



*Liberal  
theology in  
a changing  
world*

# A Christianity that can be believed in

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# A Christianity that can be believed in

The purpose of this booklet is to explore the claim that key Christian beliefs can be expressed in ways that not only do not conflict with other well-established knowledge that we have, but are arguably the best way of making sense of that knowledge. To some this may seem a quixotic quest. Many popular versions of Christianity are deliberately and defiantly opposed to any attempt to bring Christianity into line with modern thought. A hundred million Americans believe that God created humankind in the recent past broadly along the lines described in Genesis. The Anglican communion is riven by ethical controversies which centre on understandings of the Bible which ignore most of the Biblical scholarship of the past two hundred years. And the Roman Catholic Church appears to be arguing that acceptance of the Marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption as ‘consonant with scripture’ is a necessary requirement for ultimate Church unity. At the same time in academic theology scholars identifying themselves with post-modernism, radical orthodoxy or the theology of Karl Barth, suggest that Christian systematic theology can explore the internal consistency of its doctrinal language, untroubled by whether or how theological claims relate to scientific or philosophical investigations.

The paradox is that this is all happening at a time when philosophical and scientific arguments for the existence of God are enjoying new vitality, when near-death experiences have revitalised discussion of the possibility of a future life, and when New Testament scholarship seems increasingly confident about Jesus. In this context I wish to claim that some fairly central Christian claims are genuinely ‘believable’ and can be articulated in ways that harmonise the rest of our thinking, I believe that the classic ‘modernist’ position which seeks to integrate Christian believing with the findings of modern science, philosophy and the historical study of the Bible remains a viable position. However I do not wish to claim too much. As a former research student of John Hick I accept his view that we are living in an ambiguous universe which can be interpreted theistically or atheistically. Hence I am not attempting to ‘prove’ the truth of a liberal modernist version of Christianity. What I do claim however is that this is a believable version of Christianity in the sense that it can be rationally defended and can be shown not to be in conflict with other knowledge we have about the nature of reality.

## Belief in God the Creator

The starting point for theistic belief is the claim that God created the universe out of nothing. This is much more believable than it used to be because most scientists today think that the universe did come into being out of nothing. Likewise belief in divine design goes very well alongside scientific beliefs that the way the universe

evolved in the first few seconds of its existence suggests that the universe was ‘finely tuned’ for the emergence of life and mind.

To get a feel of how much the situation has changed in favour of belief in God it is intriguing to compare the 1948 debate between Frederick Copleston and Bertrand Russell, with a rerun of that debate fifty years later between William Lane Craig and Antony Flew. Russell lived at a time when scientists assumed that the universe was eternal and hence uncaused. Consequently when Copleston tried to argue for the universe being created, Russell could just sit back, fold his arms and declare, ‘the universe is just there, and that’s all’. That option was simply not open to Flew, because the consensus of contemporary science is that the universe is not ‘just there’. It came into being from nothing between twelve and fifteen billion years ago and it appears to be finely tuned for the emergence of life and mind. Antony Flew recognised that these new developments in the natural sciences affect the arguments for the existence of God and when an atheist he was not happy about these developments: ‘If it was a matter of my preference, I would certainly prefer a cyclical universe’. Such a model would ‘fit better into an argument against God’, but Flew accepted that ‘this idea has been empirically ruled out’ so ‘the discussion here tonight had to start from what is clearly the main accepted view among cosmologists.’

At the time of the debate Flew argued that we simply do not know enough to answer the question what caused the universe to come into being. We have to stop somewhere in our search for explanation and the Big Bang is the place where we should stop. As all our evidence for causation applies within the universe we have no grounds for supposing it applies to the universe itself. Hence Flew put it to his audience that they should ‘at least entertain the possibility that it’s not ridiculous for the universe to pop into existence out of nothing.’ In saying this Flew recognised that it must seem odd to speak in this way and Keith Yandell rightly commented that in arguing that the causal principle applied only within the universe, and not to the universe itself, Flew was taking a totally arbitrary position. It would seem more reasonable to suppose that if causation applies to everything within the universe, it would also apply to the universe itself.

Similarly the universe does give the appearance of being ‘finely tuned’ for the emergence of life and mind. If any one of fifty or so physical features of the universe had been infinitesimally different, galaxies would not have formed, planetary systems would not have developed and human beings would never have evolved. It looks as if some ‘anthropic principle’ is at work in the way the universe developed. According to Robert Jastrow, Head of NASA’s Institute for Space Studies, the fine tuning of the universe is ‘the most powerful evidence for the existence of God ever to come out of science.’

In his initial reflections on the debate with Craig, Flew accepted that the new arguments for God’s existence were strong and at that time he conceded that if a person already believes in a creator God the Big Bang ‘surely does provide empirical confirmation of... that belief’. Likewise if a person believes in a purposeful creation then ‘it is entirely reasonable to welcome the fine-tuning argument as providing

confirmation of that belief.’ More recently Flew has abandoned his life-long commitment to atheism and now accepts that God exists. In his own words he ‘simply had to go where the evidence leads’ and recognise that ‘the case for God... is now much stronger than it ever was before’. However he continues to reject the God of the ‘revealed religions’ at least in part because of the appalling beliefs that some Christians and Muslims have about the nature of God. For Flew the concept of God for which one can argue philosophically is the God of Aristotle and the God of Aquinas’ ‘five ways’.

Flew’s reluctant acceptance of the arguments for the existence of God reminds me of the equally reluctant acceptance of a creator God by another former atheist, the astronomer Fred Hoyle. For years Hoyle championed the theory of a steady state universe. He felt a sense of exasperation with the new findings and wrote: ‘A commonsense interpretation of the facts suggests that a super intellect has monkeyed with physics, as well as with chemistry and biology, and there are no blind forces worth speaking about in nature. The numbers one calculates from the facts seem to me so overwhelming as to put this conclusion almost beyond question.’

Hoyle’s reference to ‘overwhelming numbers’ refers to the statistical improbabilities involved in the way the universe developed. Stephen Hawking has shown that if the heat of the universe one second after the Big Bang had been less than it was by one part in a million million, and if the rate of expansion had differed by one part in a hundred thousand million million, the Universe would have collapsed into a hot-fire ball. Given that around fifty such constants had to be integrated together simultaneously the odds lengthen unbelievably. Sir Roger Penrose argues that for our universe to come into being the way it did ‘the Creator’s aim’ must have been precise to an accuracy of one part in ‘10 to the 10 to the 123’. Penrose points out that if one were to attempt to write this number out in ordinary denary notation it would be a 1 followed by so many ‘0’s that if we were to write an ‘0’ on each separate neutron and each separate proton - and we could throw in all the other particles as well - we should fall short of writing down the figure needed’.

Craig uses the fact that there is ‘no physical reason why these constants and quantities possess the values they do’ as the clinching argument for the existence of God. I do not want to follow him at this point. I believe that physicists should continue to do all in their power to continue to search for the unifying physical principle which draws all these constants of nature together. Nietzsche was rightly critical of those who place ‘into every hole in our knowledge, their stop-gap, their illusion they call “God”’. Belief in God is not a replacement for detailed scientific explanation, it goes alongside it. Our wonder at the ‘fine-tuning’ of the universe should only be enhanced when we eventually discover ‘how God did it’. As a matter of history the belief in a Creator God in medieval Europe was the trigger for the development of modern science here. The founders of the Royal Society wanted to think God’s thought after him, and I support Hawking’s belief that that if and when we discover a unifying principle then we will know more of the ‘mind of God’.

The alternative to belief in a Creator God among scientists today is belief in a ‘multiverse’. This builds on the fact that if there were an infinite number of universes or

even many thousand trillions of universes one might expect at least one of them to develop in the way ours has done. As a believer in Ockham's principle of not multiplying entities beyond necessity I share Polkinghorne's view that 'a metaphysical suggestion of equal coherence and greater economy is that there is only one universe which is the way it is because it... is the creation of a Creator.'

One reason this 'simpler' solution is not more popular among astronomers and scientists is the fact that though they may be sympathetic to the idea of a creative mind behind the universe they are rightly unwilling to be associated with what they see as the Christian belief package. This is particularly true of American scientists. Despite the fact that new findings in astronomy seem very readily compatible with belief in God, a report in the *Journal of Science and Religion* for 2003 shows that only 22% of American astronomers believe in God. One reason for this is that rational belief in a Creator God has been made very difficult for American scientists by the claims of Christian fundamentalism. According to a 1991 opinion poll over a hundred million Americans believe that God directly created human beings in the recent past as Genesis says, and in 1999 the Board of Education in Kansas voted to remove the teaching of evolution from its curriculum. The language of creationism and even of 'intelligent design' have been so muddled by such controversies that it is hard to get a hearing for a believable account of divine creation.

This is tragic because by the end of the nineteenth century most thoughtful Christians had come to take evolution for granted. In academic theology the watershed was in Charles Gore's edited book *Lux Mundi* published in 1890 which presented Christianity wholly within an evolutionary framework. Gore also pointed out that early Christian thought would have had little problem in embracing evolution. According to St. Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century, 'God in the beginning created only the germs or causes of the forms of life which slowly developed in gradual course over long periods of time.' Such a perspective would be very easy to harmonise with the concluding sentence of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*: 'There is grandeur in this view of life with its several powers having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one and... from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.'

The paradox of the present intellectual situation is beautifully summed up by Fred Hoyle's comment that although 'most scientists eschew religion it actually dominates their thoughts more than it does the clergy'. Stephen Hawking may help to explain this paradox when he affirmed a willingness to believe in 'a mathematical God... but not in what people normally mean by "God".' Astronomer John Leslie takes a comparable position. 'Our Universe does look... very much as if created by God' but not by the God of popular Christianity 'who designs the structures of individual organisms, plague germs perhaps, or who interferes in nature's operations.'

# A Believable God

It is unfortunate that the idea of an ‘interfering God’ remains so widespread. It is by no means intrinsic to a Christian understanding. The classic liberal protestant position as articulated over a century ago by Adolf von Harnack is that ‘miracles, it is true, do not happen’. The English Modernists of the nineteen-twenties and thirties were equally clear that God had created an autonomous universe in which he did not intervene. Their views were seen as an acceptable Christian position by the Church of England Doctrine Commission chaired by William Temple in 1938. This report recognised that many Christians ‘feel it to be more congruous with the wisdom and majesty of God that the regularities, such as men of science observe in nature and call Laws of Nature should serve his purpose without any need for exceptions on the physical plane’. The report went on ‘it is important to notice that the motives leading to this view are not exclusively scientific, but that a religious interest also is involved.’ I identify this religious interest with the problem of evil. If God can physically intervene within his universe then God is responsible for all the suffering of the world which is occasioned by his failure to do so. By contrast if, as John Hick suggests in his classic work *Evil and the God of Love*, this world is viewed not as a spoilt paradise but as a place in which our personhood can be shaped by the challenges and responsibilities of living in a challenging environment, then the problem of evil does not arise. If God is truly omnipotent he must be able to create an autonomous universe which develops through the natural processes of evolution. Take the analogy with contemporary computer design. Everyone agrees that the greater the skill of the computer designer the more independent will be the functioning of the computer. The ultimate goal of computer operators is to design a machine that can genuinely think for itself. I share Sir Roger Penrose’s belief that this goal is unachievable, but no one would doubt that if it could be achieved it would be the ultimate accolade for a computer designer. So too with God and the universe. If God is truly omnipotent he must be able to create not only genuinely free human beings but also a genuinely autonomous universe. Indeed I suggest he could not do one without the other. Hence I would argue that God’s inability to intervene within the physical universe should be added to the list of paradoxes of omnipotence alongside his inability to create square circles.

Belief that God does not physically intervene within the world in no way suggests that God doesn’t care. Most liberal theologians believe that God shows his love not by transforming the situation from without by miraculous intervention, but by transforming the situation from within by his presence. One vivid example of this comes from the life of a former bishop of Birmingham and president of the English Modernists, Leonard Wilson. During the war he was trapped in Singapore and tortured mercilessly in a notorious concentration camp. Unfortunately for him he simply did not have the knowledge his captors sought to extract from him, but could say nothing that would convince them of this. In terms of physical intervention God did nothing, yet the bishop affirmed later that never in his life was he so conscious of God’s sustaining and upholding love than when he felt God with him in prison.

This is an extreme example from the life of an outstanding Christian leader but at a much wider level an awareness of God's presence, or at any rate a sense of a presence 'different from every day life' is widely reported. Research undertaken by the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre over the past thirty years suggests that between a third and a half of people in Britain have felt this awareness. This awareness, commonly thought of as a spiritual or religious experience, is important to people because it is often life-changing. As William James observed a century ago 'religious experiences must be real because they have real effects'.

Among the effects of religious experience we need to include the impact it can have on people's health and well-being. In their classic study of *Religious Behaviour Belief and Experience* Beit-Hallahmi and Michael Argyle show that though claims of dramatic miraculous healings have repeatedly been challenged by scientific research, such research also shows that there is a less dramatic but very real link between religion and health. They document such surveys in detail for heart disease, strokes, various kinds of cancer, emphysema, cirrhosis and suicide. The figures are highly significant and have been repeatedly confirmed. David Hay in his study of *Religious Experience* shows that 25% of people claiming religious experience believe that they have received help in answer to prayer and that mystical and numinous experience can play a central role in the quality of life of people who are suffering from chronic or terminal illness. He suggests that in the great majority of such cases the contribution that spirituality can make is in helping the patient to come to terms with their position. He believes that spirituality may 'even at times assist with healing' but this is clearly not the norm. What is more characteristic is that spirituality can transform the situation from within. This seems to have been the case with my father. He was a priest and while dying of cancer explicitly forbade direct prayers for his healing on the grounds that God had nothing whatever to do with his cancer. On the other hand he often testified that it was only his awareness of God's sustaining love that enabled him to cope with his illness.

Beit-Hallahmi and Michael Argyle believe that the way religious conviction can contribute to healing is not through physical divine intervention but through the way spirituality can induce a peace of mind which is beneficial to health. 'Worship and prayer are said to engender positive emotional experiences such as relaxation, hope, forgiveness and empowerment' and may thus help in activating the immune system. Religion may also provide the social support of a caring community which can make the person feel valued. It is perhaps through this that the beneficial effects of religious experience may operate.

It seems to me that among the public at large it is now very generally accepted that God is not responsible for what happens in the world but nevertheless that God does care immeasurably for us. When Princess Diana was killed in a car crash, or when the twin towers were struck on September 11<sup>th</sup>, no Christian leader saw either event as brought about by God, yet both events led to a mass outpouring of feeling in a succession of religious services. Indeed it is now the case that any widely reported tragedy will generate demand for a religious service but that no commentator will hold God responsible for the tragedy. The response to the Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004 and

to the terrorist bombs in London on July 7<sup>th</sup> 2005 are further examples of events that few would attribute to divine action, but to which many feel the need to respond to in a religious way through holding special services.

In most areas of public life this is now accepted. When Margaret Thatcher asked for a thanksgiving service after the Falklands War the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Cardinal of Westminster and the Moderator of the Free Church Council agreed to participate only on the clear understanding that nothing in the service should suggest that God had anything to do with the victory. Archbishop Rowan Williams and Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor took a similar line at the Remembrance Service for the Iraq war. Even more to the point in 2001 during the disastrous outbreak of foot and mouth disease no one dreamt of suggesting that there should be a day of fasting and humiliation to persuade God to remove the Cattle Plague, as had happened just over a century earlier.

It is therefore paradoxical that in many areas of church life, clergy and ministers preach as if they expect God to intervene physically in the lives of individuals. When I was in the parish ministry the eucharistic prayer for the sick was a prayer for confidence in God no matter what might happen: 'Save and comfort those who suffer that they may hold to thee through good and ill and trust in thy unfailing love.' It is disturbing that since 1980 the Anglican Church has replaced this by a prayer for healing. The idea that God may intervene to bring healing has been further encouraged by the popularity of 'Alpha Christianity'. This course does not have a section on the Christian hope for life after death but does encourage belief that direct prayers for healing and material success are likely to be efficacious. This seems to me a very worrying development in relation to the problem of evil because this structure of teaching inevitably means that when terminal illness finally does strike down the believer or the believer's spouse they may face a serious crisis of faith on top of all their other problems.

## Believing in life after death today

In place of the this-world-only faith of Alpha Christianity, the Christian Gospel has from the beginning affirmed the reality of life after death. Preached as if this entailed a literal raising up of human corpses it is quite incredible. But this is not true of all ideas of life after death. One of the most discussed ideas is the hypothesis put forward by Professor H.H. Price and John Hick that at death our consciousness would temporarily enter a mind-dependent world. This would provide an opportunity for life-review, self-revelation and self-assessment. It would also provide opportunity for 'meeting' through telepathic contact with deceased relatives and friends and perhaps an enhanced awareness of the divine. After a period in this purely spiritual existence the person would be reborn into another embodied existence, not on earth but in another space. Hick believes that a succession of such lives with intervals for reflection in between would provide the most suitable means for the human pilgrimage towards ultimate reality. This idea is not new to Hick for earlier in the century Archbishop



William Temple had interpreted Jesus' saying 'In my father's house are many mansions' as implying that there would be many staging posts in our journey towards God and St. Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century believed that 'from one new beginning to the next the soul will make its way toward the transcendent'.

When Hick sketched out this idea of consciousness leaving the body and temporarily entering a mind-dependent state to enable life-review and telepathic meeting he was engaged in pure speculation. Neither Hick nor I had at that point heard of near-death experiences even though both of us had been researching beliefs about a future life for the previous decade. What is extraordinary however is the way in which reports from people resuscitated from apparent death provide empirical support for Hick's speculation. They consistently claim that when their hearts stopped beating and their lungs stopped breathing 'they' went out of their bodies. They describe looking down and remembering the resuscitation procedures and they talk of life-review, telepathic meetings and enhanced religious awareness. Hence what was initially put forward as pure theory might in fact turn out to be the way things are.

However it is inevitable that the credibility of any such notion will be tied up with making sense of the idea that dualism is possible. Most philosophers and theologians today reject soul-body dualism because of all that modern science has shown us about the intimate relationship that exists between all our thinking, feeling, and willing and some quite specific brain states. But there is no reason for them to do so since the same facts can all be equally well explained by a doctrine of mind-brain interaction. John Hick takes for granted everything that modern genetics and neurophysiology say about the origins of our individuality and hence rejects the idea of a soul being inserted into a developing foetus. However the reality of human freedom and spirituality also has to be taken into account and in this context what matters is not origins but ends. Hence Hick believes that it remains possible to see the soul as a real but emergent property and in fact to take literally Keat's insight that this life is a 'vale of soul-making'. According to Hick 'Distinctive human mentality and spirituality emerges in accordance with the divine purpose in complex bodily organisms. But once it has emerged it is the vehicle, according to Christian faith of a continuing creative activity only the beginnings of which have so far taken place.'

Similar positions are taken by both Richard Swinburne and Keith Ward. According to Swinburne dualism is 'inescapable' if we are really to explain human existence and experience. First he points out that 'though the mental life of thought, sensation and purpose may be caused by physico-chemical events in the brain, it is quite different from those events.' Second he draws attention to the fact that 'conscious experiences are causally efficacious. Our thoughts and feelings are not just phenomena caused by goings-on in the brain; they cause other thoughts and feelings and they make a difference to the agent's behaviour.' Third he suggests that 'though a human soul has a structure and character which is formed in part through the brain to which it is connected... [it] acquires some independence of that brain.' Keith Ward adopts the same position, 'Of course the soul depends on the brain... but the soul need not always

depend on the brain, any more than a man need always depend on the womb which supported his life before birth.’

On this hypothesis the soul is an emergent property that comes into existence in the course of life. Throughout life it interacts with the body but in principle it is separable from it and at death separation occurs. This hypothesis is supported by the latest research into near death experiences. Dr. Peter Fenwick, Consultant Neurophysiologist at the Radcliffe Infirmary, claims that recent studies of near-death experiences in hospital contexts have shown that such experiences take place in the absence of any recordable brain activity. Over the past seven years Dr. Fenwick and I have been supervising a research project at a hospital in west Wales where Penny Sartori, a staff nurse in intensive care, has monitored every resuscitation case. To explore whether or not people really did go out of their bodies during resuscitation she placed symbols around the ward only visible from the ceiling. Unfortunately no one who reported going out of their bodies looked around the ward to see the symbols. All of them focused their attention on themselves being resuscitated so all we were getting was more and more reasonably accurate accounts of how they were resuscitated. So we initially thought the experiment had failed. But then Penny Sartori decided to ask people who had been resuscitated without having an NDE if they also could describe how they were resuscitated. They could not do so. Their attempts were hopelessly wrong. This is a significant finding because it had been hypothesised by Dr. Susan Blackmore that the apparent observations made during an NDE could be explained naturalistically as a combination of ‘prior knowledge, fantasy, and lucky guesses and the remaining operating senses of hearing and touch’. Yet these factors would be equally present in all resuscitation cases. It is therefore interesting that people who claimed to have looked down from above on themselves being resuscitated were generally correct in their descriptions of what had had happened whereas those who had had no such ‘experience’ could not do so. It looks as if the reports from NDE-ers are the product of correct observations made from outside their bodies.

Michael Sabom, an American Cardiac Professor, has recently found an extremely strong case of observation in a near-death situation. It involved a patient (Pam Reynolds) who underwent a life-threatening operation to remove an aneurysm from her brain. To prevent blood circulating around her head during the operation her heart was stopped, her body temperature was lowered, and she was for all practical purposes temporarily dead with no measurable brain function. Nevertheless after the operation she correctly described what had happened during it to the amazement of the doctors involved. Most evidentially because she was a professional musician she was able to tell the doctors that the drill which opened up her skull vibrated as a natural D. This instrument had not been used until she was totally unconscious and none of the doctors had a clue about the musical note at which the drill vibrated. But it turned out that she was right.

These near-death experiences matter in relation to belief in the soul because if even for only a few seconds near the point of death people can really get out of their bodies and observe from a different vantage point then brain and mind are not identical

and the immortality of the soul is a possibility. They certainly change the intellectual climate in relation to believe in a future life. For example although Flew continues to 'hope and believe' there is no afterlife, he accepts that 'this evidence (about near death experiences) certainly weakens if it does not completely refute my arguments against doctrines of a future life'. Likewise the Australian sociologist Allan Kellehear believes that the most important impact of near death experiences is that they have 'put the idea of survival of death back on the religious agenda'.

However it is interesting that no major religion teaches permanent disembodiment after death. All add some concept of reincarnation, resurrection or recreation. The view of the Church of England Commission on Doctrine in 1938 was that after death people will be given new and quite different 'spiritual bodies' to serve as vehicles for their self-expression and development in heaven. And the only bond of union between present and future bodies is that they will be 'owned' successively by the same personality. In 1996 the Doctrine commission put this slightly differently. They argued the 'essence of humanity is certainly not the matter of the body, for that is continuously changing.... What provides continuity and unity through that flux of change is not material but (in a vague but suggestive phrase) the vastly complex information-bearing pattern in which that material is organised. That pattern can surely be considered the carrier of memories and of personality'. What happens at death according to this theory is that 'Death dissolves the embodiment of that pattern, but the person whose that pattern is, is "remembered" by God, who in love holds that unique being in his care'. However there must at some point be a 'fuller realisation of God's purpose for us all'. This will come with 'the resurrection of the body.' But 'it is not to be supposed that the material of the resurrected body is the same as that of the old.' Such language when linked to the new evidence for Near-death experiences suggests that life after death can be as realistic a hope in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it was in the first.

## Belief in the Resurrection of Jesus

Within the Christian tradition the distinctive ground for belief in a future life was a conviction that Jesus has risen from the dead and appeared to his disciples. From the second century until relatively recent times this was interpreted as a literal belief in the resuscitation of Jesus' corpse. According to the fourth Anglican article of religion, 'Christ did truly rise again from death, and took again his body, with flesh, bones and all things pertaining to the perfection of Man's nature; wherewith he ascended into heaven and now sitteth'. However so literal a view has almost died out among Christian theologians and philosophers. Stephen Davis remarks that in ten years of focused reading on the resurrection of Jesus he has come across no scholar today who thinks of the resurrection in this way. But though this might be true of the world of Christian scholarship it is by no means as true of popular religious controversy. Contributing to such controversy was an article in the *Reader's Digest*, in which Archbishop George Carey appeared to endorse the classic position when he said that he believed Jesus 'cold dead body, was raised alive by God'.

The problem with this classic view is that it seems to me to misunderstand the true significance of Jesus' resurrection which is that Jesus convinced his disciples, not that he had simply come back to life, but that he had conquered death and gone on to a new and glorious life. The earliest evidence for Jesus' resurrection, that of St. Paul, placed all the stress on the appearances of Jesus. And for St. Paul these appearances were an inward event. 'God revealed his son within me' is how he described his own experience of the risen Christ in *Galatians* 1.15. In *Acts* 26:19 he called it 'a heavenly vision'. In *1 Corinthians* 15 he constantly spoke of the 'appearances' of Jesus using the Greek word *opthe*. Archbishop Carnley argues that *opthe* is not the word which would be used for 'seeing through the natural mechanism of the eye and the optic nerve' but would always have the connotation of the kind of seeing 'peculiar to religious faith'. In other words for Paul the appearances of Jesus were more akin to a religious vision than something a camera might have recorded. This would seem borne out by the last appearance of Jesus to the disciples in Galilee as recorded by Matthew who tells us when the disciples saw Jesus 'they worshipped him, but some doubted.' Both the worshipping and the doubting suggest that what was seen was closer to religious vision than to an objective sighting.

It is of course true that there is also much material in the Gospels that gives a far more physical account of the resurrection of Jesus. The basic thrust of the empty tomb narratives found in all four Gospels is that Jesus rose bodily from the dead. But we can be reasonably confident that this was not the earliest Christian tradition. One ground for saying this is that all the most important manuscripts of Mark's Gospel show that it originally ended at chapter 16 verse 8. This verse explains that the reason why the women who found the tomb empty had 'said nothing about it to anyone, was because they were afraid'. Clearly Mark would not have needed to explain away the women's silence if the story of the tomb being found empty had been known about from the outset. It seems to me evident that the empty tomb tradition grew up as a way of insisting on the 'reality' of the resurrection of Jesus, but that a firm belief in the importance of Jesus' resurrection pre-dated the birth of the empty tomb traditions. Initially Jesus' resurrection was seen as a spiritual reality. This would seem to be the position presented in *1 Peter* 3:10 which speaks of Jesus being 'put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit'. It also seems to me impossible that Paul could have declared that 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God' if he had believed that Jesus' flesh and blood had done so.

There is no doubt that for Paul and for all the earliest Christians, what they refer to as the resurrection of Jesus was a crucially important event. St. Paul told the Corinthians that without a belief in the resurrection of Jesus, 'your faith is in vain'. We know the earliest Christians believed passionately that Jesus had risen from the dead, not only because they were willing to die as witnesses to this, but also because they persuaded others to share their belief. We know that the earliest Christians made the first day of the week their sacred day in spite of the fact that the earliest Christians were Jews for whom the Sabbath was axiomatically sacrosanct. These historical events require an historically adequate explanation. The Easter Faith of the first disciples

seems the most believable explanation and for this to be adequate, Jesus must really have appeared to his disciples.

However for this to be a believable faith both for the earliest Christians and for us I suggest we need to see it as a spiritual reality. The Gospel narratives which portray a physical resurrection are inconsistent since they speak of Christ appearing and vanishing at will and they imply that his clothing and the food he ate also participated in such changes. Moreover if the bodily resurrection of Jesus is thought to be crucial then the story of the ascension of Jesus would also have to be believed to explain how Jesus' risen body moved up to heaven. The problem with this is that from the time of Copernicus onwards a heaven in the sky to which an earthly body could be carried by clouds has become a fantasy. This does not prevent Christian belief in a heaven in another space or another dimension of being. Modern physics is open to the logical possibility of plural spaces which are in no relationship whatever with each other. The only proviso is that each space must be subject to different physical laws, as indeed St. Paul also insisted in his description of the conditions for resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:40ff.

A further factor is that from the beginning the whole point of belief in the resurrection of Jesus has been that it is one of the grounds for our own future hope. Yet what is certain is that our bodies see corruption after death either in the swift flames of the crematorium or the slow decay of the grave. The historic creedal belief in the resurrection of the flesh has long been recognised as an unbelievable destiny for us. Hence all modern versions of the Apostle's creed have been altered to speak of the resurrection of the body (rather than of the flesh) and as we have already seen they are interpreted by doctrine commissions in ways that imply no material continuity. This is highly relevant to what can be believed about the resurrection of Jesus. His resurrection can only be a ground for our future hope if what happened to him is something we may expect to happen to us.

One way of bringing the two together is to note how widespread is the experience among recently bereaved people of seeing a visionary experience of their loved one which convinces them that 'all is well'. Douglas Davies has found that 35% of bereaved people have had such an experience. They find the experience very positive and it reinforces ideas of an afterlife among those who have it. When I was a parish priest in Birmingham I was very struck to discover that having such an experience was by far the most common ground for belief in a future life among my parishioners. We could therefore see the accounts of Jesus' appearances as particularly vivid, full, and well-documented instances of something that at a much lesser level is a common feature of human experiencing, but which in both cases can lead to a conviction of the reality of a future life.

## A Believable Jesus

A Christianity which can be believed in must, if it is correctly to be called a Christianity, be related to the person and work of Christ as a real historical figure. It is

therefore important to know that toward the end of the 20th. Century there was a powerful reawakening of interest in the historical Jesus. E. P. Sanders, one of the most respected New Testament specialists today, has characterised the period 1910-1970 as a time when scholars tended to argue that we knew very little about the historical Jesus whereas 'in recent decades we have grown more confident.' Sanders's own position is that 'There are no substantial doubts about the general course of Jesus' life: when and where he lived, approximately when and where he died, and the sort of thing he did during his public activity.' His own study of *The Historical Figure of Jesus* gives the fullest and most detailed account of the emerging consensus, which is backed up both by the detail of his other works and by the comparably positive conclusions of other scholars. This confidence does not extend to any rehabilitation of the miraculous and supernatural elements discarded by earlier liberals. Sanders comments on popular contemporary views of New Testament miracles that 'none of this is accurate'

It is therefore extremely sad that in both the contemporary Anglican and Roman Churches a belief in the virgin birth of Jesus has become something of a litmus test of orthodoxy. Here the difference between the world of academia and the world of the church is at its most glaring. In the world of New Testament scholarship it is significant that Kasemann, Ernst Fuchs and James Robinson, who pioneered the new quest of the historical Jesus, simply omit the nativity narratives. Gunther Bornkamm claims that they are 'too much overgrown by legends... and messianic conceptions to be used for historical assertions', and Leslie Houlden argues that they are 'late inconsistent with each other... and almost wholly dependent on prophetic texts'. In fact there is almost total agreement among scholars that the infancy narratives are simply Jewish Midrash woven together from Old Testament prophecy.

The difficulties of believing in the nativity narratives include the biological impossibility of a virginal conception (particularly of a male), the presence of angels in the stories, and the idea that a star could be the means of locating a dwelling place. But even the most apparently prosaic element in the account is unbelievable once one reflects upon it. We are told that Augustus required Joseph to go to Bethlehem to pay his taxes there because he was descended from King David. But King David had lived a thousand years earlier, and his dynasty had been replaced many times. To order his descendants to go to David's city to pay their taxes would be like today's Government requiring descendants of the Saxon royal family to travel to Winchester to pay their council tax. We may also note that outside the nativity stories in Matthew and Luke there is no reference to them, and that Mary and the rest of Jesus' family were not initially supportive of his ministry. It would be a cultural tragedy if we were to stop observing the magic of Christmas which has inspired so much of our greatest art and music. We ought to be able to rejoice in this heritage as a poetic way of affirming the significance of Jesus, but to take it literally is to misunderstand the nature of Jewish Midrash. As G.B. Caird says in the commentary of Luke's Gospel, 'we do Luke a grave injustice if we suppose that when he wrote in an elevated and imaginative style, he was naïve enough to take his own poetry with pedantic literalness'.

Belief in the divinity of Jesus has nothing whatever to do with accepting or rejecting the virgin birth. Christian tradition has always refused to equate the story with Graeco-Roman legends of male gods consorting with human females. And in our contemporary world it is probably the case that the firmest believers in the virgin birth of Christ are Muslims, who see the story as a decisive ground for rejecting belief in Jesus' divinity.

## Some Believable Understandings of the Incarnation of God in Christ.

The classic Christian belief is that while Jesus was completely human, he was also divine. Taken literally this is very difficult to believe in. For more than five hundred years the best theologians of the ancient world tried and failed to *explain* the sense in which they held the two beliefs together and for the past two hundred years modern theology has taken up the challenge again. The nearest historic orthodoxy came to a consensus is only intelligible in terms of the Greek philosophical understanding of substance (*ousia*). If by 'substance' we mean a metaphysical non-empirical essence then perhaps it can make sense to say that Jesus and God were of one *ousia* with each other. Empirically the classic concept of God is of an infinite, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, impassible, ultimate reality, while to be human is to be finite, spatially located, with limited power and knowledge and necessarily vulnerable to suffering. Every attempt both in the patristic period and in modern times to *explain* how the person of Jesus possessed both a divine and a human nature has been declared heretical and the only formulations accepted as orthodox have simply affirmed the paradox.

To resolve this issue John Hick and Maurice Wiles argued that it was a mistake to think of the language of incarnation as making a testable propositional statement, but instead the language should be seen as mythological, metaphorical, poetic or symbolic. A metaphorical statement can be true in a quite different way from the way propositional statements are. Over the past two hundred years liberal theologians have sought to express an understanding of the divinity of Christ which harmonises with a real acceptance of his humanity but which does not involve a literal identification of Christ with God.

One believable starting point is the historical claim of the first Christians that through Jesus they had become closer to God. It is a fact of human religious experiencing that in the presence of holy people others become aware of God through them. The more holy the other is, the more likely it is that their holiness will reveal God to us. Hastings Rashdall suggested that in Jesus this quality we partially sense in all human beings was present to the  $n^{\text{th}}$  degree. Certainly as a pragmatic truth of history no other life has been anything like as effective in bringing people to God. Jesus really has revealed God to humankind. Understood this way it can truly be believed that God was really present in Christ and yet at the same time it also remains true that Jesus was fully human.

It is also possible to associate belief in the divinity of Jesus with the belief that through the way Jesus lived he truly disclosed God's loving nature. We know that the heart of Jesus' teaching was the belief that God is best pictured as like a loving father always ready to forgive and accept his prodigal children. We know that this was a distinctive element of Jesus' teaching because almost every dispute with the religious authorities of his day hinged on Jesus' teaching about the forgiveness of sins. Jesus literally died for the forgiveness of sins because that this was the issue on which he fell foul of the religious authorities of his day who put him to death. On this view Jesus did not die to placate the wrath of his heavenly father as Calvin Luther and Aquinas taught but rather he died in faithfulness to the good news he proclaimed of God's limitless forgiveness. Another way of seeing significance in Jesus' death which has become increasingly popular is that the cross is a vivid example of the way God associates himself with human suffering. The idea is that God was 'wholly present' in Jesus' suffering on the cross and that this illustrates the way in which God always shares in and is present in the darkest afflictions of humanity. This understanding of the cross was described in the 1995 Church of England Doctrine Commission report on *The Mystery of Salvation* as the 'only ultimately satisfactory response to evil' and most contemporary Christians think this is what Christianity is all about.

On this basis I would argue that a believable understanding of the incarnation of God in Christ would see the doctrine as a true metaphor. Jesus truly 'embodied' in his life and in his death the love of God towards us. I think it was a great mistake that John Hick and others originally used the word 'myth' to describe this position. A myth is not true, but a metaphor can be. It is good that Hick has subsequently seen that point. Other ways of thinking about the incarnation should include Schleiermacher's suggestion that because Jesus' awareness of God was so strong that it determined his every thought and action, we see God in Christ. Jesus' 'consciousness of God' became a 'true existence of God in him'. We may also think of D.M. Baillie's 'paradox of grace'. The more holy the saint is, the more the saint affirms that it was not his (or her) own action but the grace of God working in them. In the case of Jesus the paradox of grace reached its ultimate expression. The paradox is however that the more fully the saint aligns themselves to God's grace so the more fully alive and true to themselves they become. So Jesus was fully human and yet the outward expression of the invisible God.

Thinking back to the earliest Christianity we may note that the Gospel with the 'highest' Christology, that of John, initially used the terminology of the *logos* to express the working of God in Christ. But the expression *logos* in Stoic philosophy refers to a spark of the divine in all human beings. It is a universal divine presence. So for John's Gospel Jesus was the fullest expression of 'that light which enlightens everyone who comes into the world'. But to accept the *logos* doctrine is also to accept that God is at work in other human beings and not only in the historical Jesus. Hence Archbishop Temple argued that:

*All that is noble in the non-Christian systems of thought, or conduct or worship is the work of Christ upon them and within them. By the Word of God - that is*



*to say by Christ - Isaiah, and Plato, and Zoroaster, and Buddha, and Confucius conceived and uttered such truths as they declared. There is only one divine light; and everyman in his measure is enlightened by it.*

This comment highlights one of the greatest strengths of what I see as this family of incarnational theories. This strength is that it places the incarnation of God in Christ as different in degree, but not in kind, to the indwelling of God in other human beings. As such Jesus truly reveals God to us in the language of his human life. In Christ we can truly see God, but not in such a way as prevents us from seeing the universality of God's loving outreach and not in such a way as prevents our real recognition of Jesus' full humanity alongside us. These ways of thinking about God in Christ are also intelligible and hence believable ways of thinking.

## Why mainstream Christianity now rejects belief in hell

The most incredible of all traditional Christian beliefs is the idea of everlasting torment. Until recently I would have said most Christians had stopped believing in this, but apparently this is not so. In 1981 the University and Colleges Christian Fellowship which formerly had made no explicit mention of hell *introduced* an affirmation concerning hell into its doctrinal basis. Since 1995 all officers of University Christian Unions, are required to affirm believe that 'the Lord Jesus will return in person, to judge everyone, to execute God's just condemnation on those who have not repented and to receive the redeemed into eternal glory'. In the year 2000 a report of the Evangelical Alliance rejected both universalism and 'mere annihilation at death' and affirmed the reality of hell. According to the Evangelical Alliance 'As well as separation from God, hell involves severe punishment... both physical and psychological' and will be 'conscious experience of rejection and torment'.

Fortunately I think this report is a last ditch attempt to revive one of the most appalling blots on Christian thinking. For to believe that God would create a world in which the vast majority of humanity were doomed to everlasting torment would seem a complete repudiation of Jesus' central teaching of the love of God. We have already seen that the aspect of Jesus' teaching which we can be most confident really goes back to the historical Jesus is his distinctive teaching of the love and forgiveness of God as heavenly Father. It is in the light of this that we should read his parables of Dives and Lazarus and of the Sheep and the Goats. Both of these parables assume an eschatological background and use traditional hell imagery in a straightforward way. But the point of both stories is that Jesus wanted to teach that it is wrong for us to selfishly enjoy the good things of life while ignoring the sufferings of others. Since Jesus urged his disciples to pray that God's will would be done *on earth as it is in heaven* it is seems inconceivable that he was wanting to teach that the divisions which he found intolerable on earth would exist for ever in the life beyond, albeit with reversal of positions.

The Church of England has never officially taught belief in hell since when the 42 articles of religion were drawn up belief in hell was one of three rejected, which is why the Anglican Church ended up with 39 articles. For this reason the legal right of Anglican clergy not to believe in hell was upheld by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in 1864 and hell was finally repudiated by the doctrine Commission as incompatible with belief in the love of God in their report *The Mystery of Salvation* in 1995. In reality I think this is also true of much Roman Catholic thought today though that church finds it particularly hard to explicitly repudiate ideas which have once been accepted and sporadic references to hell are occasionally made by church leaders. The latest Catholic Catechism teaches 'the sad and lamentable reality of eternal death also called hell'. However this assertion is at once qualified by the claim that 'it is also true that God desires all men to be saved' and 'for God all things are possible'. Consequently the Catechism concludes: 'At the end of time the Kingdom of God will come in its fullness... and God will be all in all.' A similar situation occurs in Archbishop Carey's *Letters to the Future*. He also speaks of hell but immediately follows this with talk of the wideness of God's mercy which will embrace all humanity, so that in the end God will be all in all.

The response of the churches to the death of Princess Diana provides the clearest picture of what Christians today really believe about sin and salvation. From the perspective of traditional Christian teaching she was a married woman who had separated from her husband and was 'living in sin' with another man. But apart from two fundamentalist Sunday School teachers who attracted great press opprobrium, no church leaders spoke of her as a sinner. Instead she became a contemporary icon of the Virgin, Mother, and Martyr archetypes. She had been the virgin bride of the Prince of Wales, then the Mother of a future king and finally she had been martyred by the wicked press. At her funeral Archbishop Carey prayed for her Muslim lover Dodi al-Fayed 'in certain hope of resurrection to eternal life'. This was in spite of the fact that Dodi al-Fayed manifestly embraced neither Christian belief nor Christian morality. As for Diana herself, Cardinal Hume made it clear that she was on route for heaven where 'God locks us for ever into that endless now of God's ecstatic love.'

The clearest statement of universal hope in the main stream of Christian thinking is Pope John-Paul II's encyclical on the Redeemer of Humanity in which he proclaimed that 'every human person without any exception whatever has been redeemed by Christ because Christ is in a way united to the human person - every person without exception even if the individual may not realise this fact.'

## A believable Christian ethic

It is very puzzling that today there appears to be a strong revival among evangelical Christians of the tradition of seeking to base morality simply on the teaching of the scriptures. This is very much against the dominant tradition within Anglican ethical thinking which has sought to approach ethical questions from an empirical perspective. The definitive presentation of this were the fifteen *Sermons*

preached by Joseph Butler in 1726. Butler's position is sometimes described as 'consequentialist' in that he held that whether an action is right or wrong depends on what the consequences of the action are. In making this judgement one must weight up the facts of the human situation for 'nothing can be more useful than to see things as they really are'. Butler was one of the first to state clearly just why ethical problems cannot be settled by simple appeal to Biblical authority:

The Epistles in the New Testament have all of them a particular reference to the condition and usages of the Christian world at the time they were written. Therefore as they cannot be thoroughly understood, unless that condition and those usages are known and attended to so further though they be known, yet if they be discontinued or changed exhortations, precepts and illustrations of things, which refer to such circumstances now ceased or altered, cannot at this time be urged in that manner, and with that force which they were to the primitive Christians.

It is interesting that as early as 1726 Butler argued that the human situation had changed too much from that of the first century for us simply to apply New Testament ethics to our own situation. Yet the world has changed far more between 1726 and today than between the time of Butler and that of the first century. Hence the truth of his observation is greatly enhanced for us at the present time. In this context it is really extraordinary that some evangelicals can describe the Bible as the 'makers instructions' as to how we should live now.

Butler suggested an alternative way of understanding how belief in a good Creator should effect our behaviour. He argued that if we want to know what kind of behaviour leads to human well-being and the well-being of society we should observe what kinds of behaviour as a matter of fact leads to human fulfilment and happiness. Butler believed that in doing this we should look not to Biblical laws but to the principles which Jesus taught should underlie such laws. Butler noted that Jesus' summary of the law was that to love God and to love your neighbour as yourself was the basis of all the law and the prophets. He also felt that Jesus' Golden Rule of always treating others as you would like them to treat you was the best guide to ethical behaviour.

Butler's sermons were immensely influential within the Anglican tradition because for over a hundred and fifty years virtually all Anglican ordinands were required to study them. Butler's empiricism was at its most influential in the thinking of the Church of England Council for Moral Welfare which subsequently became the Board for Social Responsibility. In all their reports they took especial care to be thoroughly informed of the empirical facts and of the known consequences of the existing prohibitions. These Church reports had an enormous influence on the so-called 'permissive legislation' of the 1960s which followed very closely their recommendations. Thus the Church's report *The Problem of Homosexuality* of 1954 foreshadowed the decriminalisation of homosexual behaviour in 1967. Likewise the report *Abortion: an Ethical Discussion* published in 1965 paved the way for the legislation of 1967, just as the report *Putting Asunder* of 1966 recommended a Divorce

Law for contemporary society almost identical to that instantiated in the Divorce Reform Act of 1969.

It is tragedy that more recently instead of being in the van of moral reform as the Church was forty years ago the Church is now increasingly at odds with the ethics of a modern civilised society through seeking to re-impose biblical taboos from a very different age. I suggest that it would be far better if we could return to a believable Christian ethics. I suggest that a believable ethic would be one which once more united the principle of accepting the findings of scientific empirical research into the consequences of human behaviour with the principle taught by Jesus of loving one's neighbour as oneself and always treating others as you wish them to treat you.

# A Christianity that can be believed in

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