theological reflections we have on Genesis 1 come from Origen in the third century. He pointed out that it is impossible to take the account as literally true because its ordering of creation simply doesn't make sense:

*What intelligent person would fancy for instance, that a first, second, and third day, evening and morning, took place without sun, moon and stars; and the first, as we call it, without even a heaven? Who would be so childish as to suppose that God after the manner of a human gardener planted a garden in Eden towards the east, and made therein a tree, visible and sensible, so one could get the power of living [for ever] by the bodily eating of its fruit with the teeth; or again could partake of good and evil by feeding on what came from that other tree. I fancy that no one will question that these statements are figurative,*

*declaring mysterious truths by the means of a seeming history, not one that took place in bodily form.*<sup>55</sup>

### *St Augustine's understanding of the literal meaning of Genesis*

St Augustine, though claiming to defend the literal meaning of Genesis in his work of that title, acknowledged that one could not and should not seek to defend such details as the creation of light before the creation of the sun. More generally he insisted that we should form our judgments on questions in the natural sciences by reasoning and observation rather than seeking to derive such information from the Scriptures:

*It frequently happens that there is a question about the earth, or the sky or other elements of this world, the movement, revolutions, or even the size and distance of the stars, the regular eclipses of the sun and the moon, the course of the years in seasons; the nature of animals, vegetables, and minerals, and other things of the same kind, respecting which one who is not a Christian has knowledge derived from most certain reasoning and observation. And it is highly deplorable and mischievous and a thing to be specially guarded against that he should hear a Christian speaking of such matters in accordance with Christian writings and uttering such nonsense that, knowing him to be as wide of the mark as the, to use the*

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<sup>55</sup> Origen, *On First Principles* 4.16, cited from H. M. Gwatkin, *Selections From Early Christian Writers* (London: Macmillan, 1920), pp. 137-8.

*common expression, East is from West, the unbeliever can scarcely restrain himself from laughing.*<sup>56</sup>

St Augustine's own understanding of God's creation was that it was a gradual event. In his magisterial summary of early Christian thought, Bishop Charles Gore pointed out that St Augustine himself followed the view of St Gregory of Nyssa, that God in the beginning created only germs or causes of the forms of life which were afterwards to be developed in gradual course. Gore notes wryly that accommodation between religion and science would have been much easier in the fourth century than it was in the nineteenth.<sup>57</sup>

*Aquinas' understanding of scientific and religious modes of explanation*

The Christian thinker who expressed most clearly the classic arguments for the existence of God was St Thomas Aquinas. However it is vital to study his arguments in full, because his famous 'five ways' of demonstrating divine existence are preceded by a brilliant summary of the case for atheism. His first argument is that since the concept of God implies 'limitless goodness', evil should not exist at all. 'But evil is encountered in the world, therefore God does not exist.' His second argument is that everything we observe within the world can be fully accounted for by natural causes, 'therefore there is no need to suppose that God exists'.<sup>58</sup> Nothing that

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<sup>56</sup> Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 1.19, cited from J. G. Langmead Casserly, *The Retreat from Christianity* (London: Longmans, 1953), pp. 21-22.

<sup>57</sup> Charles Gore, *Belief in God*, p.10.

<sup>58</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Sutntna Theologica* 1a, 2, 3.

Aquinas subsequently wrote takes away the reality of these two observations. Christians always have to live with the 'problem of evil' and with the fact that belief in God is not a replacement for the search for natural explanations for what we encounter within the world.

As one proceeds to the study of Aquinas' arguments from causation and design, it is important to notice that they presuppose that there are always natural explanations to be found for the interconnectedness of all life. Everything we observe in the world is causally related to, and moved by, other realities which become the 'natural cause' or 'efficient cause' of what develops. God, for Aquinas, is not within this natural cycle of 'efficient causation'. Aquinas' five ways are a sustained argument that the discovery of the 'natural' cause of why things happen is insufficient. We need also to think in terms of 'first cause' and 'final cause'. Since God for Aquinas is outside time, his understanding of 'first cause' does not imply temporal priority but simply his belief that the whole created order in the past, present, and future is all equally dependent on God. Likewise his argument from design supplements, but does not compete with, his ongoing conviction that there can be a naturalistic explanation for everything that happens within the world which in its own terms is complete.

For Aquinas, belief in God is not some kind of rival explanation to what the sciences disclose to us about how the universe operates. For Aquinas, belief in a Creator God goes alongside and complements what science can discover about the natural order. As a matter of history, belief in a universe created by a single divine mind, within which there is a 'natural' explanation for everything waiting to be

discovered, is why science as we know it began in Western Europe rather than elsewhere. Within Britain, the founders of the Royal Society acknowledged that they wanted to think God's thoughts after him and discover how God's universe worked. In principle therefore there should never be a clash between religion and science, since belief in God is not in competition with natural explanations for the way things are.

### *The paradox of the present situation*

When we reflect on Origen's belief that no intelligent person would ever take the Genesis stories literally, or St Augustine's belief that building scientific hypotheses out of Biblical texts was a thing to be 'specially guarded against', or Aquinas' assumption that there is a natural explanation for everything, then the development of fundamentalist attitudes in the early nineteenth century and their revival in the twenty-first is utterly bewildering. It is false to the Christian tradition itself, let alone to the evidence from historical and Biblical criticism and from the data of the natural sciences. The tragedy is that this resurgence of belief in a fundamentalist creationism is happening at a time when a number of philosophers and scientists believe that a stronger case can be made for Christian theism than for many centuries.

### *The harmony between religious and scientific thinking*

There is a widespread consensus among scientists that the universe has not always existed. It came into being from nothing some thirteen billion years ago. This does not of course prove that God created the universe out of nothing.

But the two beliefs are very readily compatible with each other. The scientific belief that the universe came into being out of nothing and the Christian belief that God created the universe out of nothing fit very easily together. They are parallel beliefs and it is entirely rational for a person to hold them both.

Similarly there is a scientific consensus that the universe appears to be ‘finely tuned’ for the emergence of life and mind, since if the conditions just after the big bang had been even fractionally different the universe could not have evolved in the way it has evolved. For example, in his *A Brief History of Time* Stephen Hawking has shown that the heat of the universe one second after the big bang had to be exactly as it was, because a decrease in heat of as little as one part in a million would have caused the universe to collapse.<sup>59</sup> Similar fine tuning is necessary for about fifty constants of nature, a fact that readily lends itself to the idea that there may be a cosmic mind behind all this. But once again, scientific belief in the fine tuning of the universe does not require belief in God: Hawking is not a believer. What one can legitimately say, however, is that scientific belief in the fine tuning of the universe and Christian belief in God as the mind behind the universe go very happily together.

This was a phenomenon noted by philosopher Antony Flew, who preceded Richard Dawkins as ‘the most notorious

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<sup>59</sup> Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (London: Bantam, 1998), p. 127; John Leslie, *Universes* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 3, 28, 29, 37.

atheist in the world'.<sup>60</sup> At an early stage of his 'Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism',<sup>61</sup> Flew came to think that 'if a cradle Roman Catholic' believes that 'the universe has a beginning and will have an end' then acceptance of the big bang 'surely does provide empirical confirmation of the first part of that belief'. Likewise, if a person believes in a purposeful creation then 'it is entirely reasonable to welcome the fine-tuning argument as providing confirmation of that belief.'<sup>62</sup> Later Flew went further than this and in January 2004 announced that he had come to believe in God. He 'simply had to go where the evidence leads', and it now seemed to him that the case for God 'is now much stronger than it ever was before'.<sup>63</sup>

### *The revival of interest in the philosophy of religion*

The idea that the case for God is now much stronger than it ever was before can be seen in the way philosophy of religion was transformed in the later years of the twentieth century. As an undergraduate at Oxford in the early 1960s I was very conscious that it was regarded as a fringe subject. In theology it was an optional extra rather than part of the normal syllabus. In philosophy the positivistic school led by A. J. Ayer took the view that religious claims were not so

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<sup>60</sup> Antony Flew, *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: Harper One, 2009).

<sup>61</sup> Antony Flew, 'My Pilgrimage from Athiesm to Theism', <<http://biola.edu/antonyflew/flew-interview.pdf>>; see also *Philosophia Christi*, Winter 2005.

<sup>62</sup> Antony Flew, in Stan Wallace, *Does God Exist?: The Craig-Flew Debate* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p.190.

<sup>63</sup> Antony Flew, 'My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism'.



much false as meaningless. When Ian Ramsey left the Nolloth Chair of the Philosophy of Christianity in 1966 to become Bishop of Durham, there was a strong movement not to appoint a successor on the grounds that the subject was not really needed. Fortunately, a decision was made to appoint Basil Mitchell to the Chair and under him and his successors, Richard Swinburne and Brian Leftow, the subject blossomed as never before.

In a foreword to a book on the philosophy of religion, Professor William Abraham comments that, when he arrived in Oxford as a graduate student in 1973, he little knew that he was 'at the beginning of a golden period in the philosophy of religion' in which believers could 'take a lead and create the intellectual space in which Christian belief could be taken seriously once again. The outcome was seen in the wealth of material that has been published, has been startling in its originality and depth.'<sup>64</sup> The book for which this foreword was written is *The Agnostic Inquirer* by Sandra Menssen and Thomas Sullivan, two formerly agnostic professors of philosophy who have gradually reasoned their way to a rational faith. They wrote their book to help fellow agnostic inquirers follow them to their new convictions. They show in a work of outstanding logical force that a cumulative rational case for God's existence can be carefully developed in which natural theology and revelation combine to mutually support each other as components of a reasonable faith in a Creator God who has willed to become known to humankind.

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<sup>64</sup> Sandra Menssen and Thomas Sullivan, *The Agnostic Inquirer* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 2007), p. xi.

William Abraham's assessment of the emergence of a newly confident Christian philosophy is confirmed by the Canadian atheist philosopher Kai Nielsen. Writing in 1971, Nielsen had said that philosophers who took the claims of religion seriously were very much in the minority and their arguments have been forcefully contested'. But nearly twenty years later Nielsen's estimate of philosophical attitudes was quite different: 'Philosophy of religion in Anglo-American context has taken a curious turn in the past decade ... what has come to the forefront... is a group of Christian philosophers of a philosophically analytic persuasion, but hostile to even the residues of logical empiricism or Wittgensteinianism, who return to the old topics and the old theses of traditional Christian philosophy and natural theology.'<sup>65</sup> We need to notice that Nielsen describes this development as 'curious', indicating that he himself remains unconvinced. None the less it is intriguing that Richard Purtill similarly claims: 'All the traditional arguments have able and respected defenders, and if there is not a consensus in favour of philosophical arguments for God's existence, it is no longer true that there is a consensus against.'<sup>66</sup>

### *Why philosophy of religion has revived*

It is important not to overstate the case. Arguments about God remain strongly contested. The difference is that in the

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<sup>65</sup> Kai Nielsen, *Contemporary Critiques of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1971), p. 19; foreword to K. Parsons, *God and the Burden of Proof* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1989), p.7.

<sup>66</sup> Richard Purtill, 'The Current State of Arguments for the Existence of God', *Review and Expositor* 82 (1985), pp. 521-33.

twenty-first century the arguments are taken seriously on both sides. Factors which have changed the situation include the collapse of logical positivism and of atheistic Marxism, together with a distrust of Freudian analysis. Within philosophy an important development has been the recognition that ‘the justification of religious belief’ depends on a recognition that knowledge cannot be simply confined to what we discover through the natural sciences, but that disciplines like history, law, literary studies, politics, sociology, aesthetics, and philosophy, as well as theology, while unable to provide logical certainty, can yet still provide sensible arguments for the support of one theory rather than another.<sup>67</sup> In all such cases certainty is not available, but argumentation may convince some that one view is more probable than its alternative.

In this climate philosophy of religion has dramatically revived. In his introduction to the twentieth-century section of a five-volume *History of Western Philosophy of Religion*, Professor Charles Taliaferro writes:

*One general observation seems secure: philosophical reflection on religion has formed a major vibrant part of some of the best philosophy in the past century. We now have a virtual library of a hundred years of first-rate, diverse philosophy of religion. At the close of the century there are more societies, institutions, journals, conferences*

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<sup>67</sup> Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

and publishing houses dedicated to philosophy of religion than any other area of philosophy.<sup>68</sup>

Although Taliaferro was largely speaking of philosophy in the English-speaking world, similar comments could be made of the situation in continental Europe. Friedrich Nietzsche and many other leading intellectuals including Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, and Sartre had confidently predicted the imminent 'Death of God in the hearts of men'.<sup>69</sup> This has not happened. According to Paul Johnson, author both of a *History of Christianity and of Modern Times*, 'The most extraordinary thing about the twentieth century has been the failure of God to die ... At the end of the twentieth century the idea of... God is as lively and real as ever.'<sup>70</sup> The profoundly influential philosopher Jurgen Habermas argues that secular citizens need to accept the insight that 'they are living in a society that is epistemically adjusted to the continued existence of religious communities'.<sup>71</sup> Likewise Gianni Vattimo believes we are

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<sup>68</sup> Graham Oppy and Nick Trakakis (eds), *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion* (Durham: Acumen, 2009), vol. 5 p. 1.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Aphorism 125, cited from Walter Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking, 1954), pp. 95-6.

<sup>70</sup> Paul Johnson, 'Peaceful Co-existence', *Prospect* 7 (April 1996), pp. 34-8.

<sup>71</sup> Jurgen Habermas, 'Religion in the Public Sphere', *European Journal of Philosophy* 14.1 (2006), pp. 1-15 (p. 15).

‘entering a new age where religion is taken seriously by philosophy’.<sup>72</sup>

### *Philosophy of religion in Russia and China*

What is true of Europe is even more true of the revival of philosophy of religion in both Russia and China. I have had first-hand experience of both. In 1991 I was invited to speak on ‘Faith and Reason’ to the Philosophy section of the Russian Academy of Sciences and later gave the same lecture in the Department of Philosophy at the People’s University in Beijing. My department at Lampeter subsequently obtained a grant from the European Commission to help in the transformation of a former ‘Institute for Scientific Atheism’ in Leningrad into an ‘Institute for Religious Studies’ in what is now called St Petersburg. It is significant that this kind of development has taken place throughout the former Soviet Union and that priority was sought for it.

Subsequently Professor Xinzhong Yao and I secured a four-year grant from the John Templeton Foundation to compare religious experience in Britain and China. Working with colleagues from seven Chinese universities we found that after sixty years of atheistic indoctrination, the number of firm atheists corresponded almost exactly with the number in Britain (in both cases around 26 per cent). The biggest surprise in our China survey was that 56.7 per cent reported that they had been influenced or controlled by a power that they could not understand or explain clearly and that they

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<sup>72</sup> Thomas Guarino, *Vattimo and Theology* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2009), p. 14.

identified this power with a religious entity or force. We also found that 31.3 per cent of those Chinese who had described themselves as ‘firm atheists’ believed that ‘religion contains profound truth’.<sup>73</sup> We discovered that between 2001 and 2005, each of the five main religions in China had increased its membership by an average of 5.9 per cent each year.<sup>74</sup> We were also told by several Chinese philosophers that from being a banned subject thirty years ago, philosophy of religion is now the most popular area of philosophical inquiry in China.

### *How modern knowledge may help belief in a Creator God*

We saw earlier that a key factor in Antony Flew’s move from atheism to theism was his belief that this made better sense of the data now available within the natural sciences. The reason behind this is that as we explore the ‘fine tuning’ of the universe, it seems as if some kind of ‘anthropic principle’ is at work guiding the evolution of the cosmos in ways necessary for the emergence of life and mind. The odds of all the constants of nature being exactly as they are is utterly astronomical, and it is this fact that has caused some to think that alongside naturalistic explanations it could be helpful to think of personal explanation as well. Even Richard Dawkins acknowledges this:

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<sup>73</sup> Xinzhong Yao and Paul Badham, *Religious Experience in Contemporary China* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007).

<sup>74</sup> Yuli Liu, ‘A Buddhist explanation of religious experience’, paper presented to a conference of the British Association for the Study of Religion in Edinburgh, 2007.

*There are possible good reasons for believing in some sort of grand supernatural intelligence. They are never anything to do with the biblical God, which is just an ancient bronze age belief having no semblance of reality. But there are modern physicists who believe that the universe— if you actually look at the laws of the universe, they are to some physicists too good to be true. This suggests a very interesting case for a possible very, very deep reason why we might believe in some sort of grand fundamental intelligence underlying the universe.<sup>75</sup>*

Dawkins goes on to stress that this ‘grand supernatural intelligence’ has nothing whatever to do with the kind of God that people go into a church to worship. That may sometimes be the sad reality of some contemporary church worship, but it ought not to be the case. The New Testament belief in a Creator God is belief in the ‘Word’ or *Logos* which was ‘with God’ and ‘was God’. The Greek concept of the *Logos* is precisely belief in some sort of grand fundamental intelligence underlying the universe; an eternal mind in whom ‘we live and move and have our being’; a divine ‘light that enlightens every man’ and ‘was coming into the world’ (John 1:1; Acts 17: 28; John 1:9, RSV). It ought to be axiomatic that this is indeed the Christian vision of the Creator, and the object of Christian worship. It is a remarkable phenomenon that many scientists see an ‘anthropic principle’ at work in the way the universe has evolved. It is also surprising that the universe should be comprehensible to our minds in the way it is. But because

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<sup>75</sup> BBC talk given 16 March 2003, retrieved 28 August 2004 from <[www.bbc.co.uk/northernireland/religion/sundaysequence/archive-interviews.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/northernireland/religion/sundaysequence/archive-interviews.shtml)>, cited in Sandra Menssen and Thomas Sullivan, *The Agnostic Inquirer*, p. 117.

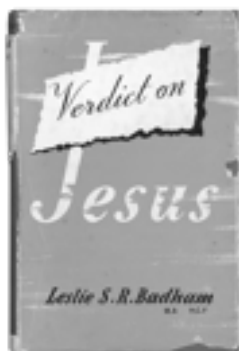
this seems to be the case, we can postulate that some fundamental intelligence analogous to our own minds underlies the way things are. This is precisely what the classic Logos doctrine actually affirmed about a mind behind the universe.

But if there is a supernatural intelligence analogous to our own minds, then it is reasonable to suppose that that intelligence should wish to make itself known to us. In Stoic philosophical thought, the idea of the Logos includes the notion that there is a spark of the divine in each of us. My father argues in Chapter 20 (pp. 180–1) how opportune it was both that the concept of the Logos existed in the first century as a widely understood idea and that there was an understanding that the Mind (or Logos) of God could find expression in human life. Hence the prologue to St John's Gospel was able to draw on a philosophical understanding which made it possible to affirm both the divinity and humanity of Jesus. The verdict of Christian orthodoxy on Jesus is that he really did incarnate the divine Logos in his life and teaching, so that in Jesus was seen the character of the mind behind the cosmos expressed in the language of his human life.



## 7 Decades

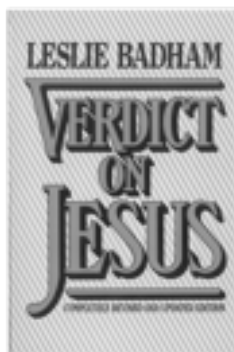
### *Verdict on Jesus through the years*



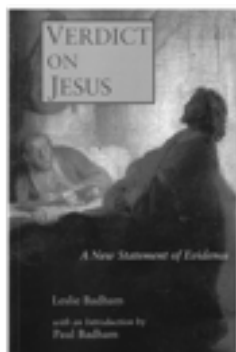
1950



1971



1983



1995



2010



2020

# Leslie Badham

*Author of Verdict on Jesus*

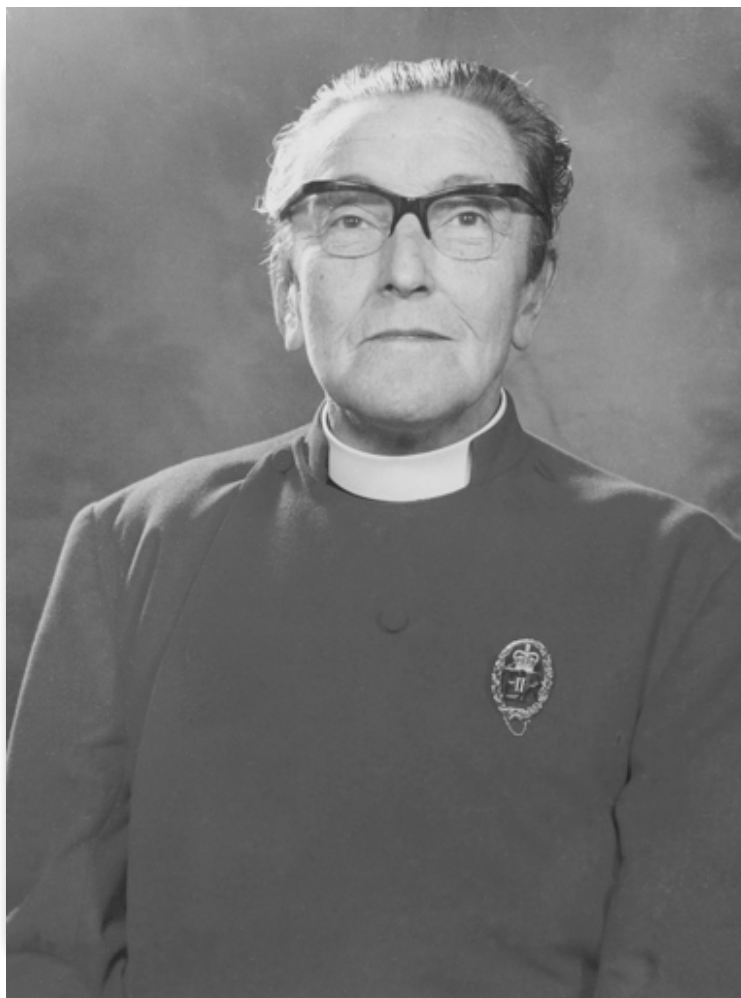


**Top left:** Leslie Badham with Effie, his fiancée, at her graduation from the LSE in 1935

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

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

**Bottom left:** Leslie Badham RAF Chaplain 1940-45



Leslie Badham (1908–75)

Originally published in Great Britain in 1950 Second edition published 1971 Third edition published 1983  
Fourth edition published 1995 by IKON Productions Ltd  
Fifth edition published in Great Britain in 2010 by SPCK

This edition published in Great Britain in 2020 by The Newson Trust

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-9163862-1-1

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- \* 'Jesus in the World's Religions'
- \* 'Was Jesus a Liberal?'
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You'll also find essays on historical Jesus research and more information about the authors and the Newson Trust.

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