

Reproduced by kind permission of The Christadelphian Magazine & Publishing Association, Birmingham, UK. All rights reserved.

This Christadelphian publication is no longer in print.

Please read all literature alongside your bible, so that you can see the accuracy and truth of the message for yourself

This Pamphlet reproduces the second of a course of twelve addresses arranged for the first Sunday of each month during 1949, by the

CHRISTADELPHIAN (CENTRAL) ECCLESIA,
In the
Midland Institute, Birmingham

To show that it is not only possible but reasonable to believe those foundation truths of Christianity upon which doubt has been cast by some modern writers.

Dare we believe?

THE SCIENTIFIC OUTLOOK AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

TWO brief explanations must be made at the outset: this essay will not be burdened with quotations from men of science ; and it will not, more than is absolutely necessary, be written in technical language. The first is necessary so as to make the treatment as readable as possible; and the second so as to make the approach accessible to those who are not scientists themselves but have been influenced by discussions of scientific matters. Nevertheless, every attempt will be made to be fair, to the views with which the writer disagrees, and to state scientific matters with accuracy.

The scientific outlook, then, takes its stand upon two - basic principles: -

- (1) The universe is rational: that is, events are not arbitrary and unpredictable, but behave in such a way that exactly the same causes will always produce exactly the same effects.
- (2) Facts must precede theories: we must examine, by observation and experiment, how things do behave in fact before trying to draw conclusions from them. Our conclusions must then be tested against further facts, and may be gradually broadened and deepened until they approach nearer and nearer to fundamental truth. This is known as the method of induction.

The wide popularity and remarkable achievements of the natural sciences during the last century has so concentrated attention upon them, that it is usual to think of the scientific outlook as limited

to these pursuits. Thus an astronomer is acknowledged to be a scientist, and so are physicists and biologists; and so, though less popularly because their achievements are not so conspicuously in the public eye, are chemists and geologists. Psychology has found its place in the pantheon, more often, perhaps, by the resourcefulness of its apostles than by their actual achievements; but political science is a borderline case, and logic or even mathematics are hardly regarded as qualifying, in the popular mind, for admission. It is unusual to speak of history as a science, and practically unprecedented to think of theology in that light.

But the distinction is quite artificial. The astronomer looks at stars and seeks to understand the universe of worlds. The physicist looks at matter and radiations, and seeks for the fundamental structures which can be built up into such complexities. The biologist looks at the varied forms of life, and looks for the pattern to which life conforms. But the mathematician and the logician are scientists too, though they alone make no experiments, and they alone successfully employ deduction without exciting complaint. For the one works with numbers and quantity, and proposes true relationships to which they will conform; and the other works with thought processes, and tells us what is valid thinking and what is not.

The historian and the theologian are scientists, too. The former takes the facts of human behaviour in the past, and seeks to trace the reasons which provoked it, and the lessons which arise from it; while the latter may start also from such historical facts as seem to demand a religious explanation, or from attributes of the human mind which suggest affinities with a Power beyond, or from records which make superhuman claims for themselves and demand investigation.

All these professions require the scientific outlook, and in all the outlook may be forsaken, its principles forgotten or its bounds exceeded. This brings us very close to our topic, for the supposed conflict between the scientific outlook and the Christian faith can only arise from the opinion of certain men of science that the Christian faith will not withstand scientific examination; while the Christian's defence must be that such strictures can only arise from a mistake in application of the scientific approach. Let us be under no delusion; the Christian must not say that science should mind its own business, and leave the question of faith to the theologian, for if he does he is playing into the hands of his adversaries, and suggesting to the observer that he knows the weakness of his position.

This is a case, therefore, where certain exponents of the science of theology, the orthodox Christians, are at variance with some other scientists, and we must first ask who these others are. Have all the other sciences set their face against the Christian faith, or is it only that some scientists believe it to be scientifically unsound? We must answer honestly and with care, because it is obviously a much more formidable position if the Christian stands alone against a united body of all other scientists, than if only some scientists, but not others, oppose him.

Thus far the answer is not difficult to give. There are professing Christians in every branch of science; no mathematician or logician would suggest that there was anything in his principles which ruled out Christianity, whatever his own religious opinions might be; certainly not every astronomer or physicist has abandoned his Christian profession, as Kelvin, Maxwell and Newton of earlier generations, and Sir Edmund Whittaker of this, bear witness. There are chemists who profess Christianity, such as Sherwood-Taylor, and competent geologists and biologists, such as Merson-Davies and Dewar. There are plenty of historians, and, of course, theologians innumerable.

Science as a whole, therefore, has not abandoned the Christian faith. There are probably more who reject among biologists than there are among astronomers, but the general opinion among most

active scientists would almost certainly be, not that they thought science inconsistent with Christianity, but that they thought it much more interesting, and were too busy to be bothered.

The wide diversity of opinion among scientists, therefore, suggests that the objections to the faith are not always thought to be absolutely demanded by scientific principles, though there are scientists who suppose this to be the case. What are the aspects of Christianity which are said by these to be offensive, and on what grounds are they rejected?

Christianity, as it is contained in the Bible and expressed, for example, in the Apostles' Creed, is shot through and through with the supernatural, and we can pick out six articles from that confession of faith. In it, the Christian affirms his belief: -

- (1) In one God, the Father, Creator of heaven and earth;
- (2) In Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord;
- (3) In the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ;
- (4) In his resurrection from the dead, and his ascension to heaven;
- (5) In his impending return to the earth;
- (6) In the judgment, at that time, of living and dead.

Concerning these and other miracles contained in the Christian records, our opponents would say

- (1) If there be a God, He is unknowable. If there were a creation, no scientist witnessed it, and the evidence available suggests that the origin of the world as we know it was quite different.
- (2) Jesus as a historical person is undeniable, but there is no acceptable ground for regarding him as essentially different from other men.
- (3) The Virgin Birth could not have occurred.
- (4) The Resurrection could not have occurred, and the Ascension is meaningless.
- (5) The Return to the Earth is impossible in itself; and ruled out by the fact that the Resurrection did not occur.
- (6) There can thus, in the nature of the case, be no Judgment, even were the resurrection of other dead conceivable, which it is not.

With the possible exception of the first sentence in this comprehensive indictment, that is the case against traditional Christianity which is put forward in the Bishop of Birmingham's *The Rise of Christianity*, and if it represents a more extreme form of unbelief than is usually found among non-Christian critics, at least we may feel sure that, if any answer to it is possible, there will be no need to fear any other charges which might be brought.

But we are obviously entitled to ask upon what scientific principle these objections are made. If we refer back to our earliest statement about the scientific outlook, we shall find the two principles to be

- (a) That the universe is rational, and,
- (b) That our conclusions should be based upon ascertained facts.

We are to suppose that the objections arise from these principles. We can state the objections thus:

- (a) Since the universe is rational, and every event has an adequate cause, anything which would have interfered with the ordinary orderly course of nature is intolerable, so that a miracle is impossible. In this way all the articles of faith except the first are eliminated, and the first

must be so modified that any creation ascribed to - God is a "creation by natural causes". If the active intervention of God in the world were to be permitted, its orderliness would dissolve into chaos.

- (b) Since our conclusions must be based upon ascertained facts, we have no ground for believing in the first four articles, which none of us has witnessed, and no conceivable ground for believing in the last two, which by their own definition have not yet occurred. Moreover, all our experience of facts proves the contrary. Such things as we have discovered about the development of the world suggest gradual development, not special creation, and such things as we know about the fate of the world and the universe make eternal inheritance of either an impossibility, since the whole cosmos is slowly dissolving into infinite cold and death. Since we know nothing, of God as a Being at all, it is mere superstition to believe in His fatherhood, and biological experience shows infallibly that an unmated birth is next to impossible, while if it occurred, the offspring would certainly be a female. Resurrections of bodies have not been reliably observed, and are out of accord with the irreversible processes of dissolution.

Accepting the first, principle, as we do, and agreeing that the Universe is rational, we must nevertheless insist that there is nothing in this to rule out any of the six articles. For, if God does exist, Christians have always known that the orderliness of the created universe would follow, together with the miracles they accept. He is called the First Cause, the Prime Mover, the Mover-not-Moved. If we grant His existence, then evidently He might have caused the creation of the world, however it were brought about. He might have begotten Jesus Christ, and might have caused him to rise from the dead and ascend to His right hand. He might empower him to return to the earth and accomplish resurrection and judgment.

Nothing in this outline proves that He would do any of those things, but it at least indicates that He might. That such activities would have interfered with the ordinary course of nature can be answered in two ways first, it by no means follows that they invariably would, for since God Himself would then be the Author of "Nature", its principles would be of His making, and would be so suited to His purposes in general that their very orderliness would be a testimony to His design; second, it has always been the Christian view that miracles will be rare. They will happen only when a special purpose is to be served by them which is not covered by the normal uniformity. In that case the anticipated chaos would not arise; men and women would continue, in the main, to live in confidence that what happened under one set of circumstances yesterday will happen again under those circumstances today; and they would view the sudden occurrence of the unexpected, not as an indication that Nature had taken leave of its senses, but as a demonstration that God was intervening to provide, for a special purpose, a special demonstration of His powers.

There is nothing, for example, in the Christian doctrine of the Virgin Birth to suggest that it would be of frequent occurrence. On the contrary, there is everything to demand that it never occurred before the birth of Christ, and will never occur again. Christian scientists are as satisfied that the observations and experiments they make are rational as are those who reject their creed. What the Christian does insist upon is that to say "[All things continue as they were - from the beginning of the creation](#)" is short-sighted. There have, in his view, been rare but important events outside the experience of scientific men before, and there will be such events again. When that has occurred or shall occur, however, it is not by caprice, but because circumstances in which God is purposively active are not the same as those in which He merely maintains the normal order. Cause and effect still operate, but the causes are different and higher.

So far, therefore, we have shown that the scientific outlook cannot reasonably be said to conflict with the Christian faith. But with the second principle the appearance is at first different. If our conclusions must be based upon ascertained facts, are we entitled to believe in God, whom no man hath seen nor can see? The atheist would say that we are not. But if we say in reply that we cannot reasonably deny His existence either, since, short of omniscience on our part, we have not the experience which justifies that claim, the atheist is rightly speechless, but the agnostic takes up the challenge and agrees with us. He adds, however, that if we have no proof either way, the elaborate fabric of the Christian faith is baseless if it be not false, and no reasonable mind would put its trust in such a thing.

This would be true if there were no proof. But it is, unhappily, usually coupled with the assumption that there can be none. That is, agnosticism is, for all essential purposes, identical with atheism in that, while its exponents do not deny God's possible existence, they claim that no reasonable proof of it is possible. By the same token, no reasonable proof is said to be possible for the divinity of Jesus Christ, his birth of the Virgin, or his resurrection, and no reasonable anticipation of the two future events of which we have spoken.

But such an attitude is quite irrational. For a truly scientific outlook would not begin by assuming that the thing to be considered could not be the case, and would not, therefore, begin the consideration of God's possible existence by assuming that no evidence in its favour can be forthcoming. Moreover, there are certain gaps in the hypotheses of even the most optimistic rationalist for which, as he must admit, the Christian has some explanation, whether it commends itself to him or not. Thus, the Christian knows why there is a universe at all because God wills it : while the agnostic does not. The Christian knows that, from whatever primeval condition the present order of things came into being, it did so because God determined that it should: the agnostic can only guess, and very unfruitfully guess, why any primitive uniformity should have begun to change. The Christian knows that, when life came into existence upon the earth, it was because the Creator willed that it should: the agnostic can only hope that someday there will be a demonstration of spontaneous generation. The Christian knows that the mind of man almost instinctively reaches after God, because God exists and man has been implanted with that capacity: the agnostic can Only choose those anthropological theories which are most favourable to his opinion, and assume that the belief in God is a rationalization of man's primitive fears and hopes in the face of the unknown. The Christian knows why man alone is disfigured by what he still calls sin, while the agnostic can only wrestle with psychological theories which quite fail to bridge the gap between the natural habits of the beasts, and the refined corruption of man.

It might be urged that every one of the Christian's explanations is arbitrary, without solid basis in ascertained fact but it could at least be said in return that in this respect it is in no worse case than its adversaries ; and the Christian might then claim that, by the well-worn principle known as Ockham's Razor, his hypothesis, as far the simplest of the possible ones, should be preferred. For on all counts the theistic view of the universe is simpler and more comprehensive, with the fewest assumptions and the widest range, of the available explanations. The agnostic is compelled to introduce his revealing expression, "We may well suppose ", time after time in order to disguise the fact that his explanation is no explanation: that the wide gaps in his hypotheses are unbridged and likely to remain so. The Christian makes his one grand assumption (if we must have it so) that a purposive God exists, and finds a perfectly satisfactory explanation within that framework.

But this is not the end of the matter. What we temporarily granted is not actually the case; the Christian does not concede that the existence of God is a mere assumption, for he puts forth proofs. He takes acceptable facts, and works back from them, inductively after the scientific fashion, to a

comprehensive doctrine which includes the essentials of them all and provides their explanation. And that doctrine is the doctrine of the existence of God.

The classical proof of the existence of God from the necessity of a "First Mover " has not been weakened by more recent investigations. If we hold fast to the first principle of the scientific outlook, and still agree that each event has a sufficient cause, then we must look back upon each chain of events from the one we observe ourselves to the earlier which caused it, the earlier yet which caused those, and inexorably back to the first sufficient cause of all. It is a strange delusion that, if a thing happened long enough ago, for all practical purposes it did not happen at all: yet that is the delusion upon which they rely who say that the doctrine of evolution, which has made changes so gradual, and intermediate causes so many, relegates so far back the first origins of the ordered universe and of life that they may well have originated then under conditions which we know to be inconceivable now. Even were the full doctrine of evolution otherwise satisfactory, the logical basis of such a conclusion is hard to discover, and the recent conviction of the physical scientists that in many respects the universe must be regarded as running down, its heat dissipating and its radioactive elements disintegrating, drives us still more certainly to the conclusion that what can run down must needs have been wound up.

It is difficult to believe that this is not recognized by more than are willing to admit it, but a singular perversity leads unbelievers to concentrate now, not upon the problem for itself of how the universe came to be in its primitive condition, but upon the problem for believers of their expectation for the future in view of the manifest running down. Surely a little reflection shows that the solution of the one problem is the solution of the other, and that belief in God is that solution? If the winding-up be thus explained (and it cannot be otherwise explained) then there is no difficulty in the recognition that what God has accomplished once He may accomplish again, or that what He has created, He is able also to preserve against whatever decay might come to it if He were to neglect it.

Another classical proof, that from Design, has not been weakened by recent discoveries, though the contempt with which Paley's watch-analogy is sometimes treated now suggests a common opinion that it has. The substance of the argument is that what has been evidently designed presupposes a designer, so that if we are prepared to dismiss the idea that a watch might have created itself, we should be prepared to do the same for the possibility that a rose or a man came into being by chance. Once again, the popular conception of the doctrine of evolution is answerable for the logical and scientific fallacies involved in the other view, though now it is not the length of the process which is in view, but its supposed gradualness. If a flower or an animal can be supposed to come to its present form by sufficiently gradual steps, it is not difficult to blind ourselves to the thought that, even so, developing complexity could not have occurred without guidance, that kind of guidance which requires God for its explanation.

Even, therefore, if we were obliged to regard the large-scale evolutionary explanation as compelling, we should still have to demand, with the creative evolutionists, that the development from one-celled organisms to man must have been controlled from above.

An argument which has only gathered force during recent decades, arises from a view of anthropology which has outmoded Frazer's Golden Bough, and followed Schmidt and Stephen Langdon into the recognition that, the further back we may go into the historical perception of God, the more He is seen as a unity: so that all the natural explanations of God's present position, based upon the assumption that primitive worship of many gods of nature gradually purified itself into monotheism, have to be revised in favour of the recognition that man has corrupted what once was pure. To explain that primeval purity of the belief in God is beyond the wit of unbelief, but the

simple statement that a revealing God does exist, and was known for what He is at the time of the Fall, covers the case completely as no other explanation can.

Valid reasons for believing in God, based upon fact and following the scientific method, can be multiplied still, but there is surely sufficient here to vindicate the first of the six articles in which we summarized the principal points of the Christian faith. It is necessary to step away from the temptation to deal with other attractive demonstrations to the same effect, and move to the next three articles, which should be taken together.

These rest upon the fourth, that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and perhaps the best preparation for appreciating the force of the historical argument that he did so, is to read the contention that he did not in Dr. Barnes's *The Rise of Christianity*. For this disbeliever in miracles denies the supernatural nature of the birth of Jesus, repudiates his miraculous deeds, refuses to accept his bodily resurrection, and has no good word for the events of Pentecost. He concludes that the disciples became possessed of the idea that Jesus, though dead, was in some manner present with them, and that their simple declaration, "[Jesus is risen!](#)" only later—much later—came to have any connection with the supposed resurrection of his body from the tomb. He then concludes that the spread of Christianity is "the supreme miracle of history", the reason for whose survival "is hidden from us".

But this pathetic wreck of faith, in one whose book is a pitiful attempt to concede all to the unbelievers among scientists that they might care to demand and still preserve the name of the faith intact, is a very travesty of the scientific method. Miracles are denied, but the survival of Christianity is the supreme miracle- of history. We are in the dark as to how the miracle occurred, but not a moment's serious consideration has been given to the explanation which is offered in the records.

And this explanation is the only one. We need to explain at least these significant factors in the early spread of Christianity:

- (1) How it came about that the disillusioned men who scattered at his death came to be attempting to spread the Gospel at all. For it is plain that they neither expected nor received personal gain from their work.
- (2) How it came about that they preached, above all things, to Gentiles at a very early stage in their ministry. For it would not have occurred to Jewish patriots, which the disciples were, to do this without higher direction of a very compelling kind.
- (3) Why it was that the Jews spread abroad the story that the body had been stolen by the disciples from the tomb. For they did spread this story, and it was current among them both in the middle of the second century and at the beginning of the third.

Without going into details which would greatly expand this essay, it can be said at once, that almost all controversialists who take the subject seriously recognize, that there must have been an empty tomb which was the cause of perplexity to the enemies of the Gospel, and of great joy to its friends. All alternative theories for its emptiness, such as that Jesus had not truly died upon the cross, or that the women had made a mistake about the right tomb to visit, or the ancient Jewish doctrine that the disciples had stolen the body, are either utterly unlikely in themselves, or altogether insufficient to account for the results which followed—or generally both. We are left with the only reasonable hypothesis, that the tomb was empty for the reason which the disciples proclaimed: that Jesus had risen. The same explanation, alone, accounts for the ministry to Gentiles, which is contained as a commandment of Jesus in the first three Gospels, and which could have been brought about by nothing less than his resurrection to show his authority to make the demand. And the same explanation, alone, accounts for what the disciples did, and what they accomplished by their work.

The Resurrection being established, the Sonship of God goes with it, for One who had foretold his own resurrection in conjunction with that claim to Sonship could not undergo the one without being vindicated as to the other. And the Virgin Birth stands as the most likely and most appropriate means whereby this Sonship would come about. It is possible in itself, if you believe in God at all, and utterly congruous with His determination to save the world by His own intimate participation in the condemnation of sin and the demonstration of the way of righteousness. There remain, then, only the last two, the yet future, articles to be accepted or rejected, that Jesus will return from heaven to the earth, and will then accomplish the resurrection of those who have known his will.

We can pause to note the fatuity of the observation which The Rise of Christianity brings to bear upon the question of Jesus being in heaven at all. Having learned that the earth is roughly spherical in shape, the author considers that the author of Acts must have held a different view, "naively pre-Copernican", if he thinks that Jesus would have to go upwards to reach heaven. It seems not to have occurred to him that to leave the surface of the earth at all one would have to go upwards in the first instance whatever happened afterwards, and that even a tangential departure would seem "69up" to those gazing from the earth. But this is a typical example of the folly into which men are led when they are determined that the wisdom of this age shall be greater than that of the word of God.

Having satisfied ourselves that the Resurrection did occur, there is no ground for doubting that the sojourn with God developed from it, and since the Son of God promised that he would come to do the thing we have named, we are merely sullen if we stop short of a full recognition that what he has promised, he is able also to perform.

We can sum up briefly:

- (1) The scientific outlook believes that the universe makes sense, and that effect demands cause. It insists that conclusions shall be based upon facts, and follow reasonably from them.
- (2) Such an outlook can be practised by men of all interests, not only in the "natural sciences", but also in logic, history and theology.
- (3) The supposed conflict between Christianity and the scientific outlook must arise from the opinion that Christianity cannot withstand scientific examination, or is at variance with the conclusions of the other sciences.
- (4) But this is not the opinion of all scientific men, or even of all scientists within a narrow subdivision of the subject. There is some case, therefore, against believing the conflict to be inevitable.
- (5) Such objection as remains is centred upon the miraculous aspects of the Gospel, notably the birth of Jesus and his resurrection, and the miraculous future events which are predicated of him.
- (6) It is urged that miracles conflict with the "cause and effect" law, and belief in God at all with our dependence upon facts for our theories.
- (7) But, if God does exist, He is the ideal foundation for the former law, and, though he may normally not choose to vary the normal course of nature, His miracles, when they were wrought, would also be in the course of cause, and effect, even though the particular cause is one which we infrequently see in operation. The expected chaos in scientific investigations would not, therefore, arise at all.
- (8) Nor is it true that the Christian faith ignores ascertained facts in reaching its conclusions. The accusation is only levelled at all by those who are determined to leave God out as a possible explanation; while, in fact, there are countless facts which demand this explanation, and can be satisfied by no other. Among them are
 - (a) The necessity for a first Mover, a "winder-up" of the universe

- (b) The argument from design: complicated functional structures could not originate by chance
- (c) The argument from primitive monotheism;
- (d) The origin of life

and there are many others. The complete effect is compelling for a belief in a purposive God.

- (9) A similarly scientific method is used to establish the truth of the Resurrection of Jesus, and so, having established his authority, of his Sonship and Virgin Birth, and his future Return to judge the living and dead.

This development is itself, as the writer believes, scientific and logical. It sets the Christian faith in an unassailable position of authority. But in the nature of the case it is the briefest of summaries, designed only to set the stage for the detailed developments which the later addresses will supply. Nevertheless, the writer is confident that, if it has been attended with care, it will ensure the most respectful attention to what will follow, and, having cleared fruitful ground of its encumbrances of tares and thorns, prepare the way for the reception of the Seed of the Kingdom, so that it may bring forth an hundredfold.

A. D. NORRIS

DARE WE BELIEVE?

Twelve addresses designed for those who feel that there is a conflict between modern knowledge and religious belief.

- The Need For Belief
- The Scientific Outlook and the Christian Faith
- Christianity and Evolution
- Miracles
- Biblical Criticism
- Revelation and Reason
- The Meaning of Inspiration
- The Virgin Birth and Divine Sonship
- Sacrifice and the Blood of Christ
- Physical Resurrection
- The Exclusive Element in Christianity