

a critical review

kategoria 31

 matthiasmedia

The Gospel of Barnabas



Communication,
class and correct
grammar



Science, life,
ethics

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Editorial

When I was employed by Matthias Media in 1994, it was with a brief by publisher Phillip Jensen to realize an idea that he had been mulling over for some time. We have so many educated, thoughtful Christians around, he considered. They are in all sorts of professions and fields, and are in a position to think critically about the intellectual basis of non-Christian society. How can we best make use of this resource?

Phillip charged me with bringing together the fruits of these minds. The result was *kategoria*—a journal which would publish critical, thoughtful articles about our world and the ideas within it, exposing the flaws that inevitably arise when people try to construct a world that is not based on the lordship of Christ. The point was not just to be gratuitously negative, but to force people, both Christian and non-Christian, to think seriously about the reliability of their world views. For non-Christians, the journal has provided a

challenge, as inconsistencies in secular thinking have been exposed. For Christians, it has provided encouragement not to be afraid of the (sometimes very impressive) intellectual schemes which exclude Christ and claim that Christianity is outmoded and weak.

I started with a list of potential authors, a list of topics, and a five-year plan. Nearly eight years later I have had the privilege of working with many more authors than originally expected, and the list of topics has been well and truly covered. *kategoria* has done the job I was charged to do. It is time, now, to bring it to a close.

A number of supporters who have been privy to this decision have reacted with dismay—why stop such a useful journal, which is doing a job that almost no other Christian publication in the world does? The answer is, having achieved our aims, we are not interested in maintaining *kategoria* simply for the sake of it. To do that runs the risk of losing

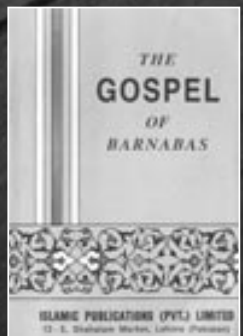
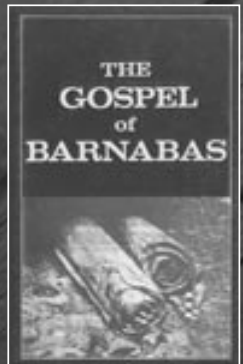
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the critical edge that has made *kategoria* such a successful intellectual tool.

I personally am very grateful to all the people who have contributed to *kategoria*, as writers and readers, and for the feedback and support that I have received over the years. I have benefited immensely, both academically and as a Christian. Over and over my faith has been strengthened as I have discovered yet another area of life where Christianity provides the answers, and non-Christian philosophies don't. We have challenged the world—"put our heads on the chopping block", as John Dickson puts it, and still Christianity stands.

Thank you to all who have supported *kategoria*, and thank you for the times you have taken the trouble to write to me with encouraging news of the way in which *kategoria* has been used to challenge non-Christian friends and institutions. The ideas, of course, will continue, even if this particular vehicle for them does not. I encourage you to continue critiquing the world, and keep challenging the non-Christian intellectual estate to face up to its failures, and consider the rock-solid certainty of Christ. ☩

Kirsten Birkett
Editor, *kategoria*



The Gospel of Barnabas

SAMUEL GREEN

If you go into an Islamic bookshop, or a mosque, you are bound to see copies of the Qur'an and Hadith and other Islamic materials. You would most likely see books that critically engage with Christian ideas. You would also find another book, a book that you may not be expecting to see—the gospel. However the gospel that you would find there would not be one of the gospels that are found in the Bible—Matthew, Mark, Luke or John—instead it would be the Gospel of Barnabas. The Gospel of Barnabas is the gospel that many Muslims promote. It has been translated into many languages and distributed around the world.

Barnabas was a famous Christian from the first century A.D. Some details of his life are recorded in the book of Acts and he is also mentioned in some of the letters of the New Testament.¹ Barnabas worked with the Apostle Paul

and was actively involved in the early church. The Gospel of Barnabas claims to have been written by this man:

True Gospel of Jesus, called Christ, a new prophet sent by God to the world: according to the description of Barnabas his apostle.

Barnabas, apostle of Jesus the Nazarene, called Christ, to all them that dwell upon the earth desireth peace and consolation.²

So why the Islamic interest in this particular book and not in the canonical gospels, or in any of the apocryphal gospels like the Gospel of Thomas? The answer is simple. In this book the life of Jesus conforms to how his life is recorded in the Qur'an: in the Gospel of Barnabas Jesus foretells the coming of Muhammad, teaches many Islamic principles and does not die on the cross.

The recent history of the Gospel of Barnabas

Towards the beginning of the eighteenth century the *Gospel of Barnabas* aroused considerable interest among the learned in England, to whom two different copies of the document were known and, to a certain extent, accessible. One of these was the Italian text ... the other a Spanish version ...³

So wrote Lonsdale and Laura Ragg in their critical introduction to the first English translation of the Gospel of

Barnabas. Their translation was from the Italian manuscript, and with this translation the Gospel of Barnabas was now accessible to a wide audience. Towards the end of the twentieth century Islamic publishers from Pakistan and

Saudi Arabia began to publish and widely distribute this translation—minus the critical introduction. And so today you will find this Gospel in most Islamic bookshops.

The contents of the Gospel of Barnabas

The Gospel of Barnabas contains most of the events from the canonical gospels

arranged in chronological order. Many of the accounts are told in a similar way to the way they are found in the Bible. However some accounts are very different.

In the Bible we read:

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ”. And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not”. “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No”. So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’, as the prophet Isaiah said (John 1:19-23).

While in the Gospel of Barnabas we read:

(T)hey saw many who came to find him, for the chiefs of the priests took counsel among themselves to catch him in his talk. Wherefore they sent the Levites and some of the scribes to question him, saying: “Who are you?” Jesus confessed, and said the truth: “I am not the Messiah”. They said: “Are you Elijah or Jeremiah, or any of the ancient prophets?” Jesus answered: “No”. Then said they: “Who are you? Say, in order

The Gospel of Barnabas contains most of the events from the canonical gospels arranged in chronological order.

The Gospel of Barnabas

that we may give testimony to those who sent us". Then Jesus said: "I am a voice that cries through all Judea, and cries: "Prepare you the way for the messenger of the Lord", even as it is written in Esaias".⁴

In the canonical gospels, it is John the Baptist who prepares the way for Jesus, while in the Gospel of Barnabas it is Jesus who prepares the way for Muhammad with the same words.

Then said the Priest: "How shall the Messiah be called ..." Jesus answered: "The name of the Messiah is admirable ... Mohammed is his blessed name."⁵

In the Bible we see the apostle Peter identify Jesus as the son of God.

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets". He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God". And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matt 16:13-17).

But in the Gospel of Barnabas he is rebuked for doing so.

(Jesus) asked his disciples, saying: "What do men say of me?" They said: "Some say that thou art Elijah, others Jeremiah, and others one of the old prophets". Jesus answered, "And Ye; what say ye that I am?" Peter answered: "Thou art Christ, son of God". Then was Jesus angry, and with anger rebuked him saying: "Begone and depart from me".⁶

And the death of Jesus is told very differently.

God acted wonderfully, insomuch that Judas was so changed in speech and in face to be like Jesus. The soldiers took Judas and bound him ... So they led him to Mount Calvary, where they used to hang malefactors, and there they crucified him.⁷

The plot of this book is that Jesus comes as a prophet to restore the truth of God's word to the people of Israel (the former books of Moses now having been corrupted), and to announce the coming of the Messiah, Muhammad, who will restore things once and for all. However, he is falsely believed to be God, or the Son of God, by many in Israel. The Roman senate try to stop this belief but are unable to do so.

The plot of this book is that Jesus comes as a prophet to restore the truth of God's word to the people of Israel (the former books of Moses now having been corrupted), and to announce the coming of the Messiah, Muhammad, who will restore things once and for all.

Due to the great blasphemy of Jesus being called these things, God is no longer going to simply take Jesus to heaven at the end of his ministry, rather Jesus is to appear to die on the cross in order to diffuse the whole misunderstanding. Judas is to be changed in appearance to look like Jesus, and will be crucified in his place. The truth of what really has happened will be made known by his disciples, though it will be fully made known when Muhammad comes.

Throughout this story Jesus addresses many issues and answers questions from his disciples and others. Through these he reinforces the food laws of the Old

Testament and the need for circumcision, and teaches that it was Ishmael not Isaac that Abraham offered in sacrifice to God. There are also discourses about how Satan fell, how

Abraham turned from idolatry, what happens to animals on Judgement Day, what heaven and hell are like, how are we to understand predestination and the nature of rewards.

The challenge of the Gospel of Barnabas

The Muslims who promote this book claim that it is a true gospel, and that it more accurately represents Jesus' life, teaching and ministry than do the canonical gospels. Thus the Gospel of Barnabas

is a direct challenge to Christianity. It challenges Christianity in a number of ways. Firstly, it claims to provide new authentic information about Jesus that the church has ignored. Secondly, on the basis of this new information it claims that the canonical gospels are corrupt and do not show the real Jesus. Thirdly, it claims that the real Jesus taught the doctrines of Islam, predicted the coming of Muhammad and never died on the cross.

Such a challenge is only as good as the evidence it is based upon, and there is good evidence to suggest that the Gospel of Barnabas was in fact written in the 14th century A.D. and has nothing to do with the early Christian called Barnabas from the 1st century. The Gospel of Barnabas has been critically examined throughout the 20th century⁸. Here is a summary of the reasons why it has been rejected as a gospel authored by the Barnabas of the 1st century.

The Gospel of Barnabas and the 1st century A.D.

The word *Christ* is the Greek translation for the Hebrew word *Messiah*. Both these words, when translated into English, mean *Anointed One*. This word is not an obscure or rarely used word; on the contrary, it is one of the most famous words in the Jewish and Christian religions. There is no doubt that a religious Jew like Barnabas would have been very familiar with this word.

At the very start of the Gospel of

Judas is to be changed in appearance to look like Jesus, and will be crucified in his place.

Barnabas, Jesus is called the Christ: “God has during these past days visited us by his prophet Jesus Christ”.⁹ However, throughout the book, Jesus denies being the Messiah: “Jesus confessed and said the truth, ‘I am not the Messiah’”.¹⁰ How can Jesus be the Christ and deny being the Messiah, when both words mean exactly the same thing? Whoever wrote this book did not know that the Greek word for ‘Messiah’ is ‘Christ’. Barnabas was a Hebrew who lived on the island of Cyprus, a Greek-speaking island, and travelled around the 1st century Greek-speaking world!¹¹ He was Hebrew, and knew Greek; he could not have made this mistake with such a common word.

In chapter 3, we are told that Herod and Pilate both ruled in Judea at the time of Jesus’ birth: “There reigned at that time in Judaea Herod, by decree of Caesar Augustus, and Pilate was governor”. This is historically wrong, for Herod and Pilate never ruled Judea at the same time. Herod ruled Judea alone from 37-4 B.C., while Pilate ruled thirty years later from 26-36 A.D.¹² The real Barnabas lived during the rule of Pilate, so if he really was the writer of this book, how could he make such a simple mistake?

There are also geographical errors in the book.

Jesus went to the sea of Galilee, and having embarked in a ship sailed to his city of Nazareth. ... Having arrived at the city of

Nazareth the seamen spread through the city all that Jesus wrought (done) ... (then) Jesus went up to Capernaum.¹³

Nazareth was not a fishing village; in fact it was about 14 km from the sea of Galilee, and situated in the hills of a mountain range!¹⁴ Capernaum was the fishing village that Jesus arrived at with his disciples, not Nazareth.¹⁵ Nazareth and Capernaum were two towns which Jesus often visited with his disciples¹⁶ therefore any disciple of Jesus would know these towns well. However the author of this book does not! This casts doubt over the claim that he was a disciple of Jesus, or that he lived in that region.

The real Barnabas lived during the rule of Pilate, so if he really was the writer of this book, how could he make such a simple mistake?

The Gospel of Barnabas and the 14th century A.D.

The Gospel of Barnabas also exhibits links to the fourteenth century. Two of these are the description of heaven, and the jubilee year.

Dante was a fourteenth-century writer. In his book, *The Divine Comedy*,¹⁷ he describes ascending through the heavens to reach paradise. Dante writes of nine heavens, with paradise being the tenth. The author of the Gospel of Barnabas describes, in the same way as Dante, nine heavens before paradise:

Paradise is so great that no man can measure it. Verily I say unto thee that the heavens are nine, among which are set the planets, that are distant one from another five hundred years journey for a man ... and Verily I say unto thee that paradise is greater than all the earth and heavens together.¹⁸

The Jubilee year is an Israelite national celebration taught in the Bible which was to be observed every fifty years.¹⁹ In the year 1300 A.D., Pope Boniface VIII falsely proclaimed that the Jubilee should be celebrated by Christians every 100 years instead of 50 years. However the next Pope, Clement VI, changed it back to every 50 years, and so it was celebrated in 1350 A.D.²⁰ In the church's history this is the only period when the Jubilee was thought by many to be

every 100 years. It seems that the author of the Gospel of Barnabas has unknowingly accepted the Pope's decree as true and included it in his book, for he has Jesus say:

(I)nsomuch that the year of Jubilee, which now comes every 100 years, shall by the Messiah be reduced to every year in every place.²¹

The links to the fourteenth century, and the errors in the book regarding the first

century, have convinced most writers that the book was composed in the fourteenth century. Some Islamic academics are prepared to admit this.

As regards the "Gospel of Barnabas" itself, there is no question that it is a medieval forgery ... It contains anachronisms which can date only from the Middle Ages and not before, and shows a garbled comprehension of Islamic doctrines, calling the Prophet the "Messiah", which Islam does not claim for him. Besides its farcical notion of sacred history, stylistically it is a mediocre parody of the Gospels, as the writings of Baha Allah are of the Koran.²²

Manuscript evidence for The Gospel of Barnabas

There are no ancient copies of the Gospel of Barnabas. The two oldest copies are written in Italian and Spanish, and these are dated from the end of the sixteenth century A.D.²³ Some Muslims claim that the early Church Father, Iranaeus, "quoted extensively from the Gospel of Barnabas in support of his views",²⁴ and this is proof that the book was in circulation in the first and second centuries of Christianity. While this claim has been made, no quotes from Iranaeus have ever been offered, simply because Iranaeus does not quote the Gospel of Barnabas.

M.A. Rahim also claims that

The links to the fourteenth century, and the errors in the book regarding the first century, have convinced most writers that the book was composed in the fourteenth century

In the fourth year of Emperor Zeno's rule in 478 A.D., the remains of Barnabas were discovered, and a copy of the Gospel of Barnabas, written in his own hand, was found on his breast. This is recorded in the Acta Sanctorum, Boland Junii, Tome II, pages 422-450.²⁵

However when this claim is investigated it is found to be false, because what the Acta Sanctorum actually says is:

The relics of Barnabas the Apostle were found in Cyprus under a cherry tree, having upon his breast the Gospel of St. Matthew copied by Barnabas' own hand.²⁶

There is a reference to a gospel of Barnabas in the Gelasian Decree²⁷ (c. 494 A.D.) where it is listed among the prohibited books, and it has been suggested that this is the same gospel that is of interest today.²⁸ However, without any text from this gospel for comparison, no identification can be made. Since the name Barnabas is famous in Christian history with other works accredited to him,²⁹ the name itself is not sufficient for establishing a link. The links with the fourteenth century also make this unlikely.

Increasingly, Muslims and other writers who want to redeem the Gospel of Barnabas are doing so by admitting that it was composed in the fourteenth century, but that it was based on earlier sources, which they try to reconstruct with highly speculative results.

Why was the Gospel of Barnabas written?

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Why would somebody in the fourteenth century write this book, and pretend that it was written by Barnabas in the first century? What could be their motive for doing this? As we have seen, the author of the Gospel of Barnabas retells most of the events of Jesus' life as recorded in the biblical Gospels, but at some points changes and makes additions to these stories. These changes are not random; they follow a clear pattern. They are intentional changes, to make the biblical accounts conform to the teaching of the Qur'an and Islam. So why rewrite the canonical gospels to make them agree with the Qur'an and Islamic teaching? The answer to this is simple. The Qur'an claims that Jesus foretold the coming of Muhammad,³⁰ and that Muhammad is foretold in the Gospel.

They are intentional changes, to make the biblical accounts conform to the teaching of the Qur'an and Islam.

Those who follow the Apostle, the unlettered Prophet, whom they find mentioned in their own Scriptures, in the Torah and the Gospel.³¹

The Qur'an also says that it confirms the teaching of the Bible.

You to whom the Scriptures were given (Jews and Christians)! Believe in that which we have revealed (the Qur'an), confirming your own scriptures.³²

These claims are made by the Qur'an as proof that Muhammad is a genuine prophet from God. However, what is a Muslim to do when he or she discovers that there is no record of Jesus foretelling the coming of Muhammad in any gospel, and that the Qur'an does not confirm the teaching of the Bible, as it denies that Jesus died on the cross³³ and

What is a Muslim to do when he discovers... the Qur'an does not confirm the teaching of the Bible?

many other central biblical truths?³⁴ The most common response by Muslims is to attack the Bible, and accuse it of being corrupted so that the prophecies of Jesus about Muhammad have

been removed or lost. Another rare response is to rewrite the gospel so that Jesus does foretell the coming of Muhammad and the Qur'an does confirm the teaching of the Bible. This is what the Gospel of Barnabas is, and surprisingly it is not alone.

In 1979 the Muslim scholar Ahmad Shafaat rewrote the biblical Gospel to make it Islamic. Ahmad Shafaat says about his Gospel:

The book before you is a Gospel. It is written in the light of the revelation of God made to the prophet Muhammad. ... This outline is supplemented in this book by some background material (derived mostly from the New Testament and sometimes transformed accordingly to the Qur'anic revelation) to form a

Gospel of approximately the size of Mark. ... As we said earlier, this book is offered as a new Gospel, a Muslim equivalent of, and alternative to, the existing Gospels.³⁵

Ahmad Shafaat has explained very clearly what he has done. He has rewritten the biblical Gospel by transforming it according to the Qur'an. He calls his new book "a Gospel"; it is written with chapters and verses, and he offers it as an alternative to the biblical Gospels. Reading *The Gospel According to Islam* is just like reading the Gospel of Barnabas. Just as the author of *The Gospel of Barnabas* changes biblical accounts to make them agree with the Qur'an, so too does *The Gospel According to Islam*.

He hath appointed me (Jesus) as a sign for men and a mercy from Him. This was a matter decreed ... That I may bring to the world the good news of a messenger who will come after me as light and mercy to all the nations; his name shall be called Admirable.³⁶

And Pilate sent an order, that Jesus Barabbas be released. But the officers who received the order did make an error and released Jesus of Nazareth, and crucified Jesus Barabbas. And when he was released he departed for Galilee, and he met two travellers who were going to Emmaus ... And Jesus answering said unto them, Lo, Jesus of Nazareth is not crucified nor dead, but he liveth.³⁷

Conclusion

The Gospel of Barnabas is not an authentic gospel of Jesus. The author does not understand the language, history or geography of the first century A.D., and there is no ancient evidence for the book. The internal evidence of the book suggests it was written in the fourteenth century, and there are Muslim scholars who agree with this dating. The book is a rewrite of the biblical Gospels, most likely by a Muslim who wanted to show that Jesus taught Islam and predicted the coming of Muhammad. This type of rewriting has been done elsewhere by Muslims. The Gospel of Barnabas issues a challenge, but the challenge is not to Christianity but to Islam. If Muhammad is really foretold in the gospel and the Qur'an really confirms the teaching of the gospel, then why does the gospel need to be rewritten to show this? **K**

Samuel Green is an Islamic scholar and student worker with the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students.

ENDNOTES

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That ain't right, but

PHIL MILES

Call me slow, but sometimes it takes me decades to think something through to a reasonable sort of conclusion. I can cite, for instance, some ideas in the field of anthropological linguistics which first came to my attention on entering university. I have only now (after a quarter of a century!) finally come to realize the error of what I had, at the time, found quite persuasive. I can only claim in my defence in regard to this slowness of mind, that I haven't ever given more than occasional attention to the subject in all those years. It may prove helpful to others to outline some of the mental processes involved, but I think my own experiences here also raise some real questions about academic inquiry and intellectual endeavour—not least for Christians in these areas.

When I was a young lad keen to read every book in my university library cover to cover, I came across an interest-

ing book on linguistics—and I *did* read this cover to cover, even though it wasn't on any reading list that I can recall. The gist of this work by Robert A. Hall Jr, entitled *Linguistics and Your Language*,¹ was that linguistics teaches us to not be judgemental of others merely on the basis of their use of language. In order to make his point, the author began pointing out that speech is merely 'sounds we make with our face' and that written language is merely 'marks we make with our fist'. He was thereby trying to 'demythologize' language, and poke holes in our common pretensions about how it should be used. He was arguing, in other words, that no members of society should put on airs in regard to their own language usage, nor try to put down others who use the language in ways not deemed 'proper'—whether they be the young or members of disadvantaged groups in society.

This was all of great interest to me

It doesn't matter what you say, as long as you communicate.

personally. I don't come from a well-heeled background, and I grew up saying things such as "Him 'n me ain't comin', but". Even today I don't say 'h' the way it oughter be said. Being told

that the way people like myself use the language is just as valid as the habits of anyone else in society was a great boost and encouragement, not least in the context of a university situation where the trend was, if anything, in the opposite direction.

Now, the phrase which sums up this approach to language is "It doesn't matter what you say, as long as you communicate"—a view which is no doubt familiar to many *kategoria* readers. Language is, after all, about communication, and so the means used are really irrelevant—even the sounds we use to create words are finally arbitrary. What matters is that our words are effective in communication, or so the argument goes. It is thus improper to criticize kids for their less-than-orthodox expressions, or to put down the 'lower' sections of society simply because of their inability to speak like the nobs.

Clearly this is a very powerful position with far-reaching ramifications. It is also a very persuasive one, being backed up as it is by objective observation of how language actually works. Certainly it all seemed very straightforward to me as a young undergraduate. And it continued to do so until a conversation with

a Primary school teacher some time later. She bemoaned this approach to language as being a real handicap when teaching English in the classroom. If you teach kids that it doesn't matter what you say as long as you communicate, she opined, then they don't learn properly—and can't, in the end, even communicate very well (sorry about the word 'opined', but I don't want to appear totally uneducated).

Now this was rather paradoxical, to say the least. Though I still believed that it didn't matter what you said as long as you managed to communicate, it now appeared that to teach this truth to young kids might interfere with the process of language learning. Learning to communicate via the spoken and written word would apparently proceed more smoothly if you simply told kids that language usage is either right or wrong and that they have to learn the 'right' way—as determined by society at large, or the education department. To tell them the truth that there is no 'right' or 'wrong' when it comes to language, would seem to muck up the process for whatever reason. Perhaps, I thought, this might be all like Plato's "golden lie", where you have to teach the populace something that isn't true in order to benefit them in the long run. It didn't yet occur to me that this whole understanding of language might itself be wrong.

I didn't think much more about the whole topic until I began the study of Japanese—a subject guaranteed to push

the issue of the nature of language on you. The issue was soon raised by a particular Japanese textbook which began with a rather pompous explanation of how Japanese is fundamentally different from English. Whereas English is centred on communicating ideas, the argument ran, Japanese is more about oiling the wheels of social relationships. In other words, in Japanese it is easy to obscure one's true feelings yet hard to make straightforward statements about issues of fact. Correspondingly, English is a language good at expressing cold facts and unadorned opinions, yet poor at conveying the subtleties of less straightforward social interactions.

From this explanation of the two languages, it might at first appear that Hill's ideas, though relevant to English, are perhaps not so true of other languages. It didn't take too many months of serious Japanese study, however, to show that this way of contrasting Japanese and English was highly artificial at best. It soon became clear that you can communicate ideas as clearly and straightforwardly in the Japanese language as you can in English, though it is nonetheless true that Japanese culture itself doesn't tend in that direction. To put it another way, language can be used in Japanese culture as a kind of social 'glue', but there is more to it than that—especially when it comes to informal, personal situations. There are certainly all kinds of expressions and ways of using the language that are designed to smooth the course of social interaction. You

can avoid saying what you really think about something in numerous ways. Also, language is used as a social marker in Japanese life, indicating what level of society a person comes from, and what their social relationship is to the other person in a conversation. But nonetheless, it's ultimately rather silly to maintain that Japanese don't use language to communicate thoughts, feelings and ideas.

Now, this got me thinking (at last). If Japanese functions both as a means of communication and as a form of social 'glue', what about English? Could the same be true of it? It really doesn't take more than a few moments' reflection to realise that English is not fundamentally different from Japanese in this regard—and we can probably extrapolate this conclusion to include every human language. Language may certainly be used to communicate ideas and emotions, but it may also be used to achieve other social goals, such as smoothing social interactions in situations where the participants don't know each other well.

In other words, to consider language solely from the point of view of communication, is to set up the issue in an inadequate way. Accordingly, to say "It doesn't matter what you say as long as you communicate" is to propose an extremely narrow basis by which to understand our language usage, or

If Japanese functions both as a means of communication and as a form of social 'glue', what about English?

indeed to judge any particular example of it. The way that language is used in human society is complex and many dimensional. Yes, it can be used to communicate, but then it also functions in a myriad of other ways—even to the extent of being a way to *obscure* what we really think in particular social contexts. The “How are you?”, “I’m fine, thank you” exchange is one example of that.

Clearly, this insight raises important questions for Hall’s position. Why does he focus so exclusively on issues of communication at the cost of other aspects of human language? Can his understanding of even the communica-

I realized that the whole “It doesn’t matter what you say as long as you communicate” approach is committing a classic philosophical mistake.

tion aspect of language be adequate, in view of the fact that he has so misconstrued his subject? What would be a true understanding of how to judge language usage? I didn’t pursue such issues immediately. However, in thinking

again about the topic of science recently, I have once more been inspired to take up the train of thought I started so many years before.

I needn’t trace out my recent, rather elliptical thought processes, but a few key issues finally fell into place and I was able to see this whole topic in a clearer light. I will set out some of my belated conclusions here in the hope that they may help some readers work through the issues a little more quickly than I have done.

In the first place, I realized that the whole “It doesn’t matter what you say as long as you communicate” approach is committing a classic philosophical mistake. It is trying to move from an ‘is’ to an ‘ought’. It is trying to set up strongly ethical conclusions about how we should judge language usage, solely on the basis of empirical observation. Hall is arguing that objective observation about how language is formed (language is just ‘sounds we make with our face’), should form the basis of ethical conclusions about how we should view language usage; we should not look down upon those who don’t use the language in socially ‘proper’ ways.

But this cannot be a valid conclusion. It is not logically permissible to move blithely from an empirical description to an ethical conclusion. What, then, are we to make of Hall’s argument, and its apparent persuasiveness? For one thing, it needs pointing out that Hall is reaching conclusions which most readers in the West would feel sympathetic with. We don’t believe that one group of people should be looked down upon by any other group, least of all be treated as inferior, simply because of the way they speak. This attitude is, of course, due to the impact of the Bible on our culture, but more of that below. The fact that Hall reaches a conclusion with which we already feel sympathy, makes it harder to be critical of the logic he uses to reach that conclusion.

Hall also makes his case seem more persuasive by using purportedly descrip-

tive phrases such as 'sounds you make with your face', which actually import his conclusions into his premises. In using such emotive language about how we create words, he takes us well beyond a simple objective description. Instead, he has already intimated the sort of ethical direction in which he is heading by the emotional implications of the words he uses. Yet, it is not immediately obvious on a first reading that this is what is happening—at least it wasn't to me many years ago.

Also, Hall's case is helped by the fact that he only seriously considers the communication aspect of language—setting it up as central and determinative in his analysis. If communication is seen as the sole yardstick by which language is judged, then we are closer to the sort of conclusions he is arguing for. But what if we accept that language is also used as a social marker, as a form of social lubricant intended to help the different parts of society to work well together? Suddenly it becomes harder to argue for Hall's conclusions purely on the basis of the observation of linguistic realities. If, for instance, it is an objective fact that language is used to distinguish different sub-groups within society (rich and poor, educated and uneducated, high and low), then how can you argue that it *shouldn't* be used in this way? In the end, Hall's attempt to put our understanding of language usage on a firmly objective footing can only work if we start by ignoring large areas of linguistic reality. It's little wonder it doesn't

work in the schoolroom.

The second major issue I recently came to understand, is that Hall's approach to language simply represents one more attempt to make science pre-eminent in all of life and thought. This is perhaps simply a reworking of the points I've already made, but it serves to put them in a wider historical context. Why, after all, was the author trying to argue ethical issues from an empirical basis in the first place? Why not start from, say, Jesus' words about the value of children, or his actions in helping the poor and needy? Why begin with basic observations about the nature of human language production?

The answer of course is that such a religiously oriented approach was no longer considered a valid intellectual option in the period when Hall was writing. Science was believed to be the only reliable path to social and moral advancement, especially in the American context where Hall was working.² Anything overtly religious was seen as being totally irrelevant to the pursuit of truth and social progress. Interestingly, I could still distinctly remember that the book ends with Jesus' words about the truth setting you free, but these were used by the author to refer to secular knowledge only.

Of course, all of this is extremely ironic. The fact is that Hall zeroed in on

The answer of course is that such a religiously oriented approach was no longer considered a valid intellectual option in the period when Hall was writing.

only one, fairly narrow aspect of language in his attempt to be 'objective'. In reality, he was being anything but objective and scientific in his approach. The very ground of his whole argument was that his approach was simply based on obser-

This attempt to be scientific ends up creating a view which is merely a caricature of the depths and subtleties of how language is actually used in human interaction.

vation, and therefore binding on the hearts and consciences of his readers. Yet he left out of consideration great swathes of truth about language. Doubtless, the focus on language as a means of communicating ideas fits with certain presuppositions about life which reflect the

dominance of science in the West—we should only say exactly what we mean and always express ourselves in a clear, objective fashion. Nonetheless, this attempt to be scientific ends up creating a view which is merely a caricature of the depths and subtleties of how language is actually used in human interaction.

What then of the ethical issues? Is it all right to put someone down for their bad language usage? It isn't my intention to go into that topic in detail. Suffice it to say that the ethical issues need to be considered, and that we are not constrained in doing that by brute facts about how language works or how it is actually used in society. The question of what *should* happen is an independent one. I've already mentioned that the Bible is historically the source of Western attitudes to how individuals in

society should be treated, and it is to the Bible which we must turn if we want to safeguard such attitudes.

In that regard, I will just mention one example, which is a development called the 'Plain English' movement. This has been extremely influential in Australia and other countries, especially in the move to the use of 'Plain English' forms in both government and private industry. Documents which had previously been written in legalese or bureaucratic gobbledegook have now been rewritten in language that is (as far as possible) understandable to the average person. The intention has been to better serve the citizen or customer. According to David Eagleson,³ a key figure in this development in Australia, the driving force behind this kind of thinking is 1 Corinthians 14:19, in which the apostle Paul writes "Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue". Here he puts communication above ecstatic experience, and the benefit of others above his own private good.

The end of the story is that I decided recently to hunt Hall's book down once more. I was interested to test my conclusions against the original after all these years. It took a little while, but I eventually found it. It was still sitting on the shelves of the undergraduate library in multiple copies—waiting, no doubt, to confuse some other unsuspecting first year student. Re-reading parts of it confirmed what I had come to conclude about its

content. As I suspected, it was right in the middle of the big push in Western culture to place science at the centre of all thought and social development. I give a few words from the close of the book to give you some idea of its tenor.

But to return to our basic point: the message that linguistics has for our society at present is primarily this: Don't Meddle Ignorantly With Your Language! Any meddling with our language, by ourselves or others, in the name of "correctness", of spelling, or of nationalism, is harmful. As we mentioned before, this message is both negative and positive. It is negative, in that it warns us to give up, to abandon entirely the old dogmatic, normative theological approach of traditional grammar and of social snobbery; and to substitute the relativistic, objective approach of scientific study and analysis. It is positive, in that it tells us, once we've cleared the ground in this way, to go ahead and find out for ourselves what the facts really are, to analyze and describe them as accurately as we can, and then to apply the knowledge we have obtained in that way. In both these respects, the contribution of linguistics is simply a part of the effort of all science in modern democratic society, to find out the truth and to act upon it; in this sense, the linguistic ana-

lyst, like other scientists, may take as his motto that noblest of all slogans: "Ye shall know the truth; and the truth shall make you free".⁴

As I've intimated, there are holes in argument here that you could drive a bus through, but I needn't labour the subject any further. Suffice it to say in response to Hall, 'That ain't right, but.'

Having considered the above, it is no doubt becoming increasingly obvious that I have finally come to grips with an issue that is about as relevant as hook and eye shoes are to the modern world. Things have moved on. Of course, the issue of the role and place of science is still a hot topic, but the old breathless faith in its power for good is pretty much gone from our midst. In the area of linguistics in particular, we are certainly now dealing with very different views of language and how it should be used (if 'should' is even the right word any more). Post-modernism has raised very different issues from those before the world half a century ago.

So why have I taken time to look at this issue now? I guess mainly because I don't think I'm the only one who takes an inordinate amount of time to think through an issue. I'm not the only one who could pick up my game as far as critiquing new ideas and intellectual

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fashions. This is true of the general intellectual climate, but perhaps particularly of the Christian world. I believe we are far too slow to take up the cudgels in dealing with new intellectual trends, too prone to simply want to be seen as up with the latest ideas—as though intellectual concepts were no more significant than new hat designs.

One big reality for me as an undergraduate student was that it was extremely difficult to find writers critical of the status quo. Everyone, especially in anthropology, seemed to tow the company line. This reflects very badly on the concept of the university as a place of unfettered intellectual inquiry, though I guess there are fewer these days who

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accept that kind of romanticized view of higher education. Recent developments toward universities being more focussed on issues of financial survival give little cause for complacency in that regard.

Sadly, similar criticisms can be made of Christian writers. Beyond people such as C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer, it was extremely difficult for me in my undergraduate years to find anyone willing or able to critique the sort of stuff I was being taught. Too many Christian thinkers seem more determined to keep up with the latest secular trends than to step back and be critical of what is being said. And if the Christians don't play devil's advocate (so to speak) in Western

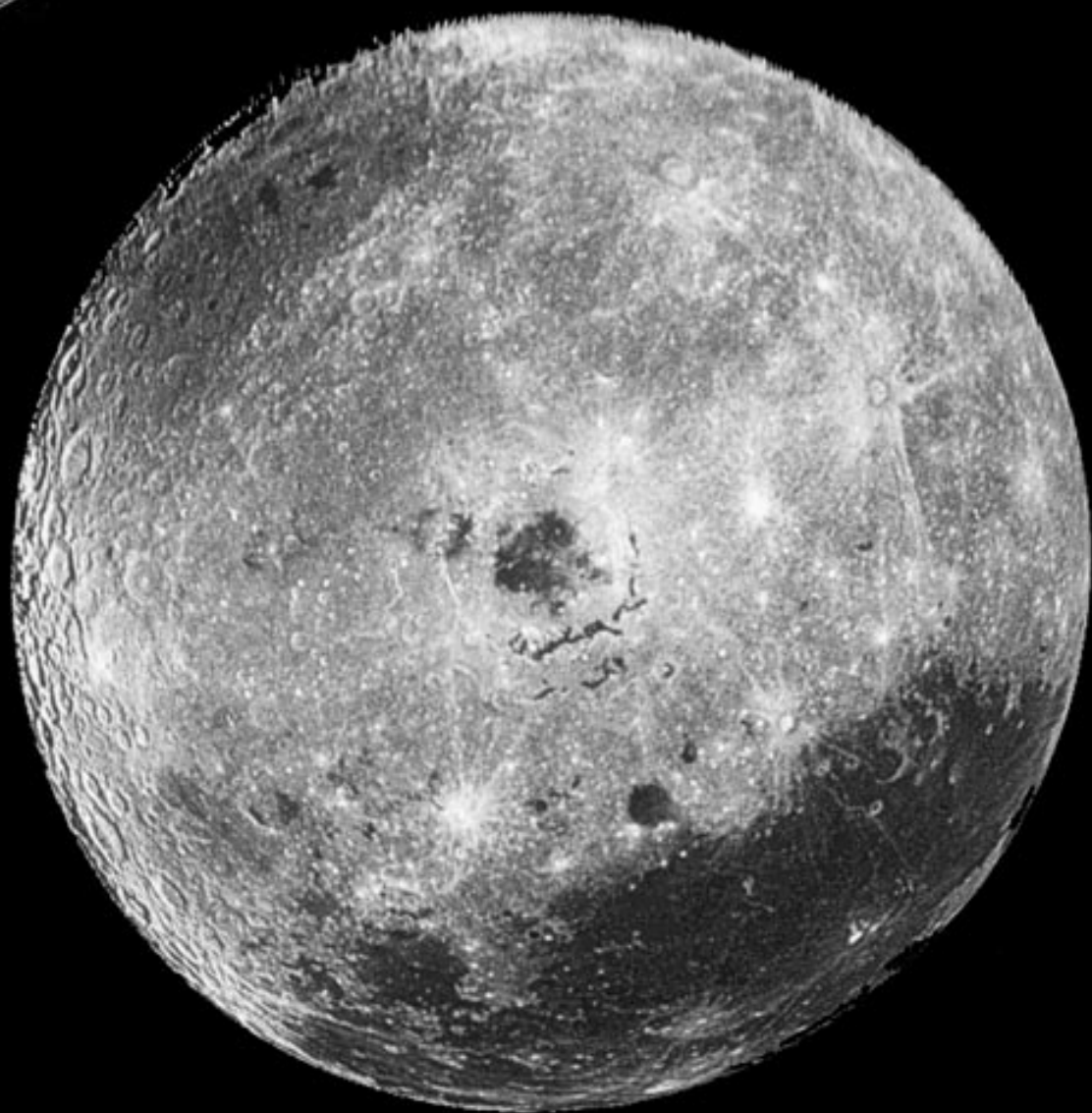
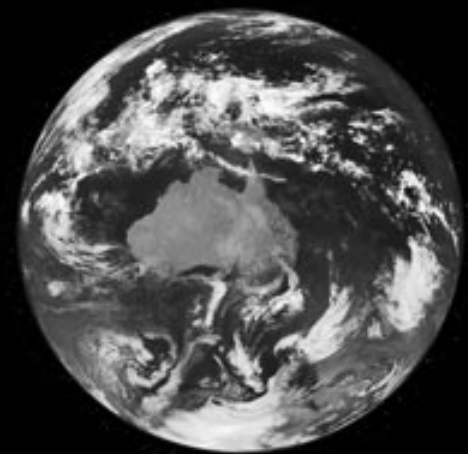
society, who else is going to?

Thankfully, things have improved somewhat in the Christian intellectual world since my undergraduate days. There are far more publications available on various academic topics, and a fairly healthy Christian philosophy establishment in the USA. Also, we should all be extremely grateful for the important role that *kategoria* has been able to fill over a number of years. It has been very helpful in raising substantive issues, and also in flagging the significant fact that ruling intellectual paradigms are not beyond being told that they have no clothes. What the future holds, no-one can say, but it is critical that we keep working at these intellectual issues and keep saying to our society 'That ain't right, but'. ☪

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Robert A. Hall, *Linguistics and Your Language*, Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1960. This work is a revision of *Leave Your Language Alone*, originally published in 1950.
- 2 c.f. my article 'When too much science is more than enough', *kategoria*, 2003, 28, pp. 51-72.
- 3 Private conversation.
- 4 Hall, *Linguistics and Your Language*, p.259.



A Christian and a scientist

DAVID HARRISON

Since starting kategoria I have talked to many scientists who are Christians about their views of God, suffering, creation and their response to sceptics of various kinds. When David Harrison sent me the following article, adapted from a talk he had given to a Christian men's group, it seemed to express many of the thoughts and feelings that I have heard from a range of scientists over the years. [Ed.]

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men (John 1:1-4)

If asked to describe myself I would have to say, 'A Christian and a scientist'. I was, in fact, a scientist before I was a Christian. I had always been interested in all aspects of nature, long before it was fashionable.

I have been a fan of David Attenborough since his early appearances on children's TV in England as the 'zoo man'. He has an infectious enthusiasm for nature in all its manifestations—from the gigantic whales to the tiniest insect—and he reports it all in a way which is refreshingly free from sentimentality. He is not afraid to show nature 'red in tooth and claw'.

So it was with great interest that I watched him being interviewed by Andrew Denton a few weeks ago. It was a very good interview, but one that left me a bit disturbed. Towards the end of the interview, Denton asked a very good question to which David Attenborough gave a very thought-provoking answer.

Denton put to Attenborough that he had been close to so many wonders of the natural world—did this not lead him to believe that this must be the work of a creator? David Attenborough's carefully considered reply was that while it was true that there were many beautiful and wonderful things in the world, there was also a worm which lives in the human eyeball (and nowhere else) and makes the infected person go blind. He stated that he could not believe a merciful God would create such a thing. I think he was talking

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about the nematode worm (*Onchocerca volvulus*) that causes river blindness in parts of Africa. It is spread by small biting black flies. The worms move around in human connective tissue until they reach a suitable place to grow and mature—this is often in the eyes. The adult worm can be over half a metre in length. It is a mode of life to which the worm is exquisitely suited, with tiny hooks and mouthparts to penetrate and burrow efficiently through the body until it finds a suitable place to grow, such as the eyeball. In terms of perfection of design to a life-style, it is up there with the athleticism and grace of the cheetah. Certainly it cannot be argued that it results only from something benign that has gone wrong through human interference. Such creatures' only mode of existence is to parasitise people, through which it causes its

victims great suffering.

It is a fair question to one such as myself, who claims to be both a scientist and a christian: How can such a thing be created by a loving and merciful God?

A question that David Attenborough was not asked was: What he believe in? It is my guess that his answer to this would have been, in common with the majority of leading biological scientists today, that he believed there was no transcendant creator but that the world arose and developed 'naturally'. In the words of the French scientist and philosopher Jacques Monod, "out of chance and necessity".¹ That is, all the details of life on earth arose by random chance based on an inevitability that life must necessarily form, given the structure of the basic universal laws of physics and nature, and that there is no preconcieved pattern or plan.

This philosophy is so widespread among scientists that it is often taken as fact. It is one of the reasons for the expensive efforts to find life on other planets. If life cannot be found outside our earth, the reasoning goes, then it would seem that there is something special about this bit of creation after all—which would be an anathema to adherants of the 'chance and necessity' philosophy.

This philosophy has been given particular impetus in recent years by developments in genetics, and by the popular writer Richard Dawkins in his very influential book *The Selfish Gene*.² Dawkins proposes that the development of all living things is driven blindly by

the need of individual genes to ‘succeed’—that is, to replicate themselves to a maximum through generations. For instance, a gene may survive and thrive by causing a worm to live and multiply in the human eye, oblivious to any suffering caused.

If you listen carefully to the commentaries of David Attenborough, you will see that they are premised on such a view of the world. The lion might hunt in a certain way because it maximizes the chances of its genes being passed on to offspring; the beauty of a bird’s song has no other purpose but to enable its genes to be passed on. It is a very persuasive way of interpreting the natural world, and it has been used to explain just about every aspect of animal and human form and behaviour. It has been claimed that there are genes that make us fat or thin, depressed or happy, genes that make us commit adultery and genes that make us kind. There have even been scientists who explain a belief in god by genes!! (I find it interesting that atheistic scientists thereby admit that humans have an innate sense of God.)

Of course the selfish gene theory is flawed—it even goes against strict Darwinism (so it is often called neo-Darwinism). How can mere genes, molecules of DNA, ‘plan’ strategies for their own survival? It is at best a misleading metaphor, and at worst blatant anthropomorphism, attributing human characteristics to the inanimate DNA molecules. When examined carefully, it is just another way of saying that

“species survive because they are fitted to survive”, a circular argument which does not answer the question: Why is the world made so that such an animal as myself can ask this question?

The weakness of the atheist’s view that the universe is created by accident as a result of occurrences necessarily resulting from the fundamental laws, is that it begs the question—what has set up those fundamental laws in such a way that this particular universe should result? This should be a serious dilemma for the atheist. It is known that the slightest change in any of the basic constants governing the universe would render the universe, and life as we know it, impossible. In fact the conditions required for life on this planet are within incredibly narrow parameters—even the slightest change in the moon would have rendered life here on Earth impossible. Some have tried to cope with this by proposing that there are, in other dimensions, an infinite range of universes—it is

just that this happens to be the one that we live in that makes it seem special to us. You wonder that they are prepared to dream up such fantastic schemes to avoid considering that it might be the work of God.

It is interesting that there has been a shift in philosophy among a number of cosmologists and physicists in more

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recent years. Among those who are studying the fundamental laws and the origin of all things, there is a growing move away from pure atheism to a belief that there is some form of intelligent force behind the creation of the universe. A leading proponent of this is Professor Paul Davies, an Australian-

based scientist who has considerable following in science. He argues that it is inconceivable that the universe developed accidentally and by random, but that there is an intelligent design behind it. He falls well short of concluding that there is a knowable God, let alone that Christ was his son. In fact, curiously for someone who goes to great lengths to present

an open and honest approach to finding the truth, he dismisses Christian belief out of hand with no investigation and no arguments.

For a long time Stephen Hawking, who is considered by some to be the greatest scientific brain of our age, argued ferociously against any suggestion that the universe was driven by anything but an impersonal mechanism. This comes across strongly in his book *A Brief History of Time*³ and is one of the reasons the book was so popular (despite the fact that only a small proportion of people who bought it, read

it, and even fewer understood it—I include myself in the latter category). Stephen Hawking has of late changed his position rather radically, and seems no longer to believe that the universe can be explained away in purely mechanistic terms. Yet again, he falls well short of admitting a loving creator God.

However, some physicists are firmly of the view that the universe can only be explained by a personal God, and that Jesus Christ is his son. John Polkinghorne was a colleague of Stephen Hawking's, and is a fellow of the Royal Society and a distinguished particle physicist in his own right. He gave up a successful career in science to serve the Lord as a minister in the Anglican Church in the UK. He is author of several books giving an alternative view to that of chance and necessity.

It is gratifying that scientific minds far more sophisticated than mine find no incongruity in a scientist believing in God. Indeed it would seem to me to be more incongruous for a scientist to dismiss the evidence of creation as needing the Mind of a creator—a creator who is merciful and loving.

Some modern science is, in my opinion, motivated by arrogance—an attempt to show how clever scientists can be. Certainly I would put attempts to clone humans, and probably much of the cloning of animals, in this category (what else could we call the grafting of a human ear onto the back of a living mouse!). Such things are a wicked misuse of scientific knowledge and reminiscent of the Tower of Babel.

But science is a worthy occupation for a Christian—to investigate the mechanisms of God’s creation, to see the amazing economy and beauty that comes from the mind of our creator. Also, it is surely a blessed thing to be able to apply science as technology to improve the life of humankind here on earth, to relieve suffering and pain—even to prevent worms from causing blindness.

And yet it is still a valid question to a believing scientist: Why did a loving God create the worm that makes people go blind?

We could, of course, say that this is because we live in a world which is suffering from the fall from grace. That such things were not to be found in paradise, but resulted from Satan’s temptation and mankind’s rebellion. This I believe to be true. But we know that even so, God made all things, which means he made the worms, adapted as they are to life in the human eye.

What shall we say then? Is our God capable of being cruel as well as loving? Or has God made a few mistakes in this creation? Are parasitic worms examples of his slip-ups? Should we point these out to him?

When Job questioned the justice of God, God gave it to him with both barrels: “Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me” (Job 38:3).

Who are we, the clay, to tell the potter how to improve his work?—especially as his work in us is not yet complete.

The honest truth is that I do not

know, and no amount of scientific investigation will reveal, why God has made the world precisely the way it is, but there are a few things I am certain about:

A creator God made the world—there is no other plausible explanation for it. So-called ‘chance’ is no more than an accumulation of circumstances beyond our abilities to compute. The fundamental laws underpinning the universe are so delicately balanced that even the smallest variation would render life on earth impossible. The odds against this universe appearing as it is from nothing are ridiculously high (a fact acknowledged by honest cosmologists).

This creator God is a personal God who makes himself known to us. This I know because he has made himself known to me—and to everyone—through his word. He broke into history as Jesus Christ. To deny the historic evidence of the New Testament is to deny that any written history has validity—I understand that there is more evidence supporting the life of Jesus than that of Julius Caesar.

This God is loving and merciful. “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Who but a loving and merciful god would be prepared to pay the price himself in order that his created creatures—that he created from the very earth, that are of the same substance as the animals, and which behave no bet-

A creator God made the world—there is no other plausible explanation for it.

ter than animals in their ingratitude—should become his adopted children?

If, then, such a God chose to make worms that cause suffering, there must be a reason for it. Sometimes such reasons may be discerned.

I heard a story of some women in a concentration camp, who were being tormented by fleas. Some prayed to God to relieve them. Why was this torment added to all the others?

Later they were to discover that it was only these pesky parasites that deterred their guards from raping them.

Mostly, however, we have to admit that we can discern no good outcome for disease and suffering. It would seem that this would indeed be a cruel creation if it all ended here on earth. As the author of Ecclesiastes tells us, “I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind” (Eccles 1:14).

But it does not end here on earth. We have a sure and certain promise of a resurrection, to an eternal life in a perfected creation. I have not done the calculation, but I fancy that, if the whole history of the universe were represented by all the grains of sand in a large truckload laid out end-to-end, then our own lifetime here on earth would probably not even span the last grain.

Does this not put a different perspective on the intransigence of this life compared to eternity? What if we must

endure suffering in this world? It would be a small thing compared to an eternity with God. Our Lord himself said: “And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell” (Mark 9:47-48).

We do not know why God has made a world in which there is the particular suffering of blindness, but we do know through the work of His son (who made blind to see) that he does care about our physical suffering. But he regards spiritual blindness as a far more severe handicap; and he desperately desires us to come to have it cured.

The apostle Paul tells us:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now (Rom 8:18-22).

Sufferings in this world are the pains of our new birth. If our short life here was all there was, and there was nothing beyond this world derived by mere chance, it would be a bleak place indeed where self-

What if we must endure suffering in this world? It would be a small thing compared to an eternity with God.

ish genes frustrate and torture us. Then our existence would have no more meaning than that of a worm that lives in the eye.

I feel extremely sorry for Sir David Attenborough and scientists like him, who deny a place for a loving creator God. All the great wonders of creation that he has enjoyed at first hand must ultimately be meaningless for him, and bound for oblivion. No amount of conservation science can change that. David Attenborough does not know that the pleasures and wonders of this world are but a small example of the love and wisdom that a merciful God wants to share with us for eternity. **K**

Dr David Harrison has had a scientific career spanning over 35 years of academic and industrial research in England, U.S.A. and Australia. He recently retired as Managing Director of a biotechnology research company and now has more time for writing.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity: An Essay on the Natural Philosophy of Modern Biology*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse, Collins, London, 1972.
- 2 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1976.
- 3 Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, Bantam Books, 1988.



Stem cells – the ethics

MEGAN BEST

The stem cell debate, which continued through 2002, culminated in the passing of federal legislation. This legislation decided the fate of excess human embryos, which are stored in assisted reproductive technology (ART) labs around the country. The public debate surrounding the development of stem cell research in our community was often as heated as it was ill-informed. The intense attention given to the legislation debated by the Australian government suggests that our society does not see stem cells as 'just another medical treatment'. This article aims to help put the ethical debate into perspective.

I want to focus on the ethics of stem cell research. Ethics should not be seen as a poor relation to factual science, but as an intrinsic part of the research method. Ethics is the science of morals, or the principles of human duty. Ethics may be influenced by cultural factors, but in essence it is a form of rational

enquiry that concerns how we should live and what we should do. Medical ethics is actually a branch of philosophy. It is not ordered by gut feelings or consciences, however well informed, but by rational study.

While much of the debate has been fairly superficial and media-driven, we have also heard mention of profound issues raised by the stem cell debate. Our rapidly developing ability to manipulate the unborn is raising ethical questions which we have never previously had to consider. However, while many ethical values are universal, with stem cells there is currently no consensus.

In this paper I will outline the three main ethical positions in the stem cell debate and try to give you an idea of the main areas where ethical concerns have been raised. We will then consider the future of this work.

Given the potential benefits of the technology, no sensible person objects

to the idea of stem cell therapy itself. The general opinion is that such regenerative medicine has enormous potential which needs to be developed.¹

The main area of contention lies in the source of the stem cells. While there is widespread support for the use of stem cells derived from adults, opinions of the ethics of embryonic stem cell research differ widely.

There are three main positions.

The first position is opposition to use of embryonic stem cells. The reasoning

is this: If a human person exists from the time of fertilization, then human embryonic stem cell research is unethical. This is because the harvesting of stem cells destroys the blastocyst, the 6 day-old embryo from which it comes.

This argument does not apply to adult stem cells, which can be harvested with no lasting damage to the donor.

While the foremost promoters of this position in Australia are from the churches, this is not a religious divide. For instance, there are Jews, Muslims as well as prominent Christians who oppose this position. The other prominent group in this lobby are those interested in human rights. The notion is reflected in a wide range of international ethical codes of conduct. The Council of Europe's *Convention of human rights and biomedicine* from 1997 specifically ensures protection of human

embryos from destructive research. Similarly, the Nuremberg Code (1946), the Declaration of Helsinki (1964), UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child (1959), and several other international human rights codes are contravened by the use of human embryos in destructive research.

At home, the *Senate select committee on the human embryo experimentation bill* 1985 concluded that "the embryo of the human species should be regarded as if it were a human subject for the purposes of biomedical ethics".² The NHMRC's *National statement on ethical conduct in research involving humans* from 1999 gives ethical responsibilities to researchers to minimize any risk of harm to human subjects.

The underlying concern is the erosion of respect for humans in our society who are weak and vulnerable.

There is also scientific support. Recent advances in developmental biology also support the argument that the early human embryo is not just a clump of tissue.³

Opponents of destructive research on human embryos do not think they are risking the loss of any medical therapies as they regard the success of adult stem cell research to date as evidence that they are as adequate, if not superior, to embryonic stem cell treatments.⁴

In summary, this position opposes embryonic stem cell research, but supports adult stem cell research. Generally it is suggested that the excess human embryos in ART clinics be adopted out

Given the potential benefits of the technology, no sensible person objects to the idea of stem cell therapy itself.

or allowed to succumb, while improving regulation of ART practice to avoid the further accumulation of excess embryos.

The only way around the human rights documents which prohibit destructive research on humans is to remove early human embryos from the human family. So we come to the next position.

The second position is that which supports all stem cell research and destructive embryo research, where informed consent from the relevant parties is obtained. There are two main arguments which support this view. Obviously there are serious biological problems with the idea that the human embryo isn't human. Instead, the early human embryo is regarded as undeserving of protection, on the grounds that it is not an individual, or not a person at that stage. Generally moral status is thought to accrue over time. These are philosophical arguments which I will not explore at this time.⁵ This position also points to other social policies which imply the same notion, such as access to elective abortion and use of post-conception contraceptives. The high rate of natural embryo implantation failure is also used in support of this position.

Secondly, it is argued that the surplus frozen embryos are going to die anyway, so we might as well use them for science. No moral difference is recognized between killing the embryos and letting them die. This argument has been extremely influential in Australia, but it

just looks at the consequences of the research. It does not engage with the act of killing the embryo. Along with the observation that destructive research already occurs in ART labs, it is suggested that the moral interests of the surplus embryos are trumped by the needs of the sick who would benefit from possible therapies developed.

In summary, this position promotes human embryonic stem cell research. Some would say that it is unethical NOT to use the embryos for research, and also support the creation of embryos for research (eg by cloning).

The third position is, I think, the most common in our community. According to this position, so long as only surplus embryos are used and informed consent is obtained, it is ethical to engage in destructive research as the embryos are going to die anyway. While the loss of the embryos is seen as regrettable, the benefits of the research justifies their use. This position does not support the creation of embryos for destructive research, either by fertilization or asexual reproduction. Obviously this implies that there is some sort of intrinsic value attributed to the early embryo in this case which is applied inconsistently. And yes, this is an irrational argument.

...the moral interests of the surplus embryos are trumped by the needs of the sick who would benefit from possible therapies developed.

Apart from debates about the moral status of the human embryo, there are other ethical concerns.

Possible uses of SCNT

Many researchers would like to use somatic cell nuclear transfer (this is the technical term for the most common form of cloning) for their work. However, the development of therapeutic cloning technology produces a problem.

We know that if you implant an embryo created by nuclear transfer into a uterus, and it develops to term, a human clone would be born. Polls suggest that over 90% of the population are opposed to reproductive cloning. The reasons for this vary, but the big question is: is the slippery slope from therapeutic cloning to reproductive cloning inevitable?

In the United Kingdom it has been decided that bans on implantation are sufficient to stop the slide. However the United States congress has said that such a ban would be impossible to police. Embryos are implanted into womens' uteruses regularly in ART clinics and it is extremely difficult for even an expert to distinguish between fertilized and cloned embryos. Two Acts were passed by the Australian Parliament last year, the

Prohibition of Human Cloning Act, and the Research Involving Human Embryos Act 2002. Our legislature has decided that human cloning of any type should be banned, along with other offences listed in the Act. However, the Research Involving Human Embryos Act 2002 allows for the use of excess human embryos from ART clinics where proper consent has been obtained from the persons responsible. This will be possible only for those granted a licence by the Licensing Committee of the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), the committee also being in charge of the monitoring and compliance with the legislation. At the time of writing, no licences had yet been granted.

There are other objections, such as those of women's rights groups who are concerned over the possible exploitation of women as a source of eggs if cloning goes ahead. Estimates are difficult to predict, but one doctor has suggested that to treat the 17,000,000 patients with Type 1 Diabetes in the USA alone would require 850,000,000 eggs.⁶ At several thousand dollars per donation, a lot of financially vulnerable women are potentially at risk.

Commercialization of human embryonic stem cells

There are several issues here. In the past, researchers have freely shared new discoveries and functioned in networks when seeking similar goals. All that has

There are other objections, such as those of women's rights groups who are concerned over the possible exploitation of women as a source of eggs if cloning goes ahead.

changed since biotech companies and universities have begun to claim proprietary rights to new developments and found them quite lucrative. There has been a flurry of patents and licensing agreements in recent years. There have been concerns regarding patents which have been issued to cover advances in the research. Some patents have been issued on embryonic stem cell lines which have not yet differentiated (changed into a different type of cell). What will be the outcome of such patents? Will they be a barrier to collaborative research? Should there be a defence for research use within patent law? Who should benefit financially? Is it right to patent nature? Human beings? The Australian Law Reform Commission is currently reviewing genetic patents and this may have ramifications for biotech patents generally.

For some people, it is wrong to profit financially from a moral evil, or from trade in human tissue, and there are concerns that commercialization may affect equity in access to benefits once therapies are available. Private investors need to recoup their development costs, but if the government cannot afford to provide new treatments as they become available, is it right that only the wealthy will benefit?

Disability perspectives

There has been an interesting divide in the disability lobby. Those with acquired

disabilities have been prominent advocates for embryonic stem cell research (eg. spinal cord injuries, diabetes, Parkinson's). However this view is not shared by all the disabled, especially not those with congenital or genetic abnormalities. Apart from concern about the use of the disabled in the debate (politicians threatening loss of cures if we don't agree while wheelchair-bound patients wait at their side), they have suggested that the money would be better spent addressing things like the social needs of the disabled.

The public debate

There have been several complaints about the public debate. The first is not unique to stem cells. Exaggerated claims from the media regarding the state of medical research is a perennial problem in medicine where any break-through in a lab becomes a headline for a cure. Embryonic stem cell research is no exception.

Journalists have promoted embryonic stem cell research with great vigour. There are several reasons for this. The active lobbying has been largely by embryologists, who wisely stick to what they know. They generally do not bother promoting adult stem cell research. They do not need to—it does

The active lobbying has been largely by embryologists, who wisely stick to what they know. They generally do not bother promoting adult stem cell research.

not involve the destruction of embryos, so the scientists are happily carrying on their research without a government bill or press release in sight. Yet adult stem cell research has been responsible for more successful treatments than the embryonic.

⁷ Surely this non-controversial stem cell option should have been discussed more widely? This has been the feature in many bioethical debates in our society, where the papers promote one (usually the ‘progressive’) option, and don’t bother informing the public of the other, usually cautious, yet valid option. But as a society, how can we make responsible moral decisions when we don’t know all the facts?

But are the professionals at fault as well? Dr Curt Civin, editor of the journal *stem cells* is concerned about public perceptions “Have we ... in our enthusiasm, overestimated what we can do in the short run, and unintentionally promulgated science fiction rather than science?” He goes on to conclude “moral responsibilities of scientists must be stressed, so that science can exist within society and be wisely and appropriately regulated by society”.⁸

Of course, public debate wasn’t helped by the ‘dumbing down’ of the arguments by newspapers, so that it was presented as a simple choice between benefits for the disabled versus sanctity of life. And there was only brief coverage of the parliamentary debate once Iraq

hit the news, the latter providing much better copy.⁹

However, when we look at public consultation, the government has given the public opportunities to be heard, for example in submissions for the Andrews Report¹⁰, the NHMRC consultation process in writing the legislation and the senate review committee.¹¹ By allowing a conscience vote on the legislation, MPs were forced to think through the issues and conduct a free parliamentary debate—one of the longest in living memory.

How have you reacted to the questions I have raised? The embryonic stem cell debate was fundamentally our opportunity to decide what will constitute the characteristics required for a member of the species *Homo Sapiens* to be given the protection of the state. Of course the human embryo is human. Both sides acknowledge that. That’s why scientists want to use them. The bigger debate is less obvious. Have you given much thought to where all this technology is leading our society?

We all need to think about it. Medicine can no longer decide its own direction. The community is concerned. Legislation has been introduced. The public need to get informed and scrutinize what is happening in our research labs.

Biotechnology is not a science. It is a means of applying science for the benefit of man and society (which is another story—technology should fit into our

But as a society, how can we make responsible moral decisions when we don’t know all the facts?

way of doing things, not vice versa). In practise, this means that biotechnology is used to make money.

The changes we experience through biotechnology are part of a larger cultural evolution where, among other things, we see a shift in the way we value living things. Our culture is materialistic. It was inevitable that commodification of the human body and its parts would occur.

The issues I have raised don't have to stop our society from using stem cell therapies to improve our heritage. But it is important that those of us committed to healing and restoring become involved in the community discussion of how we are to use these scientific advances so that market values are not the only ones to prevail. So that boundaries are placed around what is acceptable to us as a society. So our future is one where we see the benefits of our achievements and not the regrets for their misuse. **K**

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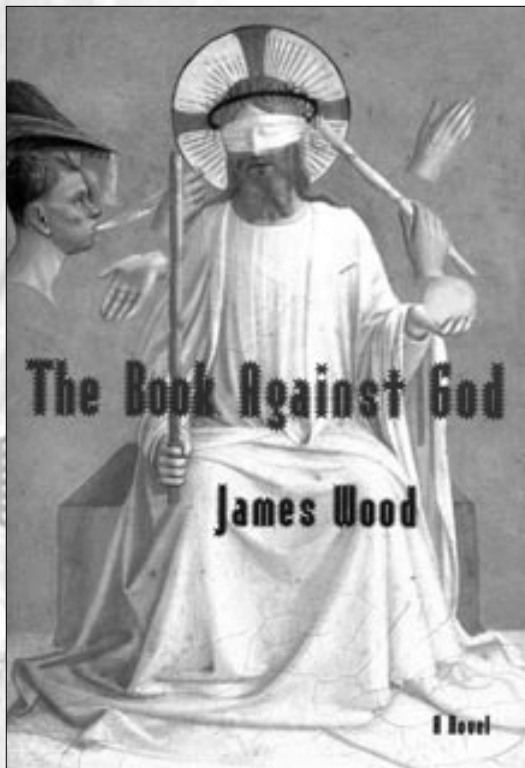
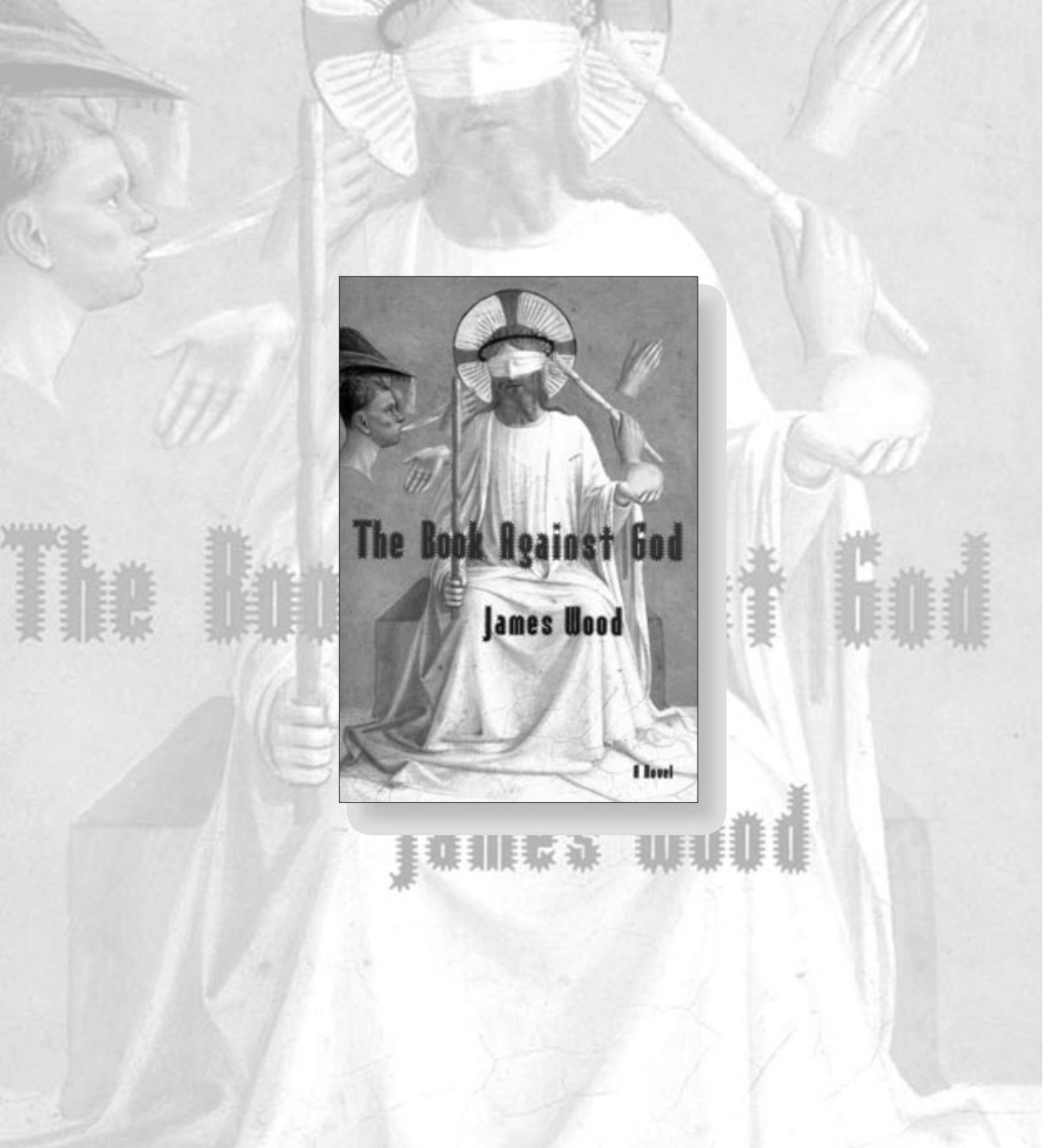
ENDNOTES

- 1 See www.stemcellresearch.org for details.
- 2 *Human Embryo Experimentation in Australia: Senate Select Committee on the*

- Human Embryo Experimentation Bill* 1985, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1986, p.28.
- 3 *Nature*, Vol 418, 4 July 2002, p.14-15.
- 4 See www.stemcellresearch.org for details.
- 5 The American President's Council on Bioethics *Human cloning and human dignity: an ethical inquiry* presents a wide range of moral arguments for and against human embryo research. It is available online at <http://www.bioethics.gov/cloningreport/fullreport.html>
- 6 <http://www.cloninginformation.org>
- 7 See www.stemcellresearch.org
- 8 *Stem Cells* Vol 18, No6, iv-v, November 2000.
- 9 An exception was made for Professor Trounson's rat incident, in which a crippled rat, which Trounson claimed to be cured by embryonic stem cells, was discovered to have been in fact treated with foetal germ cells. See (for instance) 'Government rethink on stem-cell research funding', *The Age*, 28/9/2002.
- 10 *Human cloning: scientific, ethical and regulatory aspects of human cloning and stem cell research*. House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs. August 2001. The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia. Canberra.
- 11 *Provisions of the Research Involving Embryos and Prohibition of Human Cloning Bill 2002*. Community Affairs Legislation Committee. Senate Report, October 2002, Canberra.



Books
&
Ideas



The Book Against God
James Wood

1 Novel

The Book

Against

God

James Wood

JAMES WOOD

My road less travelled

GREG CLARKE

The Book Against God

James Wood

Jonathan Cape, London, 2003

Many a doctoral student might identify with Thomas Bunting, the central character of James Wood's provocative novel, *The Book Against God*. Seven years into his philosophy Ph.D., Bunting is brought to a standstill by his failing marriage, his inability to tell the truth (he is separated from his pianist wife until she is satisfied that he has stopped lying), his unemployment, and his side project—an enormous atheistic journal known as the BAG, the Book Against God.

The BAG is a kind of philosophical notebook, crammed full of Bunting's arguments with various philosophers—he particularly hates Kierkegaard—and his conclusion that no being worthy of

the name God would generate a world such as ours:

Kierkegaard says that we are always more loved by God than we can possibly love Him, and this (combined with the fact that we are always sinful) means that 'against God we are always in the wrong' ... He loves us more than we can ever love Him, and we do not deserve that love and we must rejoice in the gorgeous injustice of it, the swollenness of this top-heavy fraction, and simply say to ourselves again and again, 'Against God we are always in the wrong' ... Oh when will humans murder this devilish concept of God? (pp.110-112)

James Wood is a literary critic, whose work has been reviewed previously in *kategoria* (see issue #17). *The Book Against God* is his first book of fiction,

and the reader senses that, like many first novels, it is more than a little bit autobiographical. However, this reader had an even stronger sense of biographical connection: I felt like Woods was writing the novel of ‘the life I could have led’, a journey down the road that I had not taken, in Robert Frost’s words:

Two roads diverged in a wood,
and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the
difference.

Forgive this slippage into personal confession in a book review, but as I read Wood’s novel, I felt that his protagonist

was someone I could have been, and somewhere I could have gone, had I given up on the Christian faith. Like me, he pursued a doctorate in the arts; like me, he came from a strong Christian home; like me, he worried away at philosophical and moral objections to Christianity; like me, he has a wife whose clarity of vision keeps calling him to account. I read the novel with eager interest in how Thomas Bunting’s life would turn out.

By the end of the novel, I was toting up a set of columns comparing the course of Thomas Bunting’s doctoral years and my own. I know it’s ridiculous, but here are the results:

	Thomas Bunting	Greg Clarke
Socioeconomic status	Impoverished, unemployed, writes ‘pre-emptive’ obituaries for <i>The Times</i> .	Hand to mouth, wonderful help from friends and relatives, writes for evangelical journals.
Relational status	Separated, confused about marriage’s value, desperately in love but hopeless at loving.	Married, convinced of its value, sometimes blissful, sometimes just holding it together, learning to love.
Mood	Bleak, despairing, lethargic, existentialist.	Fairly buoyant, sometimes exhausted by challenges, mostly hopeful.
Philosophical stance	Leaning towards meaninglessness	Leaning away from meaninglessness
Attitude to God	Angry, dismissive, thinks of God as a ‘dead father’.	Committed, humbled, sometimes baffled, sometimes awestruck.
Finished doctorate?	No	Yes

That table may seem rather smug, or perhaps just a reflection of my personality, but it is meant to demonstrate the practical difference that faith in Christ and the biblical view of the world has made in my life—a case study approach to apologetics, if you will.

But, back to the novel. The story is shaped around Bunting's relationship with his father, a solid metaphor for his attitude to his Heavenly Father. It is written looking back on his father's funeral, which also becomes the novel's last act during which Thomas sums up his complaints against God, his marriage, his intellectual work and his childhood. Doubting Thomas was always in conflict with his parish priest father—'Saint' Peter—whose cheery faith trampled all over his son's adolescent worries, producing a pulp of agnosticism by the time he was thirty. In this remake of Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son*, Wood explores very familiar territory for literary thirtysomethings: denying the father figure, losing faith over the problems of evil and human freedom, and replacing it with despair and irresponsibility. Bunting's final words of comfort to his earnest father, that he is "seeking God", are his biggest lie of all.

Bunting's parents are well drawn, with the eye of someone who knows his 'scenes of clerical life' and how being a parish minister affects a family home. I found the depictions of his mother as a slightly downtrodden but faithful servant, and his father as endlessly hopeful in a dying church, to be moving and

genuine. Likewise, Thomas's relationship with his estranged wife Jane manages to bring to life something of the anguish of being close to someone who is going through an existential crisis.

But despite his appealing self-deprecatory tone, Thomas Bunting ultimately loses the reader's sympathy. His life is testimony to the limitations of his unbelief.

Not once—not even in teenage enthusiasm—does he endeavour to 'taste and see that the Lord is good'. God never gets to offer a defence against the charges made. There is something

supremely adolescent about Bunting's inability to move beyond shaking his fist at the God he doesn't believe in. Bunting "protesteth too much", as one of his journalist friends, Max, points out: "I'm not going to church. But I think as I get older that no one is really ever an atheist. Everyone believes ... I never did believe in your atheism. You're a closet Christian" (p.106).

Had Thomas Bunting been reading some of today's Christian philosophers, perhaps he would have found some intellectual buttressing for faith. Alvin Plantinga, for example, has argued persuasively (and to the point where a great many philosophers of different commitments think he has succeeded) that it is not illogical to claim that a good and all-powerful God could create a world in

There is something supremely adolescent about Bunting's inability to move beyond shaking his fist at the God he doesn't believe in.

which evil acts are perpetrated.¹ There is more than a little truth to the criticism made by reviewer Dermot Quinn in *First Things*, that James Wood's wrestle with the problem of evil is "more of a pillow fight in the Lower Sixth dorm than a serious engagement with the truth".² After all, Thomas Bunting is

Wake up and smell the real suffering, Thomas!

hardly suffering terribly, relative to the rest of the world's population: he is neither starving, nor homeless, nor disabled, nor poor. He is studying for the university's highest degree; he has a loving family; he has a roof over his head; he can afford to be philosophically dissolute. Wake up and smell the real suffering, Thomas!

Woods is a stylist, writing in economic and elegant sentences with a clever ability to integrate historical literary references without them overly disturbing the storytelling. However, some of the conversations between his characters, whilst realistic depictions of dialogue between humanities postgraduates talking shop, are likely to put off readers from other backgrounds. For example, the first three pages contain a discussion between Bunting and an editor during which the names Tacitus, Mill, Althusser, Cioran, Popper, Derrida and Gadamer are dropped, one after the other. It's hardly an inviting opening to a novel for any but the already initiated.

The novel ends on what seemed to me to be a note of repentance, but with none of the joy that accompanies it. In

fact, it left me in tears as Tom traced his memories of his father's sternness and kindness:

And I recalled Father's funeral, and the mild wind that blew as the coffin was docked, a wind as invisible as the future, and my mother holding my hand. And suddenly I realised why the experience of having my hand held by my mother seemed familiar. Because I think perhaps that my father held my hand all the time that I stood next to him at Granny's funeral. Is that right? Could that be? Why then did I only remember Father being cross with me and striding towards me in his black cassock? But the more I think about it, the more I convince myself that Father took me back to the graveside and held my hand at Granny's funeral. I am sure he held my hand. All my adult years I only held his hand to shake it, to say hello or goodbye. I would like to put my hand out now, and touch his ...

When anyone asks me, I say that my childhood was happy, and for once, for once, I am not lying. Wasn't it an orchard, my childhood? But why, then, the worm? Why the worm? Tell me (p. 247).

The problem of suffering brings Thomas Bunting to his knees in unbelief, just as it has so for many before—including the author, James Wood, who has written at

length about his own apostasy because he couldn't reconcile belief in God with a world of grief. Surely it is the hardest problem in the world, and cannot be approached flippantly. *The Book of God* is one more story in which this problem is the lake in which the character drowns. In this sense, Wood writes within a well-served novelistic tradition of Western doubters: Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, Thomas Mann, Albert Camus.

But if we turn from fiction to belief, as realist novels encourage us to do, I have found the account of Jesus' death on my behalf, to redeem the world from the curse of sin, and his resurrection as the hope of humanity for a future where evil no longer flourishes, to be the most satisfying answer to the problem of evil. It isn't a knock-down answer, and it doesn't automatically address all of the emotional, moral and theological questions I have about suffering and evil, but I hope I can say this without sounding smug: my positive response to the gospel of Christ has been the difference between my life and that of Thomas Bunting. I took the other road, and it has

made all the difference.

So, to get back to the task of the reviewer: *The Book Against God* is a novel worth reading, especially for those with an interest in theology, philosophy and the arts. It's a philosophical chat dressed in fictional clothing, with the critic's prosaic force protruding between the buttons here and there, but it has certainly left a new character resident in my imaginary world. Thomas Bunting, may you have "the eyes of your heart enlightened that you may know the hope to which he has called you" (Eph 1:18). ❧

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ENDNOTES

- 1 It is known as 'The Free Will Defense', found in Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil*, Eerdmans, 1974.
- 2 Dermot Quinn, 'Pym wins', *First Things*, 138, December 2003, p. 53.

Responding to the Challenge
of Neotheism



THE
BATTLE
FOR
GOD

NORMAN L. GEISLER H. WAYNE HOUSE

The Battle for God

A critical review

MA'AFU'O TU'ITONGA PALU

The Battle For God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism

N. L. Geisler, H.W. House and M. Herrera Kregel, Grand Rapids, 2001

More than a decade ago, Philip D. Jensen and Tony Payne commented that

[a]s in the past, evangelicalism continues to battle with liberalism, mysticism and ecclesiasticism. These keep emerging in different guises, but their goal is the same—to turn us away from evangelicalism. Today, they all turn up as ‘evangelicals’ for the most dangerous wolves always appear in the finest merino. No longer are they on the outside spurning, taunting and denouncing us. Now they have

found their way inside the camp and are calling us to move on from our theological roots.¹

This remark has proven extremely true in the contemporary situation of the evangelical movement. *The Battle For God* is not about a battle with enemies which are outside the evangelical camp, so to speak. It is rather a battle with age old enemies who “have found their way inside the camp and are calling us to move on from our theological roots”. In that sense, it has become harder for evangelicals to be engaged in battle since the enemy, even though the most dangerous, have indeed appeared in the “finest merino”, professing to be evangelicals and having an extremely high view of the Scriptures.

This is the enemy that the authors of *The Battle for God*, Norman L. Geisler and H. Wayne House, together with Max

Herrera, are fighting. This book emerges from the writers' pastoral concern that "ideas have consequences", and so the challenge to the traditional understanding of God posed by neotheism is placing the eternal souls of spiritual seekers in the balance (p. 18). To be sure, it is written with the firm conviction that "traditional theism's view of God" is the

gateway to virtually every other Christian doctrine and therefore "a serious deviation on this topic can erode every other pillar supporting the orthodox church" (p. 277). In other words, *The Battle for God* is written as a defence of the traditional theistic view of

God against the challenges posed by the 'openness to God' view or 'free will theism' which is what the writers of *The Battle for God* designate as 'neotheism'.

According to *The Battle for God*, neotheism is a new concept of God, created by combining aspects of panentheism or process theology with traditional theism. It is a theological position with the following five characteristics:

God not only created this world *ex nihilo* but can (and at times does) intervene unilaterally in earthly affairs.

God chose to create us with incompatibilistic (libertarian) freedom—freedom over which he cannot exercise total control.

God so values freedom—the moral

integrity of free creatures and a world in which such integrity is possible—that he does not normally override such freedom, even if he sees that it is producing undesirable results.

God always desires our highest good, both individually and corporately, and is thus affected by what happens in our lives.

God does not possess exhaustive knowledge of exactly how we will utilize our freedom, although he may well at times be able to predict with great accuracy the choices we will make.²

The general argument of *The Battle for God*, as aforementioned, is that ideas have consequences and that bad theological ideas have seriously bad consequences. Since neotheism is a "seriously bad idea" it is bound to have seriously bad consequences for anyone who is influenced by it.

From *The Battle for God*, one can derive at least four basic dangers inherent in the challenge posed by neotheism for the adherents of traditional evangelical belief about God. *Firstly*, neotheists claim that the way traditional theists have interpreted the Bible in relation to the derivation of the doctrine of God was influenced by pagan Greek philosophy. They claim that notions such as the transcendence of God and His sovereignty overruling human actions, are evidence of the impact of Greek idealism on Christian doctrine.

Secondly, neotheists claim that their assertions about who God is, are consistent with the Biblical view and the tradi-

***The Battle for God* is written as a defence of the traditional theistic view of God against the challenges posed by the 'openness to God' view or 'free will theism'.**

tional theological stance. They draw not only from the scriptural data but also from historical theology for the justification of their position.

Thirdly, neotheists show no hint of embarrassment in identifying themselves with the evangelical camp by professing to hold an extremely high view of Scripture. In fact, they lay claim to the soundness of their interpretation of Scripture over against traditional theism.

Fourthly, neotheists consistently downplay the significance of the doctrine of God to the Christian faith by making the claim that issues concerning the nature of God are only peripheral.

The argument of *The Battle for God*

The Battle for God follows a highly predictable straitjacket pattern which at times can dampen one's interest in reading the book. After a brief summary of the characteristics of the neotheist's position in the first chapter, the rest of the book consists of a defence of the traditional theistic view of God, in which the traditional attributes of God are treated individually. Each chapter follows a basic structure. First there is a brief introduction to the attribute of God to be treated in the chapter. Then the biblical evidence for the attribute of God in question is displayed in a proof-text fashion. Third, the theological evidence for the classical theist position is marshalled. Fourth, the historical moor-

ings of the traditional theistic view of God is portrayed by assembling insights from theologians of various (even contradictory) theological stances, ranging from the church fathers through to modern theologians. In some of the chapters, the historical periods from which the insights of theologians are invoked are divided into the Patristic, Medieval and Reformation.

Once the traditional theistic view is established, the writers then proceed to deal with the challenges of neotheism in the following manner. First, they argue against neotheism from the Bible. Then, they argue against neotheism from historical theology, and then systematic theology. In this section

of their argument, the neotheists' proposals concerning the attribute of God under discussion are identified and then refuted. This is then followed by a brief conclusion in which the judgements of neotheism are pronounced to be substantially lacking in significant Biblical, historical or theological underpinning, and the readers are exhorted to hold onto the classical view of God based on the arguments set forth.

After a brief summary of the characteristics of the neotheist's position in the first chapter, the rest of the book consists of a defence of the traditional theistic view of God, in which the traditional attributes of God are treated individually.

The achievements of *The Battle for God*

In general, the concern of these writers to defend the faith 'once delivered to the saints' from the challenge of neotheism is remarkable. Their case is emphatically established, given the relatively difficult nature of the kind of challenge they are refuting. Had this kind of challenge come from a theological camp outside the evangelical movement, then even though it might still be difficult to

Their case is emphatically established, given the relatively difficult nature of the kind of challenge they are refuting.

counter, there would be a sense in which the enemy could be clearly identified for who they are. But the problem confronting these writers, as we have mentioned above, is that neotheism is a theological position advocated by writers such as Clark H. Pinnock and Gregory Boyd, who have publicly professed to be evangelicals with a primary commitment to Scripture in their theological conviction. Apart from the provision of 'neotheism' as a theological designation for this new kind of challenge to the traditional Christian theism, *The Battle for God's* achievements also include the identification of the basic characteristics of neotheism and affirming that this is indeed a theological departure from the teaching of the Bible and of the church throughout the history of its existence.

Viewed in this light, the achievements of these writers in their objection to neotheism should be widely

acknowledged, at least in the evangelical camp. Their boldness in speaking out against this enemy from "within" is praiseworthy and we should be thankful to God for men such as these, who are not only committed to preserving sound doctrine in the church of God, but who are also keen to speak out against "false teaching", even in an age in which categories such as "error", "wrong" and "heresy" are regarded as no longer applicable. These writers are a timely source of inspiration and comfort for young evangelical theologians in their demonstration of how a commitment to the traditional Biblical faith and to a sound academic knowledge of theology can be coupled to assist in the preservation of healthy doctrine in the church of God for generations to come.

The title of this book (*Battle for God*) bears a striking resemblance to the title of a book written by Harold Lindsell in 1976, *The Battle For The Bible*,³ as his attempt to refute a new kind of interpretation of the traditional doctrine of the inerrancy of the Bible, championed by the then Fuller School of Theology. The case fought by *The Battle for God* can be further appreciated by making a comparison with Lindsell's book. Lindsell takes the title of his work from a famous quotation by Martin Luther who said,

If I profess with loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the

world and the devil are at the moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved and to be steady on all the battlefield besides is merely flight and disgrace if he flinches at THAT point.⁴

Like Lindsell, the writers of *The Battle for God* were addressing a “battle” between evangelicals and adherents of a theological conviction contradictory to their own. But while for Lindsell “that little point which the world and the devil” were “at that moment attacking” was the inerrancy of the Bible, for the writers of *The Battle for God*, it is neotheism. In this regard, the writers of *The Battle for God* are not only to be identified with H. Lindsell in the 1970’s but also prior than that to J. Gresham Machen in the 1930’s and even beyond that to B. B. Warfield, all of whom showed their loyalty as soldiers of Christ by fighting where the “battle” was raging in their contemporary situations.

Some critical reflection on *The Battle for God*

Hitherto, I have sought to summarise the argument of *The Battle for God* and then to give an appraisal of their achievements. I shall now attempt to give some critical reflection on the general argument of the book.

The title of the book itself, *Battle For God*, tends to suggest a powerless God whose attributes depend on the result of an academic debate amongst Biblical scholars. Undoubtedly, the title is an attempt to encapsulate the theological challenge to which the book is a significant contribution. While this title might have been good enough for Harold Lindsell’s book, it is not a fitting title for the discussion in which the writers are participating. *Battle For God* gives the impression that the fate of God (or our perception of God) lies in the ability of theologians to argue their positions well. I propose that Barth’s charge against nineteenth century liberalism could have been the basis for a more suitable title for this kind of response. i.e.: *Speaking “Man” in a Loud Voice: An Evangelical Response to Neotheism.*⁵

If the way neotheism is described in *The Battle for God* is correct (and I believe it to be so), then it is simply a view of God which finds its origin in theological liberalism, but has been reasserted in a different theological guise. Neotheism attempts to explain God from a point of reference within humanity, namely, human experience. Thus, for instance, God’s ‘repentance’ is explained as the changing of his ‘will’ while his essence remains the same, just as is true in the human experience of repentance (see p. 207: cf. pp. 100-141). As a result, the

Neotheism attempts to explain God from a point of reference within humanity, namely, human experience.

God of neotheism appears to be a mere projection to the infinite of all our human ideals. In this respect, Feuerbach's dictum holds sway in neotheism: "the knowledge of God (is) nothing else than the knowledge of man".⁶ According to such a view of God, the infinite bears all the distinctive resemblances of the finite character of humanity.

But if Christ suffered only in his humanity and not in his divinity, then the atonement is an impossibility.

A second criticism is that due to the predictable form in which the argument within each chapter is structured, the book becomes tedious to read. Once

the reader expects the way the argument is going to flow in every chapter, it is quite difficult to maintain one's interest. Perhaps the writers could have varied the style of their structure and so increase the grasping power of their book.

Thirdly, D. A. Carson offers a very helpful advice which was overlooked by the writers of *The Battle for God* in some parts of their argument. He says that "[i]t is important in counteracting an error that we do not flip so far to the other side that we actually feed the error".⁷ In arguing against neotheism's conviction that a God who suffered on the cross is not impassive, the writers of *The Battle for God* say that even though Christ has two distinct natures which are neither to be separated nor confused, he suffered in and through his humanity but not in his divinity; "[h]e who suffered was both God and man

but he did not suffer as God but as human" (pp. 187-88).

But if Christ suffered only in his humanity and not in his divinity, then the atonement is an impossibility. He is only the Redeemer of the whole world because God was in him reconciling the whole world to himself through Christ's suffering on the cross, as a human being on behalf of and as a substitute for sinful mankind (cf. 2 Cor 5:19; Col 1:19-20). His death is God taking upon himself the sins of the whole world and dying on our behalf, so that sin and its penalty are dealt with once and for all. In objecting against a theological aberration, we must exercise proper caution that when we 'throw out the bath water', we do not include the 'baby'.

There is an implication here that *The Battle for God's* arguments are fully immersed in the logic of philosophical theology and not in the logic of the biblical narrative. Biblical logic involves speaking about the cross, as Luther did, as "God forsaking God" in Christ's cry of dereliction (Mark 15:34). Perhaps the writers of *The Battle for God* could have avoided such superficiality in their argument had they acknowledged the existence of 'half' truths in the arguments of neotheism. It is true that God suffered on the cross, but to draw the conclusion from it that God is therefore passible is illegitimate. Half truths as such make the neotheist's position a major threat to sound doctrine.

I have a fourth criticism. Jensen and Payne list three ways in which we, evan-

gelicals, may respond to challenges to our theological conviction such as neotheism.⁸ To begin with, there is the way of the ‘conservative reactionaries’ who are basically opposed to change and seek merely to repeat the performance of yesteryear. (In my view, *The Battle for God* belongs to this category.) There is also the way of the ‘trendy reactionaries’ whose response to challenge is to follow the latest trends and fashions of the society around them. To this category belong theologians such as C. H. Pinnock of the neotheist camp. The third way is that of the ‘actionaries’, who, when facing challenges to their theological conviction, dig back into the truths of the gospel and gain fresh confidence in evangelical theology. This last trend is necessary for evangelicals to be able to propagate evangelical truths in our world. Even though the authors of *The Battle for God* have marshalled biblical evidence in support of their position, the task at hand requires more than sheer prooftexting in support of one theological stance over another. The enemy that *The Battle for God* is “raging battle with” proves himself also to be an expert in the art of prooftexting. What we need as evangelical counter-measures to challenges such as neotheism, is an exegetical treatment of passages which are fundamental to the argument.

Fifthly, there is a sense in which the charge of idolatry can be levelled against both parties in this debate. By merit of seeking to establish one position over against the other, they risk confining

God to a particular conceptual grid—either that of the neotheist or that of the traditional theist. Since both parties appeal to the Bible for justification of their respective positions, it is apparent to me that the issue under consideration in this dispute is hermeneutical. The differences in these views of God spring from the different kinds of hermeneutical methods which they apply. Therefore, I propose that the challenge of neotheism could be better treated if the inherent weaknesses in the hermeneutical methods of neotheists could be brought under the spotlight.

Suffice it to say that from first impression, neotheism operates with a hermeneutical method which is fundamentally flawed at several points. Their error lies in their consistent attempt to impose upon the biblical text a point of reference from ‘outside’. As mentioned earlier in this discussion, neotheism’s discourse about God and his infinite character is firmly grounded in its correspondence to human experience. Armed with this pre-understanding, they then interpret the biblical texts which deploy anthropomorphic expressions to describe God.

Yet for both parties of this theological debate, the way they handle the biblical texts could be improved if adequate attention was given to the insight of John Bright. Speaking at a time in which

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the Bible has become a strange book to the average churchgoer and to many ministers, Bright, in his attempt to remedy the situation, insisted that the “question of the unity of Scripture must be

taken seriously if the Bible is to be saved from disuse and misuse”.⁹

The participants of this debate, as represented in *The Battle for God*, can hardly escape the charge of confining themselves to favourite snippets here and there in support of their opposing viewpoints. This illustrates what Bright meant

by “disuse and misuse” of the Bible.

As evangelicals, we profess to have a high view of the Bible, declaring that it is indeed the word of God with no distinction between its parts. But in practice, we confine our use almost entirely to selected sections—those that fit our preset theological grid, be it neotheism or otherwise—and ignore the rest as completely as if it had never been written. As a result, we not only neglect much that is valuable, but what is worse, we miss the deepest meaning of the very parts we use because we lift them from their larger context. If the larger context of the Biblical database is considered seriously in any attempt, either at theological construction or apologetic, then the charge of disusing and abusing the Bible could be avoided.

Thus, an integrated biblical theologi-

cal view of God is called for as an evangelical response to the challenge of neotheism. By “an integrated biblical theological view”, I mean a view of God which is derived from an acceptance of the unity of Scripture. This is “a unity of source (in God), of function (covenantal rule), of narrative (the fulfillment of promise) and of message (the gospel of Jesus Christ)”.¹⁰ By accepting the gospel of Jesus Christ as the central message of the Bible, we can establish the wholeness of Scripture since Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament in the New. Such an acceptance should develop a Biblical theology in which the unity of Scripture is not to be overemphasized at the expense of its diversity, or vice versa. An integrated biblical theology is one which sees its fundamental task as describing as fully as possible the given, canonical shape of the Bible’s own theology, focussing on the unity of Scripture while doing full justice to its diversity.¹¹ In fact, the key to this unity in diversity is found in the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As far as I am concerned, this approach is yet to be deployed as an evangelical response to the challenge of neotheism.¹²

Conclusion

It ought to be said that my critical remarks about this book are not to be considered as discouragement for reading *The Battle for God*. In fact, I would highly recommend this book for theolo-

By accepting the gospel of Jesus Christ as the central message of the Bible, we can establish the wholeness of Scripture since Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament in the New.

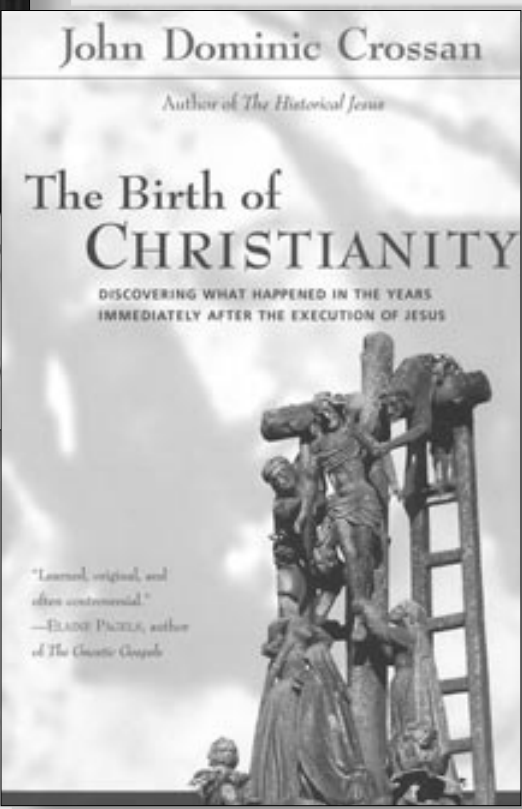
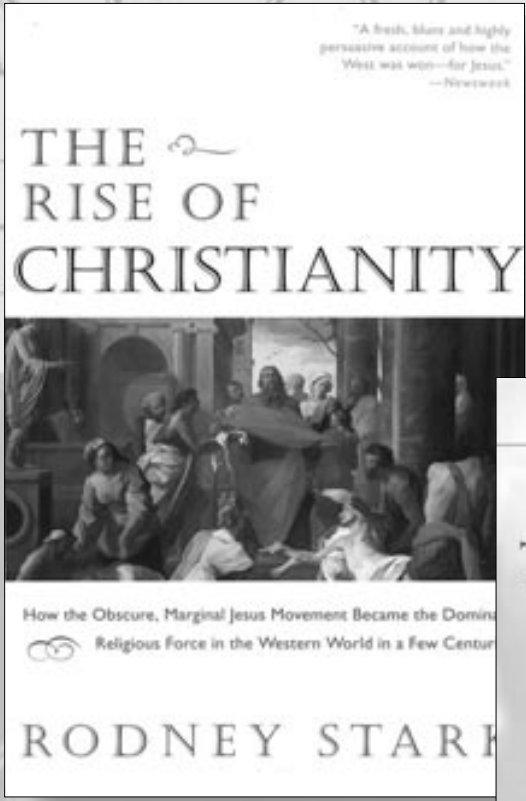
gians who want to be updated on the latest developments in the discipline of theology. *The Battle for God* is an excellent response to the challenge of neotheism and valuable reading for theologians pastoring the flock of God. It provides a template for how the voice of Scripture, historical theology and sound reasoning arising from an evangelical piety can all be combined in response to a theological challenge that touches at the very heart of biblical Christianity. For seminary students, this book is an excellent example of the way arguments formulated from a combination of sound biblical knowledge, valid theological insights and a thorough knowledge of historical theology can be sustained to make a case for traditional Christian beliefs. *Soli Deo gloria.* ❀

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ENDNOTES

- 1 See P. D. Jensen and T. Payne., *Have Evangelicals Lost Their Way? And Other ... Stuff*, Lancea, Homebush West, 1991, p. 5.
- 2 See C. H. Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, IVP, Downers Grove, 1994, p. 156, cited in p. 10 of *The Battle for God*.
- 3 H. Lindsell, *The Battle For The Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1976.
- 4 Cited by Lindsell. p. 201. My italics.
- 5 See K. Barth, *The Humanity of God*, trans. J. N. Thomas and T. Wieser, John Knox Press, 1960, pp. 39-40.
- 6 L. A. Feuerbach., *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. G. Eliot, Harper & Row, New York, 1957, p. 207. See also M. A. Noll, 'Feuerbach, Ludwig Andreas', in S. B. Ferguson and D. F. Wright (eds.), *New Dictionary of Theology*, IVP, Leicester, 1988, p. 259.
- 7 See Jensen and Payne, *op. cit.*, p. 45.
- 8 See Jensen and Payne, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8.
- 9 J. Bright, *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its Meaning For the Church*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1953, p. 9.
- 10 P. F. Jensen, *The Revelation of God*, IVP, Leicester, 2002, p. 224.
- 11 For an example of how this biblical theological approach has been utilized, see B. G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther*. *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 10, Apollos, Leicester, 2000. See also T. D. Alexander and B. S. Rosner (eds.), *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, IVP, Leicester, 2000 and the bibliographies therein.
- 12 I would mention two responses from the evangelical camp (beside *The Battle for God*) of which I am aware: G. A. Cole, 'The living God: an anthropomorphic or anthropopathic?', *Reformed Theological Review*, 59, 2000, pp. 16-27; and G. Bray, *The Personal God: Is the Classical Understanding of God Tenable?*, Paternoster, Carlisle, 1998.

THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY



How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries

A question of origins

MICHAEL JENSEN

The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal, Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force
Rodney Stark
Harper SanFrancisco 1997

The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus
John Dominic Crossan
Harper SanFrancisco 1999

We are intrigued by genealogies. One of the features of post-Enlightenment thinking that dies hardest is the belief that if you can explain how something came to be, you have explained the thing itself. If you can trace the development, or the

evolution perhaps, of your object of study, you can claim to have understood it. This of course was famously exemplified by Darwinian science; but we can see the same 'quest for origins' paradigm in the theology of the nineteenth century. The 'quest for the historical Jesus' and the developments of source and tradition criticism are examples of massive intellectual endeavours which aimed to illuminate the text of the Bible by reconstructing the 'real' world *behind* it. The documents were sifted, segmented and reconstructed. However, as in dissecting a lab rat, putting the parts back together somehow leaves you with something not quite a rat, or in this case, a text.

There were—and are—two assumptions behind the process, of course: that the earlier stream in the text is more authoritative, and that the church of the first two centuries distorted that author-

itative picture. The depictions of Jesus in the gospels, for example, serve the purposes of the communities for which they were written, and tell us more about them than about the historical Jesus. Secondly, then, the history of the early church becomes a significant matter, because if you can unpick their additions and distortions—and add

back in some of which they suppressed or overlooked—then you have a chance of glimpsing the face of the authentic Jesus, the real carpenter of Galilee himself. In particular, Paul is blamed with making Christianity into something that Jesus never intended it to be.

But the first years of the church are a valid object for historical study in their own right. This is because they, too, represent a miracle. How was it possible that, in the short space of three centuries, the Christian faith could go from being a tiny Jewish cult to becoming the dominant religion of the Empire? Augustine of Hippo used to use the miracle of the survival and expansion of the church as a pillar of his apologetic method. Nineteenth Century German historian Adolf von Harnack, in his monumental *The History of Dogma*, sounds rather at a loss to explain this success: Christianity grew with “inconceivable rapidity”; there was “astonishing expansion”. He wrote: “Christianity

must have reproduced itself by means of miracles, for the greatest miracle of all would have been the extraordinary extension of the religion apart from any miracles”. Answering this question, the question of the success of the church, is foundational for understanding the development of Christendom and thus the whole culture—ethics, law, politics and art—of the Western world, as well as crucial to understanding the historical Jesus.

Two books by two very different scholars come at this question of the early church—unsurprisingly—from very different angles. John Dominic Crossan is a remarkable scholar and a leading figure in the Jesus Seminar, known already for his confidently-titled work *The Historical Jesus* (1991). He has the remarkable gift for writing with wit and pungency on matters of great academic complexity—his book *The Birth of Christianity* is, quite frankly, a great read. As a part of his method as a historian, he admits as evidence material from medicine, anthropology, Irish laments, archaeology, Greek tragedies and sociology. He offers an extensive and quite pessimistic analysis on the value and veracity of memory and oral communication. His aim is to explore the dark decades of the 30s and 40s AD, before the conversion of Paul, about which we have apparently so little documentary evidence; and so to explain how it was that the Christian movement continued despite the execution of Jesus of Nazareth.

In Crossan’s view, Jesus was a

How was it possible that, in the short space of three centuries, the Christian faith could go from being a tiny Jewish cult to becoming the dominant religion of the Empire?

Galilean peasant radical. The movement he led was a revolt against economic oppression on behalf of the God of justice. The early movement of Christians in Galilee, for Crossan, reflected exactly these themes. After the death of Jesus, the first disciples in Galilee continued to fight against the oppressive forces that held sway in the district. The Christian gospel of sacrificial redemption and apocalyptic theology was overlaid—by the Jerusalem group—on top of the moral and political teaching of Jesus. Of course, that the true teaching of Jesus was quickly corrupted is not a new suggestion. Crossan's originality lies in the particulars of his case, especially in the emphasis on Galilee.

Criticism of Crossan from more conservative scholars like N. T. Wright and Francois Bovon has focused on the way he tosses the salad of historical sources so that the bits he likes are on the top. For example, he champions the non-canonical *Gospel of Thomas* as, at least partially, early and authentic—with a minimum of evidence and against the consensus of scholars. He construes the hypothetical document Q (made up of the material that is common to Matthew and Luke) as Galilean in origin and dates it to the 50s. He has reconstructed a document called the “Cross Gospel” from parts of the *Gospel of Peter* and imagines that originates, once again, in Galilee in the 50s. The confidence with which these claims are asserted is not warranted; and, of course, the flipside is that the canonical gospels in their cur-

rent form are seen as later and therefore reflections of a different context.

There is a circularity to this dating and source-evaluation process. Having decided that Jesus was a peasant revolutionary figure, Crossan then privileges as early the material that supports this depiction. How do we know it was early? Because it shows Jesus as a peasant revolutionary figure. Of course, it is worth noting that a conservative scholar may be guilty of the same circularity and unwarranted privileging of evidence; but that doesn't excuse it in this case.

A further question is whether Crossan is justified in his claims for the Galilean region. While archaeology has revealed significant details about life in the region in recent years, it has not shed a great deal of light on Christianity itself. Acts 9:31 points to the presence of Christians in Galilee; but more than that we do not know. It is sheer speculation to assert, as Crossan does, that the geographical references to Galilean towns in the Gospels signal the ongoing presence of Christian communities in opposition to the version of Christianity being promulgated from Jerusalem.

Crossan is very skeptical about the value of Luke-Acts for the history of early Christianity, in keeping with one scholarly tradition since the nineteenth

He champions the non-canonical *Gospel of Thomas* as, at least partially, early and authentic—with a minimum of evidence and against the consensus of scholars.

Stark uses statistics and observations of religious movements in the present day to make comparative assessments of the growth of Christianity.

century. This is also in keeping with Crossan's tendency to privilege unauthorized material in favour of authorized material throughout. Luke unquestionably has biases and a strong agenda; but so does every historian. To write him off as a source is just bloody-

minded. Bruce Winter's recently edited six (!) volumes of essays—including work by Drs David Peterson of Oak Hill and Peter Bolt of Moore College—illustrates the very opposite about Acts as history.

Likewise, Crossan is very wary of Paul.

However, the writings of Paul remain among the earliest Christian material we have. Crossan might reply that he is inquiring into the pre-Pauline period, and so the point is moot. But Paul's letters, it is widely agreed, contain much material that he obviously inherited from the earliest churches—Colossians 1:10-15, for example. This material is richly *theological* in its reflection on Jesus. He is not merely a rabbinical teacher with devoted disciples, but something far more. To ignore this material is more than passing strange.

Rodney Stark's *The Rise of Christianity* is another remarkable book seeking to account for the development and success of the Christian movement. Its scope is wider and its methodology more specific than Crossan's: Stark cov-

ers the first three centuries of the Christian movement but does so by means of sociological analysis. It is an ambitious and intriguing work. While traditional historians use specific pieces of written or archaeological evidence from the period under question, Stark uses statistics and observations of religious movements in the present day to make comparative assessments of the growth of Christianity. In his opening chapter 'Conversion and christian growth' he writes:

Having established a plausible growth curve for the rise of Christianity, I will review sociological knowledge of the process by which people convert to new religions in order to infer certain requirements concerning social relations between Christians and the surrounding Greco-Roman world (p. 3).

He is able to do this by means of comparison with the Mormons and the Moonies in the modern era—movements for whom precise numerical data is available—and finds it entirely possible that a growth rate of 40% per decade characterized the first centuries of Christianity. Stark observes that, following this chart of growth, the numbers of Christians in the first few decades would have been very small, and, as we know, scattered about the empire. However, by the beginning of the fourth century, the Christians would have been approaching 10% of the population.

But what made Christianity attractive to the pagan world? Stark covers a number of areas in which Christian behaviour made a significant impact. For example, Christians tended to their sick in ways that even the greats of pagan medicine like Galen would not. Severe epidemics—of which there were at least two in the period—actually acted in the Christian cause, because Christians had a satisfactory account of why catastrophe had befallen the community; because Christians had far greater rates of survival, not least in part because they did not abandon their sick; and because the crucial networks that formerly held pagan society had been broken by the devastating loss.

Stark's chapter 'The role of women in christian growth' is truly fascinating. Contrary to modern denunciations of Christianity as sexist and patriarchal, it was women in particular who found Christianity attractive. Women clearly enjoyed far higher status in the Christian subculture than they did in the pagan world. Stark argues that there was, early on, an imbalance in favour of women in the Christian movement because of Christian doctrines prohibiting infanticide and abortion. Abortion was widely practiced in the ancient world as archaeologists have been appalled to discover; and it was an extremely unsafe procedure. The Christian insistence on sex only within marriage and disapproval of abortion meant that the chances of women surviving were far greater. What followed was a relatively high rate of

intermarriage between Christian women and pagan men, which generated no doubt many conversions to Christianity. Women were famously prominent among upper class Christians and were able to influence their husbands to protect the church. Christian women enjoyed far greater marital security and equality than did their pagan neighbours. They married at an older age, and had more choice about who they married. Stark then explains how Christian women had a higher rate of fertility than in the Greco-Roman community.

There is a great deal more of this fascinating insight in Stark's book, presented in a readable and non-technical fashion. He readily acknowledges where he is making estimates and couples his assertions where possible with quotes from the ancient authors. I have found his work an invaluable companion in apologetics, especially when the credibility of the Christian movement is in question. It is possible to see the Christians of the first centuries as fulfilling their mission remarkably well. They care for the sick; honour women as equals and are generous to the poor. They speak of a remarkable hope to their dispirited neighbours. Christianity clearly made good sense because it was lived so attractively in the midst of the world. Would it were so today!

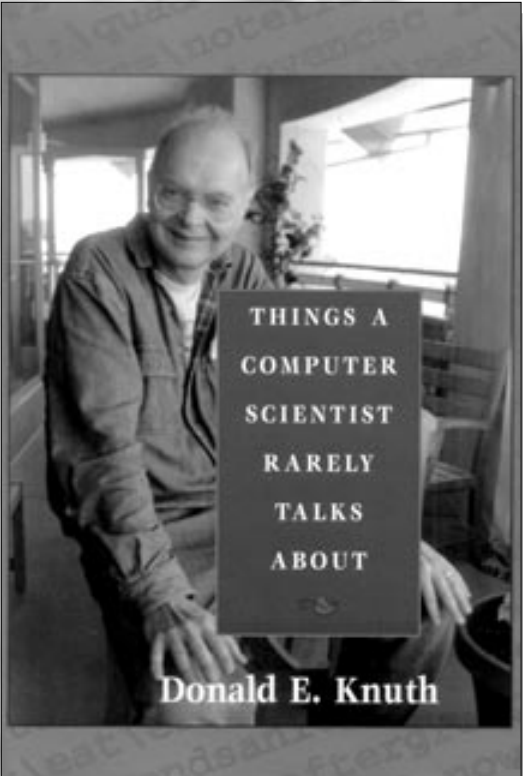
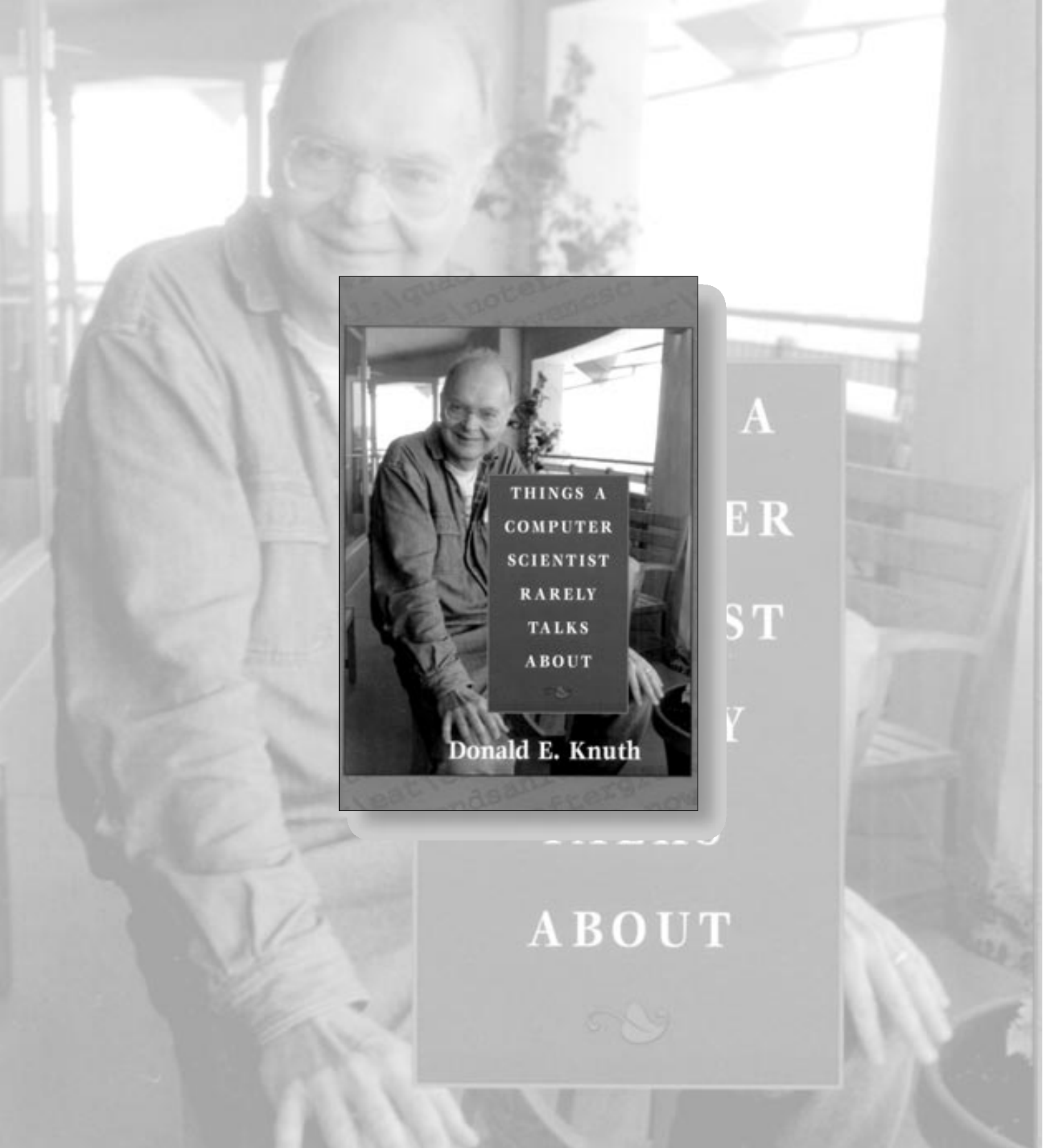
Like the whole 'quest for origins'

Christian women enjoyed far greater marital security and equality than did their pagan neighbours.

project of the enlightenment, Crossan's book suffers from hubris: he imagines that he can in some way reveal a 'key to all mythologies' which unlocks the mysteries of the early church era. On the whole, this approach of superiority has led more often to the making of history in the image of the historian: gazing at the evidence he or she sees his or her own reflection, although he or she imagines they are looking through the evidence to the whole of the truth.

Stark's book, on the other hand, provides us with useful knowledge and sheds light on the growth of Christianity without claiming to make all the pieces fit together in some impressive grand theory. **K**

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and Church History at Moore
Theological College.*



THINGS A
COMPUTER
SCIENTIST
RARELY
TALKS
ABOUT

Donald E. Knuth

A
ER
ST
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ABOUT



Christianity or just religion?

MALCOLM PURVIS

Things a Computer Scientist Rarely Talks About

Donald E. Knuth

CSLI Publications, Standford, California, 2001

Knuth: /ka·nooth' /, n.

[Donald E. Knuth's *The Art of Computer Programming*] Mythically, the reference that answers all questions about data structures or algorithms. A safe answer when you do not know: "I think you can find that in Knuth." See also bible.

The Jargon File <<http://www.catb.org/~esr/jargon/html/K/Knuth.html>>

There is a computer game, whose rules can be described in about 10 lines of prose, that provides an

insight into the question of determinism versus free will.

The game is "Conway's Game of Life", and it is played on a grid of arbitrary size. Each square on the grid can be either black or white and, for each turn, the colour of each square is determined by the ratio of adjacent black and white squares at the end of the previous turn.

The game is completely deterministic, but its behaviour can be surprising. Starting with a random pattern of black squares on the grid, stable patterns can develop quite quickly. Some grow bigger and then smaller in a regular sequence, others glide across the grid and others explode and die. Web sites devoted to the game list hundreds of other types of patterns that have been discovered. Almost all students of computer science spend some time at university playing with the game to see what patterns they can find.

The rules of the Game of Life have been proved to be universal; that is, the game can be used to simulate anything that is computable by deterministic laws, such as the operations of a computer.

The computer science mentality is different to that of the general population, and especially of theologians.

If the universe were deterministic, then it could then be simulated quite simply (if rather slowly) using the game. From the point of view of the agents in such a simulation, would it be possible for them to demonstrate that they don't have free will? If not, is the illusion of free will sufficient because it is essentially indistinguishable from actually having free will?

Computer Science is not a field of endeavour that readily intersects with the area of religion, and it is therefore unusual when a book on both subjects is printed. *Things a Computer Scientist Rarely Talks About* is the transcript of six talks, plus a panel discussion, given at MIT by Donald E. Knuth, Emeritus Professor for the Art of Computer Programming at Stanford University. Knuth, a Lutheran, is not attempting to produce a grand unified theory of religion based on his understanding of mathematics and computer science; rather it is a personal work describing how his scientific training has helped him in his own understanding of Christianity.

Knuth's reason for giving the talks was that he thinks that he is able to explain to those who share his peculiar (computer science) way of thinking, what he has learnt by reading theological works. The computer science mentality is different to that of the general population, and especially of theologians. He describes the computer science mentality this way:

One of the main characteristics of a computer science mentality is the ability to jump very quickly between levels of abstraction, between low level and high level, almost unconsciously. Another characteristic is that a computer scientist tends to be able to deal with nonuniform structures—case 1, case 2, case 3—while a mathematician will tend to want one unifying axiom that governs an entire system. (p. 13).

Others have observed that these differences also show up markedly in Myers-Briggs personality tests.¹ Knuth demonstrates this difference in mindset by describing his efforts in translating parts of the Bible, even though he did not know Hebrew or Greek.

This was not the first time that Knuth has conducted significant work in areas that were not his area of expertise. His reputation as an eminent computer scientist was made in the early 70s when he produced the first three volumes of *The Art of Computer Programming*, a proposed collection of seven volumes that

were to describe the entire field of computer science. During the publication of the third volume, he became dissatisfied with the declining quality of the typesetting, especially of mathematics, that the first generation of digital printing machines were producing. His solution was to write his own typesetting program, TeX. He thought he would finish it on his sabbatical in 1978; he was wrong by about 8 years. TeX's typesetting quality was so good that it has only recently been surpassed by modern desktop publishing systems, and only then by re-implementing his designs. Volume 4 is not expected until 2007, 30 years later than planned.

In the case of Bible translation, Knuth took on this task himself as part of his '3:16' project. This was an exhaustive study of the 16th verse of chapter 3 of every applicable book in the bible, 59 books in total (he jokes that he is the world expert on Lev 3:16, chiefly because nobody else has bothered to spend a large amount of time on it). He consulted all the commentaries and translations he could find in some of the major universities in the US, coming to conclusions that were too liberal for his conservative friends and too conservative for his liberal ones.

The resulting book was beautifully illustrated by some of the top calligraphers and type designers in the world, contacts that he made when he was designing fonts for TeX.

Verse 3:16 was chosen because, apart from John 3:16, it is essentially a ran-

dom verse in each book. Knuth had found random sampling useful in other fields where it was possible to come from little knowledge to a fairly accurate view of a topic quite quickly, and so he thought it might be an interesting experiment to try when it became his turn to lead his Bible study group.

Knuth conducted his translation with the assistance of tools such as Strong's *Exhaustive Concordance* and interlinear Bibles. He did not understand Hebrew or Greek, but Strong's numbering scheme, used to represent the underlying word in the concordance, suited him perfectly. Never having used these types of resources before, he treats them as any scientist would treat a new piece of instrumentation, poking and prodding them to see what happens and to see what use they might be.

One lecture is devoted to the details of his efforts. For example, his translation of 2 Tim 3:16 is:

All Scripture, inspired by God, is beneficial: for principles, for persuasion, for correction, and for education for what is right.

Here he attempted to preserve an ambiguity that is found in the Greek: does it say that all Scripture is inspired by God, or that all of the Scripture that happens

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to be inspired by God is beneficial?

Knuth has been a Lutheran all his life, and likes being a Lutheran because of its strong appreciation of the intellect (one Lutheran minister said “you don’t need a cerebral bypass operation to approach

God”). However, his studies have not pushed him in the direction of orthodox Christianity. Up until he started the 3:16 project he had attended church regularly but did not think about matters of faith except on Sunday mornings. He goes on:

The 3:16 project was a turning point in my life because it opened my eyes to what other scholars have written. I learned to appreciate the way that God is present in the lives of people from many different cultures. I learned that there were deep connections between Christianity and other world religions. I no longer lived Sunday mornings in a different world from the world that that I occupied during the rest of the week. (p. 7).

He describes his current faith in these terms:

People can only understand the worth of doing something if it has a purpose. My present attitude is that the purpose of having a purpose is so that we can have a

fulfilling journey...So I hope you understand this point about the journey being more important than the destination. (p. 148-149).

The 3:16 project helped me understand the complexity of religious studies, that things are not simple black or white. I became much less dogmatic about such issues. I began to learn about other religions and to see that God need not exclusively be identified with Christian dogma. At the same time, many aspects of Christianity became more precious to me, more deeply a source of inner peace, although I no longer consider them to be the necessary and sufficient way to approach God (p. 155).

Crudely put, it would seem that actually finding answers gets in the way of a fulfilling journey of trying to find new things to learn. Such thinking is not uncommon among non-evangelicals, but his explanation was the clearest that I’ve encountered, perhaps because of the common computer science mindset.

Reaction to the 3:16 project within the computer science community was mixed. Some were supportive, but most were surprised. Christianity, in any form, is rare amongst computer scientists, and it is even rarer for one to speak openly about it. Questions of a spiritual nature are normally confined to the areas of artificial intelligence and robotics, areas that try to emulate human

Crudely put, it would seem that actually finding answers gets in the way of a fulfilling journey of trying to find new things to learn.

thought and behaviour.

With this book, Knuth views the Bible with a programmer's eye and sheds some different light onto the area of religion. In doing so he also makes the Bible worth reading for a group of people who would otherwise not pay it much attention. The book also demonstrates the limits of this approach because all conclusions are considered worthy, even if they deny the exclusivity of Christ's work. **K**

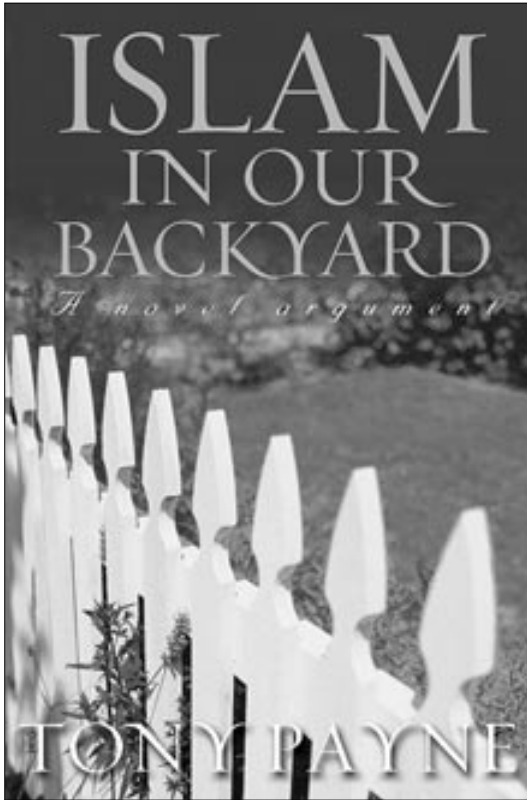
Malcolm Purvis holds an honours degree in computer science and works as a software engineer in the Telecommunications industry.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Footnote: Computer Scientists appear “to concentrate the relatively rare INTJ and INTP types; that is, introverted, intuitive, and thinker types (as opposed to the extroverted-sensate personalities that predominate in the mainstream culture)”. They also “have relatively little ability to identify emotionally with other people. This may be because they generally aren't much like ‘other people’” (<http://www.catb.org/~esr/jargon/html/personality.html>).

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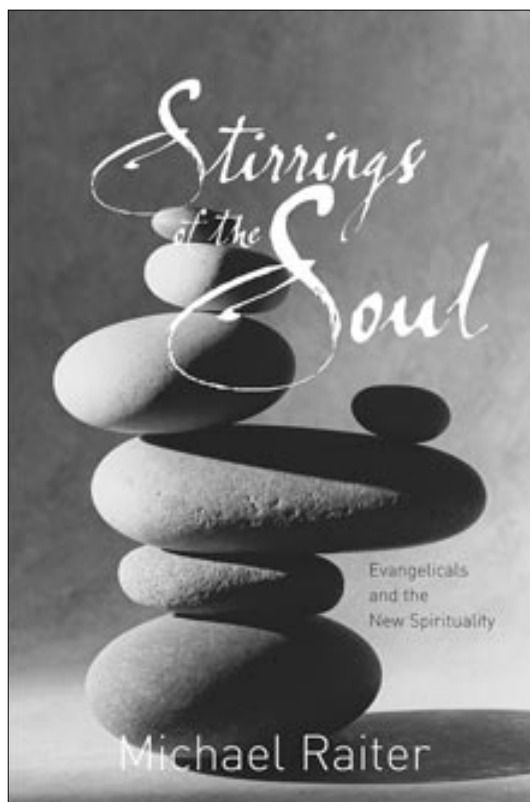
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Stirrings of the Soul



Evangelicals and the New Spirituality

The explosion of interest in spirituality in our society is nothing short of phenomenal. Among Christians, too, there is a flourishing interest in developing a greater 'spirituality'. Many who love the Lord Jesus Christ and long to please him seem frustrated that their spiritual lives—and the church services they attend—are too often dry and lacking in vitality. There has been a turn to the charismatic movement, and to forms of mysticism, and even monasticism, in search of a way to 'practise the presence of God'.

In this book, Michael Raiter surveys contemporary spiritualities, highlighting both their enormous variety and their common features, and tracing their historical, cultural and social roots. He then addresses a range of important questions for Christians: What is true spirituality? If we were to meet a 'truly spiritual' person, what would he or she look like? How do we respond biblically to our longing for spiritual intimacy? And is evangelicalism, in its current expressions, contributing to an atmosphere of spiritual dryness?

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