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## ***Contemporary challenges to Christian apologetics***

*(The Fourth C.S. Lewis Memorial Lecture, 24th October 1986)*

by **BASIL MITCHELL**

C.S. Lewis was the greatest Christian apologist of his time and his works still have a wide readership. In paying tribute to his memory nearly a quarter of a century after his death it would be entirely appropriate to discuss some aspects of his own writings. I propose instead to look at contemporary challenges to Christian apologetics from the standpoint of someone who is primarily a philosopher and who belongs to a generation later than Lewis's. There is a genuine element of continuity here, for I had the privilege of succeeding him as President of the University Socratic Club at Oxford, which he founded, and which was for many years one of the liveliest undergraduate societies in the University. And like all thinking Christians of that period, I owe him an enormous debt of gratitude. Although he was very well grounded in philosophy and taught the subject in his earlier years at Magdalen, he felt increasingly after the war that he was not equipped to take on the professionals and turned away from technically philosophical topics to theological questions of wider scope.

So I want to consider, first external challenges, and then internal challenges to Christian belief as they have developed since Lewis's time.

### **External challenges**

What I have in mind is this. In discussing external challenges to Christian belief we are concerned with providing a convincing

statement of Christian truth to our contemporaries. To be convincing it must be presented in a way that takes account of the problems and pressures that affect people in their actual situation. I say problems and pressures, because people's difficulties are not purely intellectual—even the difficulties of intellectuals are not: and even the problems that are intellectual generally receive their particular pattern and emphasis from people's social and personal life. But the convincingness of a case depends enormously on the context in which it is presented; it will fail to convince, for example, if the presenters behave as if they didn't themselves believe it, or if they disagree radically among themselves in such a way that the disagreements do not appear to be fruitful, or if they escape disagreement by avoiding problems which their potential audience can see manifestly arising. To put the issue in a crude commercial way, if one is trying to sell something to someone, it is wise not only to study the market and the competition, but also the product and its packaging.

At each stage in my discussion I shall try to distinguish the state of affairs in the academic world from that in the cultural world at large (in so far as one can make that distinction). So far as academic philosophy is concerned I think it is fair to say that the question of Christian theism has now returned to the status which it occupied before the logical positivist movement got under way in the 1930's. That is to say, the problem of God is seen once again as one of the great controversial issues of philosophy—together with the problem of free will, the problem of personal identity, the mind-body problem and so on. I should guess that more professional philosophers are atheists or agnostics than are theists, but it is distinctly less of a surprise today to discover that an able philosopher is a theist than it was twenty or thirty years ago. Then it was still generally believed that it was possible to draw a reasonably clear line between science and common-sense on the one hand and metaphysics (including theology) on the other. A.J. Ayer himself had gone

so far as to reject belief in God as meaningless. This whole movement has now petered out, and philosophical critics of Christianity, although still prepared to argue initially that the concept of God is logically incoherent, are not as a rule determined to hold that line, but instead fall back on the claim that, as an account of the nature and character of the world, theism is not very probable.

The reason for this change is chiefly that scientific explanation itself has proved impossible to describe and account for along positivist lines. Both the reliance of scientists upon models and their need to posit unobservable entities in order to explain phenomena reveal analogies with religious thinking; and the considerations that lead a scientist to prefer one explanation to another, such as simplicity, elegance, comprehensiveness, coherence, explanatory power, are recognisably of the same sort as are appealed to in trying to decide between world-views. Positivism could not give a convincing account of science; and a convincing account, when offered, failed to justify the positivist attempt to reject metaphysics and with it theology as a rational enterprise.

This means that when philosophers now attack Christianity they rely on arguments which are recognisably of the same general kind as the plain man uses. In particular they stress the difficulties for theism of accounting for the character and extent of the evil that there is in the world. This is far from being the sterile attack that the positivistic one was, leaving the Christian apologist merely bewildered; for he too can see the difficulty and has always lived with it: and a philosophical critique on these lines can actually help theologians to deepen and develop their understanding of Christianity. Some years ago I took the chair at a series of discussions about *The Myth of God Incarnate* (subsequently published as *Incarnation and Myth*), and I remember how the debate really began to become creative at the point where the participants seriously considered the question of

how far a doctrine of incarnation was required to give substance to God's involvement in human suffering.

The demise of logical positivism means also that rival world-views, that is possible alternatives to theism, are liberated from the positivist ban on meaninglessness. Materialism as a metaphysical system was as philosophically suspect to the positivists as theism, and people who were, in effect, materialists used to have to disguise themselves as positivists in their attacks on religion. Now there is no need for them to do so. So once again philosophers are in line with a general cultural movement, for everyone recognizes that materialism is the main alternative to a religious view of life. From the point of view of Christian apologetics this is a gain. For it means that the materialist alternative to theism (along with others) has to be spelled out and defended in detail and its implications made explicit. It is much healthier in every way for rival world-views to be recognized, and vigorously contested, for what they are, than for the sceptical critic to be free, as the positivists supposed themselves to be, to demolish the claims of religion without his own substantial views ever being called in question.

The main secular alternative world-views are, it seems to me, materialism (or scientific naturalism) and Marxism. In a sense, of course, they are not alternatives but variations on a single materialist theme. But both in theory and in their practical implications, and also in the attitudes that go with them, they are significantly different. Marxism has a quasi-religious character, which is apparent in its discernment of an immanent and inevitable purpose in history, and its demand for complete commitment on the part of its adherents; whereas scientific naturalism favours a pragmatic, sceptical, turn of mind and a utilitarian approach to ethics. To the Marxist the scientific naturalist is a typical bourgeois product, characteristic of the capitalist West; while to the latter the Marxist is heir to most of the vices of religion, especially dogmatism and intolerance.

Marxism has contributed something essential to our understanding of society, through its insight into the way in which economic and social conditions interact with moral and political ideas, but this insight provides no warrant for a total economic determinism. As a world-view (as distinct from a contribution to sociology) it has been largely discredited in the West (and indeed, increasingly, in the East too) by its totalitarian denial of human rights. This is not just an incidental feature of Marxist thought, but follows from its insistence upon viewing individuals not primarily as individuals but as members of a class. The working class has rights (which in capitalist countries are restricted or denied) but the bourgeoisie have not, since their claim to individual rights is but an expression of a false economic and political system, which is destined to be superseded: the belief in human rights is something which remains very strong in our culture and Marxist denial of them is an effective bar to the wider acceptance of Marxism.

Scientific naturalism or scientific humanism, meanwhile, has its own problems. They centre on the nature of man, and his freedom. The scientific naturalist has to hold that man, like everything else in the natural world, is a product of processes that are scientifically explicable; and it seems to follow that human choices could, in principle, be predicted, if only we knew enough about natural laws and the state of the world at any given time. The mind is to be identified with the brain and mental events, including decisions, with physical changes in the brain. It is very difficult, both as a matter of logic and in imagination, to see how genuine freedom of choice can be ascribed to men so understood; and, if it cannot be, not only is moral responsibility threatened, but also rationality in general. This whole issue is one of intense philosophical controversy, and of enormous difficulty. How is the relation between mind and brain to be understood in the light of modern knowledge? and what are the implications for theory and practice of

alternative answers to the problem? This is, of course, the issue that C.S. Lewis addressed in his essay *Miracles*.

Clearly Christian thinking must come to grips with these problems and be prepared to attend carefully to the scientific evidence. And theologians with scientific expertise like A.R. Peacocke are in fact doing so. At the more popular level the discussion is still thought of as being about science versus religion, but the issues are a good deal more complex than that. Part of the problem is that the sciences do not speak with one voice—the unity of science is more pious hope than accomplished fact. Not only do psychology and sociology make assumptions about human motives and intentions which are not reducible to physics and chemistry, but they often raise problems about the objective character of scientific enquiry itself. So the natural scientists, for so long accustomed to providing the paradigm of rational thought, now find themselves, disconcertingly, treated in a deliberately objective way, as examples of a social group with common interests. And these, it is held, to some extent determine the direction and the character of their enquiries. At the same time historians of science are beginning to cast doubt on the legendary story of the growth of modern science which was the guiding theme of Bronowski's television series, *The Ascent of Man* and Don Cupitt's *The Sea of Faith*. In retrospect the familiar representation of the great scientific thinkers as engaged in a constant and eventually victorious war with religious dogmatism and obscurantism is seen to be highly misleading.

It is very tempting for religious apologists to welcome these developments and to assume that anything which appears to weaken the authority of science must automatically restore the credit of religion. This seems to me a great mistake. There is mounting evidence, as I understand it, that Christian theology was influential in the growth of modern science. It inculcated the belief that the world obeys laws which, because they originate with God, cannot be discovered simply by inspecting

it, or simply by the exercise of human reason without careful experiment. The enormous labours of the early scientists were undertaken in the faith that the world has an intelligible structure which is there to be discovered. Christianity and natural science share a conviction that there is a truth which it is possible, although always incompletely, for men to attain. No doubt some spokesmen for science have maintained that there are no truths but scientific truths and no explanations but scientific explanations and we have a right to protest against such dogmatism, but to deny the possibility of objective truth altogether is as destructive of religion as it is of science.

Nevertheless, scientists do now find themselves threatened in an unaccustomed way. The foundations of science have been called in question and scientific method challenged in the name of cultural relativism. From this relativist standpoint our modern scientific world-view is only one among a number of possible options between which there can, ultimately, be no rational choice. Even our scientific medicine, which has the most dramatic achievements to its credit, is not, from this point of view, to be judged superior to 'primitive' magic.

In combating this kind of relativism, the scientist cannot simply rely on the authority of scientific method itself—for it is just this that is being challenged. He has to appeal to criteria of rationality of a very general kind—simplicity, coherence, comprehensiveness, and so on—and, as I urged earlier, the same criteria can also be appealed to in favour of the claims of a religious system of belief to explain the nature and character of human experience. I suggest, then, that in the intellectual world at large, Christian apologetics has a tremendous opportunity. Positivism has ceased to be the force it was, Marxism as a world-view has largely discredited itself, and scientific materialism is confronted with serious problems as to its own consistency and ultimate justification. The situation is no longer one in which there is a thoroughly coherent and agreed scientific world-view based upon an unchallenged scientific method, but



rather one in which the claims of science require to meet the same sort of sceptical challenge as religion has long been used to.

It is, therefore, much more difficult now to draw a simple contrast between the solid, common sense reality of the world disclosed by science and the speculative uncertainty of religious claims. At the same time, because of the intellectual and moral uncertainty of this situation, thoughtful people long to discern some meaning in life over and beyond what they as individuals choose to give it. So there is more willingness than there has been for a long time to take the intellectual claims of Christianity seriously. This does not mean that Christian apologists can expect to secure a clear dialectical victory over their rivals by producing straightforward solutions to the problems that perplex people. It is rather that, because people do not expect clear-cut answers to many of them, they are more content 'to see through a glass darkly'.

At the popular level my impression is that things are a good deal less favourable. The tide that in the intellectual world is running in is here still running out. There is still a great deal of popular 'scientism', which is taken to 'disprove' religion, and which, more insidiously, erodes people's capacity to appreciate and understand the language of religion. Either religious doctrines are regarded as cut-and-dried statements of quasi-scientific fact and promptly rejected as incredible, or they are treated as expressions of purely personal feeling. Scientism and relativism thus conspire to convince people that there is no truth in religion. Religion is either not true at all (because not scientific) or 'it's true for me' or 'it's true for him', a purely personal matter which no institution, and therefore no church, has any right to pronounce upon.

Sociologists of religion trace this phenomenon to what they call 'privatization'. Peter Berger remarks on the need people have for 'nomoi' or meaning-systems in terms of which to order their life.

'Nomos' activity may be expected to cluster around 'marginal' situations—death, loss, change of status, crises, etc. None of this alters in its fundamentals in the modern world except through the impact of differentiation, fragmentation and privatisation. The role of official bodies, and especially of churches and states, in providing and effectively purveying ready-made 'nomoi'...is greatly reduced because they lose their monopoly in conditions of pluralist competition. Meaning systems, moreover, are not mere intellectual exercises, but must be lived collectively; constant interaction with other people who perceive and interpret reality in the same way as oneself is necessary if one's 'nomos' is to be automatically effective in imbuing one's everyday experience with meaning. But modern societies have largely dissolved these supportive systems...and among them the churches. This happens when the individual in his multiple and fragmented role exists partly inside and partly at a tangent to so many institutions and associations that no one of them addresses itself to 'meaning' throughout the whole range of his life experience, but only to snatches and fragments. So in the end the individual is in a certain sense alone with the task of making sense of the world and his own place in it out of scraps and oddments culled here and there in his differentiated life and contacts (*Young People's Belief*, p.47)

I suggest that this represents the greatest 'external' challenge to Christian apologetics in Western countries. There has been an increasing disintegration both of the older Christian culture and of the newer rationalist culture. This, for the time being at any rate, leaves many ordinary people, particularly young people, quite happy to adopt a pragmatic, utilitarian attitude to society at large, and to meet the crises of personal life with odd and often inconsistent scraps of 'philosophy' picked up from anywhere

and claiming no universal truth or even relevance. The more thoughtful, however, feel increasingly the lack of meaning and purpose in their lives and are to that extent readier to take Christianity seriously, but they, too, often have difficulty in identifying themselves with a continuing historical institution. The very conditions which create the need also make it extremely difficult to meet it.

## **Internal Challenges**

I have suggested that the decline of positivism and its attempt to draw a very sharp line of demarcation between science and metaphysics (including theology) has enabled theism to emerge once again as a world-view with a claim to be taken seriously. Given that, for example, materialism and theism are again live options (as for a while they were thought not to be) it is not enough for the critic of religious claims simply to challenge them from the side-lines without in any way otherwise committing himself: he has to enter the arena and defend his own position, whatever it is. The Christian apologist, for his part, needs to decide where he stands in relation to 'modern knowledge' and to present a coherent statement of Christian doctrine which takes it into account. This does not mean, of course, that he has to solve all the problems—the present age is conspicuously one in which many problems have to be left unsolved—but it does mean that he has to know what the unsolved problems are and why it is reasonable to adhere to Christian belief in spite of them. Reflective people are, I think, readier to listen to such a statement than they have been for a long time.

My own impression is, however, that, often when given the opportunity to explain Christian doctrine and its implications to a potentially receptive audience, theologians have little definite or distinctive to say. This is not at all surprising, for the 'acids of modernity' have been at work here too, and the intellectual problems facing theology are considerable, as are the social and

psychological pressures upon the clergy. In a situation in which the foundations of science are thought to be problematic, the foundations of theology are unlikely to be undisturbed. Whatever the reasons, and however understandable they are, the fact appears to be that there is a broad divide between conservative and liberal (or radical) opinion, which is the source of considerable weakness. Neither party adequately meets the external challenges to Christian apologetics. The conservatives fail through not addressing themselves sufficiently to the task of relating the historic Christian faith to modern knowledge, including the results of a critical study of the Bible. Hence their apologetic, though vigorous and uncompromising, and worthy of respect on that account, is of limited appeal, and strikes many reflective enquirers as intellectually inadequate and even at times dishonest. The liberals, on the other hand, have been too much inclined simply to take over what they suppose to be the 'modern scientific world-view' which reduces Christianity to a sort of deism. Religion is thus seen, as it was in the TV series *The Long Search*, as the story of 'man's religious quest' and concepts such as those of 'revelation', 'grace' and even 'incarnation' are reinterpreted entirely in terms of human religious experience. This evokes from the interested non-believer the sort of response that was well expressed by a philosophical colleague of mine: "The trouble with Christianity as presented in so much modern theology is that it isn't worth disbelieving!" The reflective non-Christian feels intuitively that Christianity, if true, radically transforms our ordinary view of the world and of human possibilities. This trend in liberal theology has been greatly influenced by the philosophical legacy of Hume and Kant or, more broadly, of the Enlightenment. They were believed throughout the nineteenth century (and well into the twentieth) to have undermined theism as an explanation of the existence and character of the world and of man's place and purpose in it, so that Christianity had to be understood as an expression of man's religious experience or of his existential

decision to endow his life with meaning. The names of Schleiermacher and Bultmann illustrate these approaches. One might say, in very general terms, that theology drew heavily upon the categories and attitudes of the Romantic movement with its emphasis upon authenticity and its suspicion of claims to objective truth. Anglo-Saxon theology has been, characteristically, less extreme in this respect, but it too has been reluctant to countenance any notion of God's activity in the world other than through the naturally explicable processes of nature and of human cultural history. Here the decisive influence has been the discipline of Biblical criticism, which has led theologians to suppose that only those influences can actually have been at work in the history of religion which an entirely secular thinker is prepared to discern. Hence it is very widely believed that a theological doctrine, such as that of the Incarnation, can in no way be based on historical evidence. The historian *qua* historian, it is said, can take account only of purely natural events and can offer only entirely natural explanations of them. Hence explanations in terms of divine activity must either be disallowed altogether or, if introduced at all, be based upon faith alone. The possibility that the whole episode might, when carefully and sympathetically studied be such as to make a theological interpretation more convincing than any entirely naturalistic one on offer, is not even brought into the reckoning. Underlying this is an unspoken assumption that a "scientific world-view" is mandatory upon the theologian.

Now it *may* be the case that, when all things have been considered, the naturalistic explanation *is* to be preferred, but, for reasons that I gave earlier, it is no longer possible to rule out a more definitely theistic interpretation from the start. The strictures directed by Hume and Kant and other thinkers of the Enlightenment against theological explanations have turned out to be equally fatal to scientific explanation; and there does not, at present, exist a scientific world-view possessing the

unchallengeable authority that many liberal theologians wish to give it.

I do not want to give the impression that the theological task is currently an easy one and that only certain philosophical inhibitions or prejudices prevent a contemporary Summa from being developed. But I do think it is a weakness of what I have broadly called liberal (as distinct from conservative) theology that it is not prepared to explore more boldly the conceptual possibilities for a distinctively Christian metaphysic that modern philosophy affords. So I would myself like to see Christian theologians stop for a while reflecting on how difficult it all is and actually address themselves, in specifically Christian terms, to the questions their unbelieving contemporaries so insistently ask, as in his day C.S. Lewis did.

A corollary of this is that conservative theologians should be more prepared to enter the general theological debate. Their reluctance to do so is to a large extent due to a suspicion that, once criticism is admitted on any terms, it will eventually take over, and the essentials of Christian faith will have been surrendered. And, in the light of some trends in 'liberal' theology, this suspicion is not wholly unreasonable. It is, in fact, the reverse of the coin. Both sides tend to assume that criticism can be exercised only in a secular way leading to sceptical conclusions. But, once this assumption is challenged, the way is open for a critical conservatism—an element which is not entirely unrepresented in the present theological scene, but is nevertheless somewhat under-represented.

Nor, I think, can the conservatives claim to be themselves entirely free from the influence of the scientism which has so markedly affected the liberals. It appears, as James Barr has argued, in the extremely literal manner in which the language of Christianity has often been interpreted, a literalism which is in contrast to the readiness of the church in earlier ages to recognize the symbolic and poetic character of much religious language. Here is another case in which theology can benefit from closer

contact with the world of secular thought, in this instance that of literary criticism.

But it has to be recognized that freer and livelier debate between Christian theologians, radical and conservative, is not likely to result in a consensus. And the question has to be asked, how far this absence of consensus must reduce the effectiveness of Christian apologetics.

A great deal must depend on the character of the debate. It can be fruitful given two conditions. One is that it can be seen to concern things that matter; so long as this is so, lively controversy is a sign of health and its presence helps to persuade potential believers that they are not being asked to leave their intellectual consciences behind if they come into the Church. The other is that the Church (I am using this in its broadest sense of 'the whole company of faithful people dispersed throughout the whole world') has itself some *rationale* available of the differences within it. At present we have no such *rationale*. We are liable to regard it as a scandal that Christians do not entirely agree as to the content of their faith or as to its implications.

Obviously there are, and always have been, differences due to lack of charity or lack of thought, but it may be that there are two kinds of difference that are not attributable just to these causes.

Firstly, if it is conceded, as I think it must be, that attempts to formulate Christian truths and to put them into practice can never be entirely adequate—the transcendent cannot be wholly captured in finite terms—theologians are bound to draw upon the most suitable philosophical systems available; and the practical implications of Christianity are bound to be worked out in relation to the prevailing social and economic possibilities. (This can be avoided to some extent by the faithful withdrawing into small communities cut off from the intellectual and moral influence of the world, but this is not an ideal solution either.) This situation encourages the development of variant traditions, each of which emphasizes some features of Christianity at the

expense of others. It could well be that a fuller and richer approximation to the truth is achieved in this way than by an attempt to reconcile these different traditions by means of some compromise formula. This does not mean that genuine reconciliations are not sometimes possible (and should be sought as far as possible); only that a certain tension between variant traditions may be of positive value.

Secondly, there is another distinction within the Christian church which needs to be recognized and understood, viz., that between the main body of Christians and the advanced guard of theologians or the 'scouts'. If it is true that the Christian faith needs to be brought into relation with the best thought of the day, it must be someone's task to do this, and this task is bound to be to some extent exploratory and experimental. It is debatable how much freedom the 'scouts' ought to have, but, unless they have a good deal of freedom, they cannot do their job. It is worth remembering that even St. Thomas Aquinas's massive development of Christian theology in terms of Aristotelian philosophy, later to become an established orthodoxy, was at the time regarded with considerable suspicion. No doubt there are risks attached to theological exploration, but, unless the risks are accepted, the result will be ossification and that is worse. The fact, then, that there are these differences within the Church ought not to be regarded as a weakness, but as a sign of vigour. To develop the military analogy, the scouts and the main army ought not to be attacking one another, but rather concentrating upon the defeat of the enemy.

When one acknowledges these two sorts of division, between different traditions and, within each tradition, between the main body of the faithful and theological explorers, another image suggests itself, that of a river. The main stream sometimes divides into several large streams and a number of smaller ones, some of which later feed back into the main stream, while others continue to run parallel to it indefinitely.



Some of these streams represent secular currents of thought which have Christian origins and which later contribute once again to the main flow of Christian thought. The 'secular thought' of a culture deeply influenced by Christianity is unlikely to be entirely secular and it is possible that certain ideas that are genuinely Christian may be, for a time at least, preserved and developed better in a secular medium than in the mainstream of Christian theology.

I conclude, then, that lack of full agreement in the interpretation of doctrine need not weaken the apologetic stance of the Church and can strengthen it, so long as church members themselves learn to appreciate the value of diversity. Having said this, however, it is important also to insist that *diversity should not be accepted for the wrong reasons*. Earlier in this lecture I mentioned the relativism that is so striking a feature of contemporary culture. People are very much inclined to say 'it's true for me' or 'it's true for him' and to resist the idea that truth is independent of the beliefs and attitudes of individuals. Sociologists associate this with the conditions of modern life, in which social arrangements are made in a purely pragmatic, utilitarian way and the search for meaning and truth becomes a purely private affair.

The prevalence of this attitude is, as I said then, one of the greatest threats to any Christian apologetic, and we ought to be wary of it. My impression is, however, that many of the more articulate Christians, those who belong to synods and equivalent bodies, are themselves strongly tempted by it. It appears in the ready welcome they give to the concept of 'the plural society'.

The philosophy underlying the plural society is generally this. There is a distinction to be made between, on the one hand, a basic social morality, which can be justified pragmatically—society could not survive if it were not observed—and, on the other hand, a morality of individual ideals, which is purely personal in inspiration. The basic morality is founded upon certain broad non-controversial facts

about human beings and what is capable of harming them; personal ideals derive from 'visions of life' which have no objective basis but which owe their existence to the creative imagination of individuals. Religion, on this showing, belongs to the realm of personal ideals, and has no claim to objective truth. It follows that there should be complete freedom for people to preach and to practise their religion, so long as they do no tangible harm to others or to society at large, and so long as they do not seek to influence the basic social morality. Different religions, of course, reflect different 'visions of life' and all are to be tolerated, and indeed up to a point welcomed, so long as they are prepared to accept the purely private status they are offered.

This philosophy of the plural society fits very well into the sociological framework I was mentioning earlier, and it is entirely understandable that Christian apologists, especially those in exposed positions, should be inclined to take it over. Faced by a social situation in which it is increasingly difficult to persuade people to accept any religious or moral authority, it is reassuring to learn that it would be morally and religiously improper to claim any such authority. It is nice to be able to say 'In our increasingly plural society the Christian cannot claim any special authority or influence'.

But, if the sociologists are right, it is the felt unsatisfactoriness of just this sort of 'plural society' with its increasing 'privatization' and its restricting of meaning to the purely individual realm that affords the Christian apologist his chief opportunity. Simply to embrace the philosophy underlying it and to offer the Christian gospel as one among a range of possible options, none of which has any serious claim to truth, is to add to the patients' malady, not to cure it.

This means, of course, that we need to re-think the Christian basis for a *liberal* society, in which the rights of individuals and communities are founded upon a Christian understanding of man which is widely shared by non-Christians. It is not adequate to

regard Christianity as a purely personal matter having no social implications. The case for freedom is based not upon the absence of any reason for preferring one ideal to another but upon the positive conviction that men have the right and the duty to follow their consciences and to promote the common good. It is no more likely in politics than it is in the institutional life of the Church that we shall achieve a Christian consensus. Christians will continue to differ in their political emphasis and it may be a good thing that this should be so. But in each case there is an overriding demand for the exercise of charity, not only out of consideration for others but also out of concern for the truth which transcends our best endeavours to define it.

# *The Recovery of Piety in the Post-Pious West*

by MARK A. NOLL

Piety is not a going concern where I live, and I suspect it may not be faring so well in Northern Ireland either. One difficulty that stands in the way of a Christian recovery of piety in the present day is the nature of Western culture. Even more important difficulties have to do with the phenomenon of piety itself. My goal here is to reflect on how Christians might recover a piety both genuine before God and useful to others. But to get to that positive goal it will be necessary first to canvass thoroughly the ills of piety in our day.

The first class of ills are external and concern the attitudes and practices of western society. If ever a culture has moved beyond piety, surely it must be the modern West, with modern America charging ahead in the vanguard. The list of difficulties faced by piety in our culture is a long one. Piety is a nebulous asset; it is hard to market. Piety cannot work on television, where only the image of piety is able to sustain a viewership. The sad end to which that image has come recently in the United States is fully known to all who can read a newspaper. Piety, furthermore, does not observe the compartmentalisation of life that is so much a part of our existence. It is pushy and intrusive, always breaking through the casing of private, domestic existence to create awkwardness in the public square. In addition, piety fits awkwardly into the suburbs, the Elysium of modern existence, where everyone would be clean, prosperous, properly sun-tanned and brimming with animal vigour.

Much more troubling than the threats of modern culture to piety, however, are problems posed by the would-be pious themselves. Here a multitude of problems prevail. First, piety is

corrupted by the company it attracts. At least in the United States, there is a renewed interest in general spirituality, which quite easily adds Christian piety to its varieties. Shirley McLain plumps astral contacts, TV preachers hawk peace of body and mind, ex-fundamentalists swoon for liturgical bells and smells, classes in religion are said to be full at the state universities, New Age movements advance from strength to strength, athletes of all sorts pause to pray before they enter the lists, therapy and the therapeutic are supposed to ease every strain. So, sure, why not throw a little ol' Christian piety into the mix as well.

Christians, of all people, should be on their guard against the inward turns of the age. Seeking God with the whole heart is something other than being comfortable with one's self, something other than hunkering down to the pursuit of inwardness. Messages of judgement, even if the prelude to hope, have trouble finding sponsors. When piety is confused with the counterfeits of the age, it is piety that suffers most.

A related difficulty concerns the question of whether this is a proper moment for piety. When faced with significant cultural dislocation, we may well ask whether the turn toward piety might not be a concession to cultural defeat, psychological despair, or social alienation. The world as a whole is going to hell in a handbasket, shopping malls march across the American landscape like locusts, image has completed its conquest of politics, and most of us (by any reasonable standard) are consumed by the idolatries of consumption. Can this really be the time to turn inward? If cultivated taste is a refuge from the collapse of civilisation, is this the moment to indulge a hankering for the spiritual?

The need is very great for dedicated Christian action against the massing forces of self-centred greed. Volunteers are required to assist the armies of the dispossessed and to proclaim the gospel to an increasingly pagan Western society. A faithful meeting of such needs would seem to leave little room for the

cultivation of piety. To put it another way, offering the cup of water is hard to do when meditating.

Yet a third difficulty in calling for a recovery of piety is the record of piety with regard to the Christian mind. Ours is an age, as perhaps all ages are, requiring the most vigorous Christian thought, in order to understand the conditions of our existence and to grasp the many dimensions of the Christian hope. For these tasks, piety may seem a dubious asset. Or at least, that might be the conclusion from a little historical study.

The thrust of classical Pietism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was to call believers back from formal, dogmatic rigidity towards living Christian experience. On those terms, Pietism did breath a badly needed vitality into several varieties of Christian faith, from Protestants in Germany, Holland, England and America, to their Catholic counterparts in France and other parts of southern Europe. In its day, this Pietism had a timely appeal, for much calcification had taken place in the years after the Reformation and the Counter Reformation. And many valuable things did come from this Pietism. Pietists inaugurated the first widespread missionary movement among Protestants, they encouraged renewed seriousness about the priesthood of all believers, they turned laypeople back to eager study of the Bible, and they encouraged many acts of social compassion.<sup>1</sup>

The intellectual problem was not so much one of Pietism in itself as with the excesses of Pietism. Pietists had rediscovered the truth that Christianity is a life as well as a set of beliefs. The difficulty came when some Pietists began to view Christian faith as only a life, without much concern for beliefs at all. This led to fascination with practice, deep involvement in spiritual experience and absorption in the psychological dimensions of the faith. Objective realities of revelation were sometimes

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1. The best studies in English are by F. Ernest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965); and *German Pietism during the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973)

eclipsed. In the early nineteenth century, religious teachers trained by Pietists, like Friedrich Schleiermacher, even began to argue that a 'feeling of dependence' was the foundation of Christianity.<sup>2</sup> Others hesitated to affirm that God could break into the world in ways unknown to human experience. As well-intentioned as they may have been, these proposals in fact undercut the Christian faith. Always the church had had a place for Christian experience, but in living communion with the objective character of the gospel. Pietists quite properly protested when this objectivity came to be regarded as the sum and substance of the faith. But a few overreacted by picturing the *experience* of faith as the new totality.

At its extreme, the Pietist emphasis on religious life tended to deprecate self-conscious efforts at forming a Christian perspective on the world. To be consumed by feeling was to have no time for thinking through the relationship between God and His creation. Once this stage had been reached, it soon became difficult to distinguish between those forms of feeling that remained within the Christian orbit and those which had spun off as meteorites with no fixed centre. Pietism played an important part in the revitalisation of the church in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Unchecked Pietism, however, also played a role in the rise of theological liberalism, nature mysticism, and the humanistic romanticism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It also had something to do with the flight by Christians of orthodox belief from serious labour with the mind.

So, a call for the recovery of piety runs into immediate difficulties. In our day there is much bad coin circulating under the name of piety to drive out the good. There is the question whether the inward turn is appropriate at a time of manifest need in social service and evangelism. And there is the sobering

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2. For an overview, see Franklin L. Baumer, *Modern European Thought: Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1600-1950* (New York: Macmillan 1977).

example of Pietists who wasted their minds while seeking the fix of religious feeling. But these problems, bad as they are, are not the most serious difficulties.

The most serious difficulty standing in the way of a recovery of piety today is more basic still. It is the problem of self-conscious religiosity for a religion that professes to believe in justification by faith, salvation through the grace of God. Put precisely, the problem is not piety but the self-awareness of piety. If we are conscious of being pious, we are making a conclusion about our own status, our own religious dignity. Pursued beyond a certain point, the self-awareness may verge perilously close to self-satisfaction, self-justification, self-salvation. The temptation of piety, in these terms, becomes but another instance of idolatry. It is the danger of being captivated so thoroughly by my own religiosity that I have no consciousness left for what God has promised to do for those who trust in Him. No law exists that always transforms a concern for real godliness into an idolatrous fixation upon one's own spirituality. But in the modern West, where self-awareness is so much a part of our therapy, and so treasured a feature of our ideologies, the transit from other-directed piety to self-satisfied religiosity can be very short.

The one redeeming feature of this difficulty blocking a recovery of piety is that it inheres in us rather than in the thing itself. We may be in a situation where if we are aware of *feeling* pious, we are, because of that awareness, actually excluded from *being* pious. But that need not necessarily deter us from seeking piety. Such a situation leads rather to the conclusion that to recover piety in the post-pious West, we must not begin by pursuing piety itself.

The need for such a strategy—for a way of pursuing piety that avoids the perils of self-justifying religiosity—is great. If we lose piety, even in the post-pious West, we lose something irreplaceable. To rescue piety, we can begin at no better place than careful attention to how the notion has been defined



historically and in the Scriptures. This is a path that may show us how to pursue piety without being compromised by the pursuit itself.

The most obvious conclusion that even a superficial glance at the history of the term reveals is that until the last several centuries piety was regarded not as a quality of human consciousness, but of human action. In more specific Christian terms, piety was not so much a quality of existence *per se*, but of existence in relationship to God and to others. This sense of piety, moreover, was shared by Christians and ethical pagans alike.

Prior to the modern era, the word ‘piety’ stood for a multitude of virtues.<sup>3</sup> Figures as varied as the Roman author Virgil, the theologian Augustine, the Reformer John Calvin, and America’s most significant early religious thinker, Jonathan Edwards, looked upon ‘piety’ as almost the sum of the good life. In the mid-sixteenth century, Calvin wrote in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that “the first step to piety is to know that God is our Father, to protect, govern and support us till he gathers us into the eternal inheritance of his kingdom”.<sup>4</sup> For Calvin the practice of piety was anything but being ‘holier than thou’ or adhering to a legalistic code of behaviour. For him the term defined the essence of the Christian faith. To act in a pious manner meant to return to God through praise and obedience that which was due to Him. “By piety,” Calvin wrote, “I mean a reverence and love of God arising from a knowledge of his benefits.”<sup>5</sup> According to Calvin, the pious acknowledge with reverence the glorious deeds of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Such people pattern their behaviour

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3. The historical material in the following paragraphs is adapted from the Introduction to *Voices from the Heart: Four Centuries of American Piety* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), and is mostly the work of my co-editor for that volume, Roger Lundin.

4. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* II. vii. 4.

5. *Ibid.*, I. ii. 1

after the divine example of redemptive concern. “Now, it may also be understood what are the fruits of repentance. They are, the duties of piety towards God, and of charity toward men, with sanctity and purity in our whole life.”<sup>6</sup>

This concept of piety had roots both in the Roman world and the Bible. In the *Aeneid*, written only decades before the birth of Christ, the epic poet Virgil celebrated the piety of his hero, Aeneas. One of the main virtues Aeneas repeatedly demonstrated was *pietas*, an attitude of humble devotion before the gods and a humble commitment to his family, to his people and to the missions the gods had entrusted to him. Virgil’s conception of piety differed strikingly from some modern ideas of the quality: he was less concerned with inner states of the spirit than with outward acts. Indeed, Aeneas found his inner desires and outward duties in almost constant conflict. He had to counter a hunger for personal fulfilment in order to obey the gods, that is, to be pious. And the gods had set before him arduous tasks protecting the good of his people.

As important as these classical sources once were in shaping Christian ideals of piety, the Bible remains the single most important source for its definition. Many of the great figures of Scripture—Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Joseph, Ruth David, Jeremiah, Paul—show that genuine spirituality involved both meditation and action, both devotion and practice. Clearly, the piety of Jesus stands as the supreme example of the balance between prayer, reflection and action. On the night before his death, he defined for his disciple the link between devotion and deeds; “If you love me, you will obey my commands” (John 14:15). In his last few hours Jesus demonstrated the very ‘piety’ he was describing to his disciples. He spent much of his final night in prayer and contemplation, yet when the soldiers came for him, he went forth to do what his Father had willed.

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6. *Ibid.*, III. iii. 16.

Throughout the rest of Scripture, we find the life of godliness defined by a quality of certain actions, as much as by a distinct consciousness. Thus, in one of the few passages where our English translations use the word ‘piety’, we are instructed to ‘practise piety’ within our own families (I Tim. 5:4). And in the catalogue of the faithful in Hebrews 11, the verbs of action become an overpowering litany: Abel *offered* a better sacrifice; Noah *built* an ark; Abraham *obeyed and went*; Abraham *offered* Isaac as a sacrifice; Isaac *blessed* Jacob and Esau; Jacob *blessed* each of Joseph’s sons; Joseph *gave instructions*; Moses parents *hid* him; Moses *chose* to be mistreated; Moses *left* Egypt; Moses *kept* the Passover; the people of Israel *marched* around Jericho; Rahab *welcomed* the spies. The author concludes with another flurry of such verbs: “What more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut up the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies” (Heb. 11:32-34).

Augustine of Hippo, writing in the fifth century as the Roman Empire crumbled around him, paid tribute to those scriptural and Roman ideals. In his masterwork, *The City of God*, he spoke with profound admiration of the example set by the early Romans: “The pagans,” he explained, “subordinated their private property to the common welfare, that is to the republic and the public treasury. They resisted the temptation to avarice. They gave their counsel freely in the councils of the state. They indulged in neither public crime nor private passion”.<sup>7</sup> Later in the same work, Augustine sought to correct a narrow misconception: “The word ‘piety’ (in Greek, *eusebia*), in its

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7. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. G. G. Walsh, ed. V. J. Bourke *et al.* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1958), 112.

strict sense...ordinarily means the worship of God. However, it is also used to express a dutiful respect for parents. Moreover, in everyday speech, the word *pietas* means pity or mercy...God commands us especially to practice mercy, declaring that it please Him as much as or even more than sacrifices. Hence God himself is spoken of as pious, in the sense of merciful".<sup>8</sup>

This classical tradition, which viewed piety at once as both private and public, inspired also the Puritan movement. The history of Puritan piety, in Britain as in America, also, however, helps show how a comprehensive ideal—love to God flowing out to faithfulness in the world—came to take on the more limited scope of our modern conceptions of the term.

America's most important twentieth-century historian, Perry Miller, recognised that the "Augustinian strain of piety" dominated Puritan experience. It "was the inspiration for Puritan heroism and the impetus in the charge of Puritan Ironsides [during the English Civil War] . . . . It was foolishness and fanaticism to their opponents, but to themselves, it was life eternal".<sup>9</sup> The sermon that John Winthrop, first governor of Massachusetts, preached to his fellows on board ship for America shows how the Puritans linked internal experience with public duty. The sermon spoke eloquently of the experience whereby "Christ comes and takes possession of the soul and infuseth another principle, love to God and our brother".<sup>10</sup> In sober language, Winthrop told his fellow Puritans about their need to remain bound to Christ as devoted individuals. At the same time, he warned them that they dare not forget their covenantal duties and communal loyalties. If they were faithless in their relationship with God, he told them, they would face the

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8. *Ibid.*, 188.

9. Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), 3-5

10. Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity", conveniently modernised in *The Puritans in America: A Narrative Anthology*, eds. A. Heimart and N. Delbanco (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 87.

certain destruction of their enterprise: “Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together in this work as one man. . . We must delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body”.<sup>11</sup>

As noble as this vision of piety may have been, it did not long survive in the Puritan experience. Soon what one historian has called “the sharp distinction moderns make between the sacred and the secular”<sup>12</sup> was at work to nourish a divide between individual religiosity and communal secularity. In such a setting, piety was on its way to becoming an irrelevant indulgence.

In its original terms, however, as defined by Virgil, but even more by the authors of Scripture and the shapers of the Christian tradition, piety was not a special awareness of the self, though it certainly involved attitudes and dispositions of the heart. Rather, it was more a characteristic way of life, of acting, that arose from an awareness of God and His actions on behalf of humans. Piety in these terms vastly transcended what we often assume to be characteristic of the pious. In these terms, piety was not a personality trait to be studied, dissected and evaluated. It was a pearl of great price devotedly to be pursued.

Now let us ask how we may pursue piety without falling into the traps described earlier. The most important thing in such a pursuit, it might be urged, is to put piety out of our minds altogether. It would seem, in other words, that we become pious when we forget our piety and concentrate upon the person and acts of God. Such a strategy moves us from ourselves to God, and then from God to those about us. It is preeminently the path shown to us by the Lord Jesus.

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11. *Ibid.*, 91.

12. Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 21.

In John 14 we are made privy to a conversation with distinctly modern overtones. The disciple Thomas posed to Jesus a question familiar to us all: "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" How, Thomas wanted to know, may I secure my bearings? How may I put my life together? How may I know the way I should go? Jesus's answer, perhaps made trite by many repetitions, yanked Thomas out of himself abruptly: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." The answer to Thomas's concern for himself is found in God's concern, through Jesus, for Thomas.

And then another disciple, Philip, poses another question whose variations we all know: "Lord show us the Father and that will be enough for us." In other words, if only we are able to position the Father properly in the orbit of spiritual beings circling the sun of our existence, we will have our spiritual solar system in order. Once again, Jesus breaks through to lead Philip away from a concern for his own receptivity of the religious to a reality outside himself: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father..." And after a few more words, "If you love me, you will obey my commands."

One of the messages of John 14 to the post-pious West is, thus, that the way to recover piety is to follow the words of Jesus. Jesus said that the way to be properly religious is to know God. The way to know God is to love Jesus. The way to love Jesus is to keep his commands. It is therefore knowing Jesus, and then following Jesus, that enables us to be responsibly pious.

The effects of this kind of piety are great indeed. It is the presence of Jesus that enables us to exchange the need to feel pious for the reality of doing piety. Piety thus may be regarded not as a cloak of spirituality to put on when we are in the mood

and then discarded when we no longer are disposed for such an outfit. It is much more a quality of life that carries us through the exigencies of existence. This sort of piety gives meaning and purpose to education, it redeems desperate interpersonal relationships, it stands alongside in the raising of children, it is present where we work, where we play, when we are cheerful, when we are perplexed, and on and on.

The sort of piety Jesus preached is not primarily something in us. It is something essentially from God. Nowhere do we see how much genuine piety arises from outside ourselves more directly than when we confront the end of life. A pious death is one in which our would-be religiosity is swallowed up in the living reality of God. On this subject, the lines of George Herbert are compelling:

Death, thou wast once an uncouth, hideous thing,  
Nothing but bones....,  
But since our saviour's death did put some blood  
Into thy face,  
Thou art grown fair and full of grace.<sup>13</sup>

What Herbert saw about the end of life, Jesus tried to teach his disciples about all of life. In a word, the way to recover piety, even in the post-pious west, is to set aside preoccupations with ourselves and to act in the world as those who have been acted on by God. Even more simply, the way to recover piety is to forget piety and find Christ.

And now, in closing, a prayer for piety:

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13. Herbert, "Death", *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Dent, 1974), 189.

Christ be with me, Christ before me,  
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,  
Christ where I lie, Christ where I sit, Christ where I arise,  
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,  
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,  
Christ in every eye that sees me,  
Christ in every ear that hears me.

Salvation is of the Lord,

Salvation is of the Lord,

Salvation is of the Christ,

May your salvation, O Lord, be ever with us.<sup>14</sup>

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14. St Patrick, *The Oxford Book of Prayer*, ed. George Appleton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).



## *In Conversation with Evangeline Paterson*

by JOY ALEXANDER

Evangeline Paterson is a poet and a Christian. She was born in Limavady, grew up in Dublin—where she remembers writing poetry at the age of seven—and now lives in Leicester. Her collection, *Bringing the Water Hyacinth to Africa*, is currently in print, and her poems appear in *The Lion Book of Christian Verse*, *100 Contemporary Christian Poets*, and several secular anthologies. She also edits the poetry magazine *Other Poetry*.

Evangeline has given a poetry reading at the library of the Irish Christian Study Centre, and the Literature Group which meets under the auspices of the Study Centre has a special interest in her poetry and provides prayer support as she practises her calling as a poet in a secular world.

*Bringing the Water Hyacinth to Africa* (Taxus, £3.75) can be purchased from the Irish Christian Study Centre Library.

### **Introducing the Poetry**

At a time when so much poetry seems to be characterised by obscurity, it is refreshing to turn to the poems of Evangeline Paterson. Here we find approachable poems, readable poetry. It is rather like listening to a wise conversationalist, for these are poems that 'read well'. In the experience of reading them we recover that quality that was once held to be a hallmark of a good poem—delight. There is genuine pleasure and enjoyment to be had, yet this is not something facile, a mere momentary smile. We find ourselves beguiled into wisdom, glimpsing insights that linger and are reinforced as poems are re-read.

Many of her poems are narratives, recreating small incidents or recording mini-biographies. A number have the flavour of ballads, while many are rooted in, and hence have the authenticity of, Evangeline Paterson's own, daily, home-centred life. In particular, the focus is on people, almost invariably given names, pursuing their individual lives, all the more striking when compared with so much modern poetry which seems to have been penned in an ivory tower devoid of human company. Here we have one response to Pope's dictum: "The proper study of mankind is man". The different ways in which human lives are explored seem inexhaustible—people in their quirkiness, unconscious humour, and especially in those moments of crisis by which a life is defined. Evangeline Paterson has the gift of penetrating beneath the surface: in "Moriarty", Moriarty has a face "like a wooden Indian" and in "Ballad of Marjorie", Marjorie "held her face like stone", but the poet gives an understanding of the deeper sorrows that are belied by the facial expression. Just as in "Coming Alive" a child's coat seen in a museum collection brings to the imagination the real life of the child who once wore it, so other cultures and historical eras are not encountered in the abstract but in terms of an individual life on which they impinged. There are misfits here, such as a crazy girl and a tinker woman—an indication partly of Evangeline Paterson's sympathetic interest in all of humanity, even its fringes—perhaps especially the fringes because she can give a voice to those who are too often passed over and neglected; and an indication also of a value implicit in this poetry, that all that lives is of worth. Usually we are given a woman's perspective; frequently the tone is gentle and tender. "Old Woman in the City" brings before our attention such a bag-lady as we have all seen on a city street and passed by on the other side—

But I saw her once, in a phone booth,  
furious, shouting into the dumb receiver:  
'You got no respect for a person!  
You got no respect!'—and stand  
for a long time, listening,  
under the notice saying 'Out of Order'.

More than the phone is out of order in such a world, yet, as the poem itself testifies, respect is precisely what Evangeline Paterson has.

These are meaningful poems, measuring up to T.S. Eliot's description of a poem as "perfection of form united with a significance of feeling". Generally the significance is present as under-statement, for there is no didacticism but instead a meaning to be discerned for those who have ears to hear. Metaphor presses in: both "Tribal Homeland" and "Bringing the Water Hyacinth to Africa", for example, in their own way contribute a great deal to the debate about the problems of the African continent. The poems move between the poles of dark and light, dream and reality, silence and song. There is an awareness of the modern predicament of *Angst* and anomie with their attendant terror—

and there was a whisper of crying  
under the dumb sky, an echo of  
steps going another way, a sound  
of nobody coming

yet—wonderfully—the overall impression is always positive, affirmative and wholesome. Fools refuse to face reality or blinker themselves against it. Endurance is seen as a virtue, and there is tender understanding for those who cave in under the pressure of reality. Better to take on the burden of living even at the cost of becoming its victim, like Ha-no-mi in "The Betrayed Girl", than to find a cheap comfort in avoiding all the issues as

Putzi Hanfstaengel does, and Mrs Stephanopoulos in “Armaments Race” and the man in “Death on a Crossing”. Death is frequently a part of the subject-matter; in the collection *Reprints* death is explicitly present in almost half of the poems. Thus words are not used to shield us from reality but to assist us to face up to it. In “Miss Emily in White” there is admiration for Emily Dickinson who confronts Death the enemy. Always there is an underlying note of moral responsibility. In the “Ballad of Marjorie” all those who knew her are ultimately implicated in her suicide. The tone is judicious rather than judgemental, but the clear implication is always that human beings are accountable. This quiet but steady outlook gives balance and integrity to the poetry as a whole. People matter and what they do matters—in this more than in anything else a Christian world-view is conveyed.

The range of styles and approaches in Evangeline Paterson’s poetry is wide. Even a superficial reading gives an impression of endless variety. Poems which at first may seem to deal with remote subject-matter turn out to be grounded in the familiar, and for this reason are accessible and effective. Jehanne may belong to the medieval world, and the historical Madeleine of “Elegy for Madeleine” may have died in 1537, but their experience of love and loss becomes real and relevant to any reader. More often than not it is ‘out-of-doors’ poetry, with images characteristically drawn from nature. In particular the imagery is elemental, literally so, and usually air threatens while water welcomes. There is lyricism, but most striking is the economy of expression. In a few lines a poem is located in both time and space. The simplicity and clarity extends even to sparing use of punctuation. It takes a sure touch in a poet to hold to such a sharp, clear focus, and yet leave room for so much between the lines. Bare statement is carried to its ultimate in “Dispossessed”, where the stark, factual sentences exemplify the totality of which Obed has been dispossessed. Such economy in language must necessarily be allied to precision in

vocabulary, to words which evoke more than they state. It is impossible to give examples because every poem has its pleasures in the deployment of words. Consider “Siesta” in which the maids are “laying the silver straight”, the widow’s moneyed daughter is “befurred in a taxi”, and the widow herself goes “creaking and corseted down the wavering stair”. In each case the detail contained in one phrase is sufficient to delineate an entire stratum of society with its attitudes, duties or privileges.

It is not surprising that a poet and a Christian would value the word, and Evangeline Paterson continually comes back to speech, to what people and things say, and in some of the best poems goes beyond that to give a voice to the dumb. The poem “Silence” is about how much silence actually says, and how much it needs an interpreter. Yet the poems not only avoid, but sometimes rebuke, romanticism. There is the realism of “Warning”, and a refusal of sentimentality in the haunting award-winning poem “Visitation” or very differently in the witty “Dilemma”:

The water that I live in  
is full of piranha  
and it doesn’t do  
to have a bleeding heart  
here.

These are only the first lines of the poem and are sufficiently diverting for the cleverness of the amazing punch-line at the end to come as even more of a shock. The danger of critical analysis is that it treats its subject with too heavy a hand and too much seriousness, which in the case of Evangeline Paterson would be to misrepresent her stance and tone and lightness of touch. She has a ‘fey’ imagination, healthy curiosity, amusement at human foibles, and a sense of humour which ranges

from the whimsical to the sardonic. Who could fail to warm to the cow which says to the ewe in “A Poem, with Respect”—

Buck up, dear. Grit your teeth. Here comes Ted Hughes

or to jolly Flora Wickerley in “A Moral Tale”:

her eyes come-hithering and her feet aching

or to the nemesis wished upon Vittorio Emanuele in “Triangle, with Camel”?

No survey such as this can cover all the aspects of Evangeline Paterson’s poetry with its potential enrichment for the reader. What is certain is that no-one who turns to her poems could come away disappointed. In “Country Churchyard” the poet stands in the churchyard, recreated in our minds by its “windy tower”, “creaking of boughs”, “constant cawing”, “green moss”, “cracked stone” and “leafdrift”. Here is the grave of Matthew and Jenny Bludgen, “who were so blithe, so kindly”, somewhat old-fashioned adjectives, recalling values far removed from those of the Bludgen grandsons who “riot at factory gates”. The poet looks

to the wood  
where their window shone, once,  
in a murky world.

The next line tells us that “it is dark now, and late”. As then, so now. And as with the good couple whom the poem memorialises, Evangeline Paterson lets her light so shine.

## Meeting the Poet

*Evangeline, could you elaborate a bit on your Irish background? Do you feel that Ireland has contributed anything—positively or negatively—to your poetry?*

I spent my earliest years wishing to be English. This was, I think, because of being a Protestant in Dublin—very much a shunned minority. I read Dickens from the age of seven, told my mother that I intended to marry an English soldier. (I did! In the first photos my husband ever gave me, before we were married, he wore an officer's uniform!). But now I find that I can't get away from my Irish roots. I feel that the rhythms in my poems, based on my own voice, sound awful when read by the English! I was very pleased to be included in the first ever anthology of Irish women poets.

*How did your commitment to Christianity come about?*

Despite an exceedingly rigorous Christian upbringing, I genuinely got saved when I was nineteen. When I was younger I had tried very hard to 'achieve' a conversion, and God paid not the slightest notice. By the time I was nineteen I had rather lost interest, and then it was God's idea, not mine. I am not at all naturally a religious person, and had seen so much I didn't like about Christianity, that I still think it's a miracle that I was ever hauled kicking and struggling into daylight.

*I have a feeling that you might not like the term 'a Christian poet'. How do you in fact see the relationship between your Christian living and your poetry writing?*

I don't like the term "Christian poet". One might as well say I am a Christian housewife. I am a Christian, so that everything I do is different. I feel no obligation to write "Christian" poems.

But I have a world view that includes God, an afterlife, a judgement, and a concept of moral responsibility, which makes me different from almost every other poet I know who is writing now.

*Are there any particular influences on your poetry that you are aware of? What poets do you enjoy reading?*

Influences—I constantly thank God for Shakespeare. I think there is nobody like him. After that, Eliot. I like Geoffrey Hill. I do not like the Romantic poets and I do not like confessional verse. I read new poetry most of the time, and when I go back it is to the Elizabethans and occasionally scraps from the Jacobean. Seamus Heaney's last book, *The Haw Lantern*, made me cry in a railway station buffet. But I seldom find current poetry so moving.

*The subjects of many of your poems are women—Jehanne, Marjorie and Gunna, for example. And the fact that you are a housewife and a mother is also apparent in a number of poems. Do you yourself regard the fact that you are a woman poet as of any significance?*

The fact that I am woman does make a superficial difference, but I think poetry should reach beyond sex, politics, class and all the other barriers, to the level where we are all human beings trying to live our lives the best way we can in this bewildering world. I don't want to be anything but a woman, and what I offer is a woman's eye view of the world, but I don't terribly want to make a big deal out of it.



*In some of your poems—"Armaments Race", the African poems, and "History Teacher in the Warsaw Ghetto Rising", which I find especially and memorably moving - a moral standpoint is at least implied. Do you think you have any 'message' in your poetry?*

I do think I have a noticeable moral standpoint in my poems, which is unconscious and which I can't help, and I think it counts heavily against me as far as acceptance and publishing goes. I have sometimes lost friends because of it—ie. my poem about Putzi Hanfstaengel, and "Female War Criminal", in the anthology of second World War poems, *Chaos of the Night*. I was told about a poet who had heard some of my poems read, bought my book, and told the reader afterwards, "I didn't like it. It stung".

*There's a fair bit of death in your poems. Ernest Hemingway said that "all stories, if continued far enough, end in death, and he is no true storyteller who would keep that from you". Do you think you share this outlook?*

Yes, I think death is a fact of life. Life wouldn't be complete without it. As Christians, particularly, I think it is something we have constantly in our minds—not in any morbid sense. I see death for me as a tremendously exciting passage into something unbelievably better than we have here. For people in general, I see death very often as a blessing, and acceptance of death—coming to terms with it—as a very character-forming thing.

*Where do you get your ideas for poems? You seem to cover such an enormous range.*

I wish I knew where the ideas for poems come from, because then I could go and get one when I wanted. I think the wide

range I cover is because of my very crowded and chaotic life. I have never had time to sit and brood. I have just won a writing bursary and have arranged three weeks (which is all I could manage at once) in a country cottage, and this is going to be a new experience. My writing had dried up considerably because of magazine-editing, and I want to see if enforced silence and solitude will help me to dig down and clear the spring.

*Do poems come easily to you, as in the traditional, but no doubt wrong-headed, picture of the poet writing under the influence of a flow of inspiration? Or perhaps writing is for you more like practising a craft, something you have to labour over.*

Nothing can be done without inspiration. But once the familiar 'ping' has sounded in the brain, when something, encountered quite casually maybe, suddenly lights up and becomes all-important, then the work comes into it. Sometimes, but seldom, a poem is written almost straight off. Much more often it takes considerable dogged hard work. The title poem of my book, for instance, "Bringing the Water Hyacinth to Africa", was worked over so hard that I thought the sweaty thumb-prints would be visible all over it, but people tell me they don't show. I think I would have abandoned it if I hadn't wanted the title so badly for the book, because I couldn't think of another one.

*You obviously have a sense of humour. "Armaments Race" is witty from the tone of the first stanza right up to the punch-line at the end. "Mrs Pintrap" is downright mischievous and "Herald of Spring" and "Programme Note" make me smile every time I read them. But I suspect being a poet nowadays is not all sweetness and light, smiles and good humour. Is it tough out there in the world of poetry?*

It is certainly tough in the world of poetry. There are cliques—and I suspect the poetry world has always been like this—who

control the major outlets whose work I do not like and who would certainly not like mine. They not only cut down very much my chances of being published, but also my likelihood of being able to read people whose work I would find sympathetic. I have made my own airhole with my magazine, where I go for poems that actually relate to human people and show human feeling, both qualities being at a considerable discount nowadays.

*To develop that last point, the unique flavour of your poetry for me is that so many poems are about people, treated as individuals, whose choices matter, and whom you clearly care about very much. This is what I find so deeply Christian in your poems. Would you like to comment on that?*

For me people are terribly important. I think this is inseparable from my faith, and also the fact that choices are important.

*And again, Christianity for you obviously extends to the whole of life and sanctifies even the most ordinary of moments—*

*“yet there is time for epiphanies between ironing the blue pyjamas and the green” .*

I was brought up in a Christian environment where, because God had to be given pre-eminence, nothing else was allowed to be important. I have broken through to the position that because God exists, everything has significance. This makes life very exciting. And for a Christian the most exciting things can happen in all kinds of little chinks of time and experience, like ironing the pyjamas. We have this absorbing inner life that goes on all the time and illuminates and gives importance to the outer life.

*Do you think being a Christian has heightened your perceptions or is it that, as a poet, you have a gift for imaginative awareness?*

I don't know that poets are more aware than most people, except in spots. I don't imagine I'm more perceptive than any other woman who has lived a long time and read a lot and watched people a lot, except when the poetic function takes over. It's like the shutter of a camera opening, and letting in one flash of really penetrating insight, which is then taken in and worked over by the inner chemistry until a poem comes out. In between these moments of vision, I think we're just as stupid as the rest of humanity.

*You would expect the general Christian public to appreciate poetry—the Bible, after all, contains some magnificent poetic passages, and we are used to honouring the Word. Do Christians in general respect and encourage you in your calling?*

Christians as a rule do not see the need for poetry, except, of course, in the Psalms, where they feel safe. I do not feel that other Christians, except a very few, have any particular sympathy or interest in what I do. Strangely, the one thing that has made an impact is the fact that I was recently awarded a thousand pounds. People who can't see for themselves the value of poetry have at least had to admit that what I do is valuable to somebody! I hope this doesn't sound bitter. I'm not particularly bitter about it, it's a fact of life I accept, and I'm thrilled when I find someone who shared my interest and preoccupation with poetry. Otherwise, life can be rather solitary.

*Thank you very much, Evangeline, for all you have shared in this conversation. By way of conclusion, could you select one or two of your poems and perhaps introduce them for us? The poetry, of course, stands on its own; it would be a fitting way to finish, and hopefully will help to broaden your readership.*

### Visitation

'Have you heard of angels?' said the visiting lady  
to the little poor child. 'They have you in their keeping.  
They hover around you when your prayers are said.  
They whisper dreams in your ear when you are sleeping.'

Said the little poor child, 'I have seem them, tall as gantries  
and thick as rain in the air above the town.  
They all leaned one way like a field of wheat.  
Their faces were white as paper. Their tears fell down.'

This image of a skyful of angels, all leaning at a slant and weeping, came to me with great force and persistence, and I couldn't imagine what to do with it. It finally resolved itself in my subconscious, and emerged one Sunday morning, as I woke up, in this form. Much later I realised where the image had apparently first been suggested to me—when I saw the west window of Coventry Cathedral, etched with saints and angels.

This is a second poem triggered off by the same image, much more conscious and close to the surface.

## Angels at Coventry

Pacing the length of the aisle with Auntie Grace,  
who walks with a cane, and leans on my arm,  
passing the carved canopy of the choir  
like flocks of birds that rise on a single note,  
pausing under the weight of the Christ in Glory,  
we turn, slow and careful, towards the west

and are staggered by flights of angels, etched in glass,  
like flickers of frozen fire. Jagged as lightning  
they stand, taller than pillars, or lean oblique,  
launched at the sky like Concorde. 'Auntie, look!  
Angels!' I cry, forgetting the step  
we are shuffling on to. Auntie, unsure on her feet  
but head screwed on, grips me, or I would have fallen  
flat on my face in the aisle, astonished by angels.

## *Scientific Theology*

by OLIVER BARCLAY

*"Of course that's the problem ... How to love and respect what you are being taught to dissect". Rabbi Abraham Gordon speaking of critical studies of the Talmud in Chaim Polak's novel The Chosen.*

Why is it that so many enthusiastic Christians are disappointed by what they meet when they start studying theology? I suggest that two of the main reasons arise from a tradition of what is sometimes called 'scientific theology'. That title may be used even when the approach is derived from history rather than science. Abraham Gordon, in the quotation above, calls historical criticism 'dissection' and I hope to show that one aspect of the problem is in this approach whether it is called 'scientific', 'literary' or 'historical'.

The attachment of the word 'scientific' to theology is in any case a rather curious juxtaposition. Probably it arises partly from the confusion which has followed the failure of the English language to have any word to translate *Wissenschaftlich*. In the English-speaking world the use of the word 'scientific' as a substitute has, of course, brought in all the aura of prestige, impartiality, progress, modernity, and so on that goes, or at least used to go, with the word 'scientific'. One cannot think that calling theology aesthetic or mathematical, or logical or even academic, would have been so popular.

However, whatever the origin of this juxtaposition we find ourselves in a situation where many theologians are pleased to think they are teaching and studying scientific theology. This tradition has two main features which create problems. The first is in fact not really in the scientific tradition at all. The

word science is stretched to cover a rationalistic approach. People like Wellhausen had some classical statements of this rationalism when he wrote about certain positions being 'inconceivable' and today it is common for people to argue that we should believe only what the scientific man or 'man come of age' finds intellectually comfortable. Those who argue like this rarely have any scientific background or any serious association with scientists, and have been singularly unsuccessful in influencing the scientific community. For all that Bultmann and his followers say about the scientific mind their methodology and approach have not proved to be particularly compatible with the discipline of science as we have it and the basic reason I suggest is that they are often more rationalistic than scientific, and frequently treat their data in an extremely cavalier fashion reminiscent rather of the philosophy of a pre-modern period when one could argue that it was only fitting for heavenly bodies to move in perfect circles just because heavenly bodies surely would do that kind of thing. This debate has been discussed fairly fully in evangelical circles and I do not wish to dwell on it.

## **Reductionism**

I want to concentrate, however, on the second aspect of a scientific tradition which had more claim to be part of scientific methodology and outlook over the last hundred years. That is the reductionist tradition. A recent book *Reductionism in Academic Disciplines* provoked some further reflections on this theme. It is largely concerned with science and history and there is no treatment of theology. Nevertheless it attacks the reductionist tradition in science when this steps over from being more than a methodological device for analysis and becomes an ontological or philosophical outlook—as it so easily does. It also warns of other dangers which are particularly of relevance to the evangelical theologian.



A comparison with the varying traditions in biology is helpful in some ways especially as the developments lie somewhat parallel.

When the period of the great amateur zoologists and botanists was replaced by one ruled by professional academic biologists, there was a very important shift in the concept of what it meant to study living organisms 'scientifically'. The reasons for this shift are complex, but the result was that most of the leaders in the field regarded it as the academically correct thing to study animals and plants chiefly when they were dead. A reductionist philosophy that regarded the whole as no more than the sum of its parts undoubtedly contributed to this trend so that at almost the same time as Wellhausen was analysing the Pentateuch and trying to define the sources, the biologists were pre-occupied with classification (taxonomy), comparative anatomy and detailed morphology. Species were divided up into innumerable smaller species and sub-species, each new one bearing, if possible, the name of the man who had first identified it. Reading the late nineteenth century scientific journals, especially some of the German journals, fills one at the same time with admiration for the marvellous accumulation of detailed knowledge, but also a sense of astonishment that such learning should have been largely wasted. And it *was* wasted, because most of it told you almost nothing about how the animals and plants actually managed to live. Often it invented artificial entities and comparisons which had nothing to do with the life of the organisms (shades of JED and P ?). Sometimes it was positively misleading. One of the most famous of all the professors of geology in the first quarter of the twentieth century (D.M.S. Watson) used to demonstrate convincingly how his beloved fossil amphibia and reptiles walked, but in ways that have now been shown to be biologically and even mechanically impossible. He had, however, never asked how living amphibia do it. As late as the 1930s it was being argued that the best distinguishing features between groups and species

should be chosen from those which had no functional significance whatsoever. It was thought that that made them more academically secure so that much of this learning was totally divorced from function.

The result was that biology became 'Necrology'—the study of the dead. Museum specimens were an adequate source of information and students left the universities with an amazing ability to identify rare plants and animals, but with practically no knowledge of them as living things. Inevitably there can be a reaction when people stood back from all this massive accumulation of irrelevant knowledge. The problems of medicine helped to turn the tide. Many major biological discoveries like the life cycle of the malaria parasite were worked out by medicals. Then the two World Wars accelerated the process by asking questions such as, why desert animals have white tummies and whether that meant that tanks in the North African Campaign should do the same (the answer was in the affirmative)? Why was a fish shaped as it was and what did that teach us about efficient movements in water? How do bats locate their prey and could we learn radar from them? Biologists began to think again of animals as living things, marvellously adapted to their environment. This seemed to many to be an almost revolutionary rediscovery and it meant a massive shift in the academic curriculum. It became important to think of the whole organism and its *environment*. Environmental studies even became an academic discipline.

A non-Christian writer on science has put it like this: "There have always been two broadly contrasting traditions in biology: a reductionist or analytical and atomizing one: and a holistic or more synthetic one. This latter was strongly represented in the 1930's..." The former, which dominated the second half of the nineteenth century and the early part of this one, "believes not merely that to understand the world requires disassembling it into its component parts, but that these parts are in some way more fundamental than the wholes they compose. To

understand societies you study individuals, to understand individuals you study their organs; for the organs their cells; for the cells their molecules; for the molecules their atoms...right down to the most 'fundamental' physical particles. Reductionism is committed to the claim that this is *the* scientific method, that ultimately the knowledge of the laws of motion of particles will enable us to understand the rise of capitalism, the nature of love, or even the winner of the next Derby".<sup>1</sup>

The basic issue is this. It is perfectly possible to do learned necrology, but that is not biology. It can seriously mislead you if you want to know how animals and plants live. It certainly diverts your attention from those fairly obviously primary interests of biology. The fault had been to study organisms as *something that you know that they are not*—mere dead bodies. It is not a total waste of time, but where it had predominated it had led into a very sterile and unreal world of human knowledge. When it was seriously proposed in the 1930s by an extremely learned scientist that the key difference between man and the apes was to be found in the presence or absence of the *peroneus tertius* muscle in the foot, it was treated seriously. Today it would be laughed out of court.

Biology has largely recovered its sense of balance and discovered ecology. Medicine has swung back to a medicine of the whole person and sociology has moved towards thinking of broader cultural forces including religion. Theology in its anxiety to be scientific has been in danger of hanging onto this reductionist tradition too long. In the 1940s it reached a point where Professor Burnaby at Cambridge acknowledged that the faculty was not training people for the ministry and the Principal of Trinity College, Glasgow, lamented that though they were training a number of theologians—of which the Church of Scotland needed at most one a year—they were training

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1. Professor Stephen Rose in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 28th March, 1986.

practically no preachers for which the Church of Scotland was clamouring. No doubt there has been a considerable improvement since then, but the problem remains a part of the academic background in which theology is still taught. A reductionist approach is thought by many to be the academic tradition.

## **Theological Necrology**

A systematic reductionist outlook cannot allow the independent reality of 'higher level' categories. Everything has to be taken to pieces and as far as possible reduced to the lowest possible categories. The result has been that a reductionist 'scientific theology' simply has no room in it for the idea of the miraculous, or for that matter for faith or awe for the living God. To open a theological lecture in prayer is, in this tradition, simply not appropriate.

Indeed it is not necessary for those operating in this way to have any personal faith at all. This does not mean that those in this tradition want to deny the miraculous or the spiritual. These categories just are not what their methodology can deal with. As a result, the most conservative scholars can seem to be leaving out of their lectures all that matters most to the ministerial student. This is one of the major concerns of the student's bafflement and can tempt him to develop an almost total dichotomy between his studies and his preaching and personal devotional life. He is astonished and even embarrassed if the lecturer even says anything to move him to awe or worship.

There are, however, two kinds of reductionism. The academics have frequently 'reduced' theology to linguistics and historical criticism in all its forms. They will emphasise a few proof texts on the basis of which they criticise our Lord and the Apostles for their teaching (for example on the Second Coming), and don't know how to cope with the evangelical

students who maintain the reliability of our Lord and the Apostles on the basis of other passages and a broad sweep of biblical teaching. Faith in the reliability of our Lord is simply not a category that comes into their reckoning so that even evangelical scholars write and speak 'as if' from a reductionist standpoint that excludes all spiritual reality.

The book quoted above about reductionism in academic disciplines has, however, implicitly an interesting challenge to evangelical students. Stephen Rose (quoted above), who is a Marxist and insists on the political level of reality as a tool for understanding science, is neatly criticised by Mary Midgley, a non-Christian philosopher. She points out that there is not only hierarchical reductionism such as that defined by Stephen Rose—reducing all to its parts. There is also what we may call horizontal reductionism which reduces all to our own favourite level or other higher level categories. Evangelicals have not infrequently been guilty of this—seeing only certain familiar doctrinal themes in the Bible and refusing to see other less familiar emphases. The past fundamentalist aversion to social action is a case in point. They simply refused to see the thrust of Amos and of the enormous (distracting?) amount of time and energy given by Paul to raising money for the poor in Judea. There is a tendency to reduce everything to a simple gospel that could be expressed in a few points. A theological professor in one faculty complained that when he drew evangelical students into discussion of biblical passages they seemed to know exactly what the passage ought to be teaching before they looked at it! They had reduced everything to a few basic gospel themes in much the same way as the Marxists reduce everything to politics.

What then is the remedy? I suggest that the basic remedy is to allow the Bible to say what it actually says, recognising it as a unity which has a consistent message. The scientist studying nature believes that there is a unity in nature even where there are certain facts which do not fit into our present knowledge and

seem to stick out like a sore thumb. He will work hard until he sees how they all fit together. At the same time he has got to be absolutely honest with the data and willing to see that they make sense only when seen in the light of higher level categories. Many features of animals and plants only really make sense when you remember that they are actually living things and that though you may be examining the corpse, it was—a short time ago—an organism making its living in a difficult environment. The hierarchical reductionist can find little difference between a blackbird and a crow except size. Bird song simply is not in his vocabulary and by the time he has finished with his comparative anatomy, you have a colourless and soundless world. At the same time amateur ornithologists, who recognise birds by their song, must be willing to ask questions about anatomy and what those anatomical differences mean in terms of lifestyle, food patterns, and so on. The reductionism which reduces everything to anatomy on the one hand or the horizontal reductionism which reduces everything to bird song on the other, must be seen in the wider context. They have their value so long as it is remembered that both are talking about a living organism.

In theology it is harder than in some other disciplines to relate the comparative anatomy of the text to the great themes which move us to worship and to obedience. At the same time hammering away at those great themes will be on very thin ice unless it is adequately based on proper exegesis and linguistic study. The preacher who wrote in the margin of his notes, 'argument weak here, shout louder', can never be an evangelical ideal. We have got to be honest with the whole data which God has given us and sit humbly before it. When the atheist, Thomas Henry Huxley, said that 'he liked to sit down before nature like a little child', he was deliberately making a parody of a fundamental Christian attitude, but he realised that that was the true scientific attitude. He did not acknowledge that this owed a tremendous amount to a Christian view of God and His

creation. I suggest that theology should cease to call itself scientific, which is naming the parent after the child, and let it return to the queen of the disciplines which helps to teach the others to deal honestly and uncritically with their data.