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INTERVIEW

An interview with Keith Ward

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Abstract

This article is part of *Religious Studies*' new initiative to publish a series of interviews with distinguished philosophers of religion. Each interview explores the personal and academic background of the interviewee and discusses their core philosophical views. The aim is to inspire students and scholars and to provide an overview of some of the most important works developed by contemporary philosophers of religion. In this interview, Tyler Dalton McNabb interviews Keith Ward, covering such topics as his upbringing, his first years of teaching, his view on natural theology, and his view on special revelation in the world religions.

How did you get into philosophy and why did you become a philosopher/theologian?

I was studying music at Cardiff University, and the course had a module in philosophy. I discovered I could write better than I could sing, and I changed my course. I was hooked. I went to Oxford to study with Gilbert Ryle, and got a job as a Lecturer in Logic at Glasgow University (there were jobs teaching philosophy in those days).

How have your views changed from when you first started out?

I began with a love of Plato, then I got immersed in the British Empiricists (Locke, Berkeley, and Hume), and turned into an Idealist, thinking that conscious experiences are the ineliminable foundations of knowledge. This led me to think of the possibility of one supreme consciousness as the basis of reality. To the surprise of my colleagues, it was philosophy that led me to God. I later got ordained as an Anglican minister while continuing to be a lecturer in philosophy at King's College, London University. That, I suppose, was quite a change.

What advice would you give to your younger self?

Try to do what interests you most, and what you are good at. I have been immensely lucky to be able to do this.

What advice would you give to philosophers and philosophical theologians today? Is there some work you would tell them to read?

Read widely and discuss interminably. Be sceptical of your own certainties, yet always seek for the 'transcendentals' – truth, beauty, and goodness.

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The first philosophical book I read was Plato's 'Republic', and I still think that this is one of the best introductions to philosophy. And don't worry about being a professional philosopher. Many of the great philosophers of the past were not.

What's the biggest difference between doing philosophy and theology when you first started out and doing it in the 2020s?

There are many ways of doing philosophy. When I started, Wittgenstein was very influential in holding that traditional metaphysical problems were the results of mistakes about language, and such problems should be not solved, but dissolved, by closer attention to how ordinary language was used. My tutor Gilbert Ryle took a similar view, and his book *The Concept of Mind* attacked Cartesian dualism, recommending a closer study of how language about mental properties was actually used. But Ryle was also interested in the very different approach, more typical of continental Europe, of phenomenology, and seemed intrigued and amused by my stubborn defence of Bishop Berkeley.

In two main ways, philosophy has moved on since then. There arose a much greater interest in practical problems, such as those in medical ethics and issues of social justice. And advances in modern science, especially perhaps quantum physics, led to greater interest in the nature of things and the relation of consciousness to physical reality. Such matters were not in fact lacking in earlier times. Freddie Ayer, when I was at Oxford, held that reality consisted of sense-contents, while Ryle denied there were any such things as sense-contents. This sounds like metaphysics to me, but they strongly denied it. Now, however, there are unashamedly open defenders of various metaphysical views, like materialism, pan-psychism, and process philosophy. Ordinary language, like religion, is of less philosophical interest, and tends not to be the arbiter of truth.

Where philosophers are interested in religion, there are at least four different approaches often found – an 'analytic' approach, focusing on rigorous logical analyses of particular doctrines; a non-realist interpretation of religious language; a use of process thought originating with Whitehead; and a revival of Thomism. Sadly, these approaches rarely acknowledge the existence of the others. But at least they take the big questions of philosophy seriously.

Within Theology there often remains a fear of attempting grand metaphysical narratives. My predecessor in the Chair at Oxford, Maurice Wiles, even held that a Christian philosophy was impossible. I have thus, according to him, spent my academic life attempting the impossible. However, that goes, in the English-speaking world, philosophy is now a diverse and flourishing activity, and there are many issues of the relation of religions to one another and to science yet to be addressed in detail.

How many hours of reading did you do per week during the peak of your career?

I suppose about five hours a day, with as many more in just thinking.

On average how long do you think you took writing most of your articles? Books? Was there a special method for deciding which publishers and journals you would send your work to?

I just wrote down what I was thinking, as I was not sure what I was thinking until I read it. Then various people published these things – there was no system, I just responded to requests that came largely by chance or accident – too often, some might think.

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Without claiming your own work (or the Christian Scriptures), what four books best summarize your worldview and overall thought?

Plato's *Republic* and *Timaeus*, which aroused my interest in philosophy. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, which infuriated, inspired, excited, and confused to equal degrees,

Let's talk shop. What argument for God's existence do you find most convincing? Is it an argument you would give to someone who was considering moving away from atheism? If not, what argument would you give in this context?

Most basically, the argument that matter is the expression of mind, rather than the reverse. But I am impressed by the thought that there is a mathematically elegant basis of physical reality and structure, and that there is an objective moral demand and an existent intrinsic and absolute value ('the good') as components of reality. I think that sort of conceptual realism can lead to belief in God as its ontological basis.

You say that matter is an expression of the mind. Can you explain more why you think that is?

There are four main steps to such a view, all of which are contestable but in my opinion sound. First, acceptance that sense-perception is the essential basis of all human knowledge. Together with feelings and thoughts, which are only known without inference ('directly') to the subject who has them, perceptions exist, but are not publicly observable objects in public spacetime. There is an inner, non-physical, or mental dimension to reality.

Second, this phenomenal world is not only directly apprehended. Its elements are also evaluated as good, bad, or neutral. These are not all purely subjective (good or bad for me). Some elements are of intrinsic and objective value. That is, it is good that they exist simply for their own sake, not for the sake of anything else. That is the case even if many people do not value them. They ought to value them, insofar as they can. A Beethoven symphony is intrinsically good. It is better that it exists than not, even if Joe Bloggs does not like it. There is a world of objective possible values, and the best reason for their existence is simply that they are intrinsically good.

Third, the phenomenal world is teleological. Conscious agents can perceive objects and states and evaluate them. They can then act for the sake of actualizing a possible value or avoiding a possible disvalue. Their actions can be explained by discerning and assessing their purposes. In general, rational and moral action will be that which realises the richest and most intense set of values that is possible for them. Axiological explanation (in terms of conscious and purposive value-production) is the most fundamental form of explanation, and it is not reducible to any other form of explanation (for instance scientific explanation in terms of general non-purposive, non-conscious laws).

Fourth, the phenomenal world of conscious percepts, feelings, and thoughts, of existing values and purposes, must be related to the non-conscious world of physical objects in spacetime which do not have any value or purpose. There are many possible ways of trying to do this. It seems to me very difficult to suppose that a purely physical reality, being without purpose or value, would, by chance, produce a world of purposes and values. There would be no possible explanation of why it should do so. It would just have to be accepted as a random, purposeless, totally inexplicable occurrence. Whereas a phenomenal world could have an intelligible purpose in generating a physical reality whose complex, developing, and law-like structure would enable a rich set of intrinsic values to come into being.

This is not a 'proof of God', and there is much more to be said – which is partly why I have written so many books. But I think it explains why it is reasonable to think that a 'phenomenal world', or a mind-like reality, could generate a material world with a predictable and mathematically elegant structure, in order to be an expression of its nature as a conscious,

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purposive, and value-generating being. On the other hand, postulating that a blind purposeless mechanism could, without foresight or intelligence, unexpectedly produce beings which (falsely) believe themselves to be creatively free and capable of understanding and even changing nature itself, is to assert something almost infinitely improbable. It is in that sense that the opinion that matter is the expression of mind is much more likely to be correct than the opinion that mind is the expression of matter.

Is there an objection to the existence of God that gives you any pause or worry?

I have objections to many ideas of God (everybody's but mine, and mine sometimes). Mostly, of course, that any explanation of our universe which appeals to an objective value and purpose must explain the existence of suffering and evolutionary malfunction. An Idealist thought, developed from the work of Leibniz and Hegel, is that the idea of an omnipotent and omniscient God, external to the universe, should be amended. Instead, there is one cosmic Consciousness ('Absolute Spirit') which is necessarily, not just contingently, what it is. It contains all possible states of being, good and bad. From it proceeds ('fulgurate' in Leibniz) sets of actual states, which, in some possible universes, develop from simple and unconscious states by the evolution of multiple finite agencies through struggle, competition, and co-operation towards greater awareness and self-direction. Our cosmic history is the progressive self-development of Absolute Spirit, as it reconciles these agencies to itself through synergistic and dialectical interaction to a completed ideal goal of great intrinsic value. This is what is often called a panentheistic idea of God – the world is part of God, and God is the origin, the underlying teleology, and the ideal goal of the world.

This notion is too much of a 'grand narrative' for many modern philosophers, but I believe that the revolution in the sciences in the last hundred years calls for a revival of the traditional metaphysical interests that are dominant in the history of philosophy.

It may also seem that such an idea of God is too far from any sort of Christian faith. But Leibniz and Hegel were both self-proclaimed Lutherans, and the so-called classical Christian idea of God is more the child of Aristotle than of Moses or Jesus. Perhaps it would be possible to find a way in which the classical notion of an eternal, changeless, God could be combined with the more dynamic and continually creative Idealist idea. They might be different and complementary aspects of one reality. This is something I have tried to do.

Do you think there is historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus?

I think Jesus was seen by many after his physical death, and now lives in the presence of God, the Absolute Spirit. The evidence for this is not historical, in the sense of publicly available documentation. It lies in religious experience, and in cumulative considerations about the existence of God, the possibility of life after physical death, and a degree of trust in the widespread human testimony to spiritual experiences.

What do you believe about the person of Jesus of Nazareth? Do you think it falls in line with the first four ecumenical councils?

If there is an Absolute Spirit, it seems probable that it would make its nature and purpose known. One way of doing this would be to unite a human form of consciousness to the cosmic Consciousness, so that the human would have a unique awareness of God, and God would be uniquely expressed in the life and teaching of that human being. I believe that Jesus was such a person, in unique union with Spirit, who has become the channel of Spirit, as an inward power bringing forgiveness, resolution, joy, and hope to millions of humans. The first Church Councils were attempts to express this in the philosophical terms available at that time. Philosophy has changed since then, and even

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though Idealism may not be very popular now, it seems to me that it could provide a good contemporary way of seeing the importance of Jesus as what Marcus Borg has called a 'spirit person'.

Do other religious traditions have special revelation? Do you think the major religions can be rendered consistent with one another? For example, can a form of theism be rendered consistent with Buddhism? Can Christians believe Muhammad was a prophet and was given the Qur'an?

It does not seem reasonable for God to limit revelation to just one part of humanity. So, though any religion may become corrupt, there are likely to be many forms of divine self-disclosure. But there are many differences, not only between religions, but within religions. For instance, Christian Idealism will be different in many ways from Biblical literalism. Therefore, human interpretations will enter into the reception of every revelation, even or especially within as well as between religious traditions. If so, no religious view will ever be consistent with all other religious views. But one can still hold that Spirit truly encounters humans, though what is heard and interpreted will partly depend on the culture and history of the hearers. One can then say, for instance, that Muhammad was a true prophet, but not that everything he said or, more sensitively, that any interpretation of what he said was correct, and without error.

Is there another religious text (one that isn't Jewish or Christian) that you feel really attracted to? To clarify, on your view, God might speak and reveal through it, right?

The *Bhagavad Gita* (the song of the Lord) is a much-loved Hindu Scripture, and I believe that Spirit has revealed many things through it. I do not think that any literary work, even ones that have become Scripture for many, is free from error and from human limitations. So the Gita assumes some things that were widespread in Indian culture, but may be regarded as false or inadequate in many other cultures.

Examples from the Gita would include the assumption of rebirth, of the aim of the religious life to obtain liberation from rebirths in a world marked by suffering, and of a cyclical and endless process of the origin and destruction of the universe, or of many universes.

Yet even with those examples, there may be truths about a progressive destiny for human lives that extends beyond their present lives on earth, about the possibility of final liberation from suffering, and about the vastness of the universe that Western traditions mostly failed to perceive, because they saw the earth at the centre of a rather small cosmos.

What makes the Gita attractive to me, and I would have thought to religious believers in many traditions, is its emphasis on overcoming selfish desire and emotions, on seeking consciously to become one with supreme Spirit, and on obtaining human fulfilment by love of and devotion to the Spirit.

Compared to most Western traditions, there is much more teaching about meditation and renunciation, about how to attain union with Spirit and about the importance of love of Spirit, which in the Gita takes the finite form of Krishna. There is more about the nature of *Brahman*, the absolutely Real, as including the whole universe in itself, and as an Eternal and blissful reality, personal apprehension of which is to be attained through devotion, meditation, and self-discipline.

The central teaching of the Gita is that one must act in accordance with duty, but do so without being concerned about the fruits of one's action. One must learn to overcome desire for 'joy and power', and all attachment to sensory desires. In all things one must be centred on *Brahman*, the cosmic self of intelligence and bliss, of which all things are part, though it is greater than all. One can 'rest in *Brahman*', sensing the unity of all things. Yet the distinctive feature of the Gita is that one can also passionately love *Brahman* in the human form of Krishna, and know that one is loved by him.

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It seems obvious to me that these things are revealed to humans by the cosmic Spirit, and help to truly disclose its nature and purpose. This revelation is received in the context of Indian traditions of dutiful life (including the caste system), of an ascetic and world-renouncing spirituality, and of devotion to Krishna as an avatar of the Real. Thus, many of its details may be influenced by local and contextual features. But the general structure – the dependence of the cosmos on a mind-like creator, the origin of suffering in attachment to desires, the way to liberation by meditation and self-renunciation, and the final goal, possible for all, which is attainable either by realizing one's identity with Spirit, or by loving devotion to Spirit – this structure can readily be seen as a divine self-disclosure in this unique and beautiful work.

I have a special interest in Buddhism and its compatibility with theism. Can you sketch out briefly how a Buddhist of a certain type might come to embrace your version of theism? I imagine you have a special interest in the Yogācāra tradition, is that right?

I do not suppose that a Buddhist might come to embrace my version of theism. I have enough trouble trying to persuade Christians of it. Yogacara (some versions of which are often termed 'mind-only' Buddhism) sounds like a form of idealism, but it has enough internal arguments of its own about that to bother with me trying to interfere. Some Buddhists think that Yogacara is very much like Kant's idealism, but others vehemently deny this, and I think non-Buddhists should leave such arguments to them.

What I am concerned with is laying out the wide range of possibilities that exist in this area, and trying not to demonize or caricature any of these possibilities. My philosophical views lead me to look for evidence that a supreme Spirit has communicated ('revealed') something of its nature and purpose in many different cultures, certainly enough to lead people, probably after physical death, towards an ultimate apprehension of and blissful union with Spirit.

This leads me to think that knowledge of the absolute truth of the spiritual dimension during life on earth cannot be a necessary condition of attaining the final goal. If it was, the majority of humans would never attain it, and on some accounts would even be tortured in Hell forever. That seems totally unjust and irrational. Humans are rather like children who need guidance to lead them towards a goal, but who do not immediately need to know all truths about the goal. But they do need to know that there is a goal, that it is possible, though difficult, to attain it, and some of the things to aim at and avoid if it is to be attained.

As I write this, I realise that it is almost exactly like the four noble truths which are definitive of Buddhism. All is suffering or unsatisfactory; suffering is caused by attachment; there is a way of liberation from attachment; and the eightfold path of mindfulness, selflessness, and compassion, is that way.

It would, of course, be absurd to say that Buddhists think God revealed this. Buddhists generally have little interest in God, and so do not think of liberation in terms of union with a supreme mind. Some followers of Jodo-Shin-Shu Japanese Buddhism do hold that assertions of faith in Amida Buddha will enable them to be with him in the Western Paradise. That is certainly like faith in a divine being. But it would not be right to identify this with belief in one personal and eternal creator God.

Usually, the more central doctrine of *anatta*, no-self, renders the idea of an eternal Spirit or God impossible, and liberation is more like cessation from rebirth and suffering, rather than participation in a community of love.

Nevertheless, the four noble truths are 'revealed' by Gautama Buddha, who experienced enlightenment and spoke from a knowledge beyond that of most mortals. So, though it

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is sometimes said that the truth of Buddhism is not revealed, but relies only on everyone's own personal experience, this is not quite true. There is an important place for authoritative teaching in Buddhism, and disciples normally believe what more advanced meditators teach. A Christian might think that God has revealed truths through the Buddha, but Buddhists would say that the Buddha has revealed them from his own enlightened experience.

Thus, most forms of Buddhism are not compatible with most forms of theism, if compatibility means that none of their beliefs conflict. However, the situation is more complicated than this. It is notoriously difficult to define what a religion is, so much so that scholars like Cantwell Smith have suggested that the term 'religion' should be dropped. That is not going to happen, but it is true that there are many different sorts of religion, that religions are in a state of constant change, that their boundaries are often ill-defined, and that they interact with each other and with other cultural factors, especially scientific, political, and ethical ones.

Even quite conservative religions change. In the Roman Catholic church, for example, it was widely believed (though never formally defined) that unbaptized persons could never enjoy the beatific vision, but after death were put in a special place that came to be called limbo. But in 2007 the Catholic International Theological Commission declared that that this was an 'unduly restrictive' view. Limbo disappeared, and the commission admitted that this was because the understanding that God was loving and merciful had changed. More importantly, religious views of the place of women have changed over the years, though it can hardly be said that affirmation of the equality of men and women has been achieved.

Religions change, and this is often because of interaction with other faiths or with changes in moral and scientific beliefs. It is also the case that religions are not just lists of beliefs, but form a multi-dimensional complex. Ninian Smart distinguished seven dimensions of religion: doctrinal, mythological, ethical, ritual, experiential, institutional, and material. Religions differ in the importance they give to these dimensions, and for many, the strictly doctrinal elements are not of primary importance. In general, Eastern faiths prioritize experience and ritual over the doctrinal agreements that are more important in, say, Christianity.

Because of these factors, it is hard to contrast Buddhism with Christianity. There are many varieties of each general faith, they change over the years, and they influence each other in different ways. Some movements are very closed or exclusive, and insist on adherence to precise and unchangeable dogmas. Other movements are very open, and welcome different interpretations of rather vaguely specified beliefs, and tend to have a positive attitude to other faiths. However, even exclusive views are capable of allowing that some opposing views are morally oriented and spiritually profound, even if mistaken.

If taken as total and exclusive bodies of doctrine, Buddhism and Christianity look very different. Buddhism has no eternal Creator, no resurrection of individual persons, and no salvation by a suffering God. Christianity has no complete renunciation of sensory pleasure, no rebirth, and no salvation by individual effort. But those generalizations are misleading.

For instance, 'Engaged Buddhism' is a rapidly growing form of Buddhism which holds that Buddhists should not spend all their time in meditating and remaining cloistered from the world, but should engage in social and political activities for the betterment of human life. When it was founded in India by BR Ambedkar, thousands of Hindus converted to Buddhism, partly because it freed them from the caste system. In this respect, the present Dalai Lama has said that Buddhism has much to learn from Christianity about compassion being best shown in benevolent social action.

Christianity has much to learn from Buddhism too. The practice of mindfulness has become much more widespread after contact with Buddhist practice. And Christian compassion has been seen as extending to animal life and to the well-being of the natural world

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in a way not usually characteristic of traditional Christian thought, in which all things were said to be created for the sake of humans. Buddhism and Christianity are thus already influencing each other, and they can be seen as complementary forms of spirituality rather than as competitors.

This process can be taken even further. Thich Nhat Hahn published fourteen precepts of engaged Buddhism, which include the precept that even Buddhist doctrines should be seen as 'guiding means' rather than as absolute truths. One should not be attached to them in intolerant or arrogant ways. I think it would be good if many Christians felt the same about their own doctrines.

There is no question of all Buddhists and Christians coming to agree, just as there is no question of all Christians coming to agree. But there is the possibility of seeing that diversity is natural and unavoidable, that change is always possible, if unpredictable, and that there is much to learn from at least some other spiritual traditions. Buddhist-Christian dialogue is of special interest because each stresses aspects of faith that the other has often neglected.

What all this suggests is not that members of one faith should convert to another. If diversity is to be accepted, then different traditions will continue to exist. Missionary work can continue, but it will be done with respect for and tolerance of other traditions which do not cause positive harm, and with respect for the personal decisions of individual persons.

One crucial difference between faith traditions will not so much rest on doctrinal divisions as on whether they have a closed or open self-understanding (this is a rather different division than John Hick made in his well-known threefold classification of religions into exclusive, inclusive, and pluralist. My view of religions does not quite fit into any of his categories). What I call closed religions hold that they alone possess an absolute and changeless truth, whereas open religions are open to change in some ways in the light of other perspectives which may complement their own.

My form of Idealism would suggest that a creative world Spirit concerned to produce an extensive range of intrinsic values would be unlikely to confine the great value of finally fulfilled human lives to just one small group of people. Revelation of some sort and degree would be virtually universal, even though it may have different degrees of clarity and adequacy. Thus, an open faith, and also a diversity of such faiths, is an implication of Idealism. I also think that closed faiths have an unfortunate tendency to breed ignorance of and hostility to others, which is dangerous in the modern world. For that reason, it is of some importance that positive dialogue between Buddhism, Christianity, and other faiths should be encouraged and pursued, not only in general, but within the faiths themselves.

If inspiration comes in degrees, would you say that the Christian Scriptures are more inspired than the religious scriptures from other traditions?

Obviously, no one can believe every religious doctrine. One will think that one's own beliefs are correct. But one need not believe that all one's beliefs are correct (some of mine are definitely mistaken, but I do not know which). One can believe that other faiths have insights and perspectives that one's own faith lacks. And one may well believe that one should seek a greater understanding of other faiths, and work for greater unity between them where possible. It is possible to hold that many Scriptures are inspired in the sense that the supreme Spirit is revealing something through them. But if all those revelations are influenced by historical and cultural beliefs, it will be impossible, from some neutral viewpoint, so say which may be more inspired (which contain the greatest amount of worthwhile information). Holding a particular view oneself, some Scriptures may seem more adequate

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than others, and some may indeed be so. But there is no neutral vantage point available for making a judgement that all will accept.

When we do make such judgements, they depend on many factors, including philosophical points about the nature of God, of human nature, of revelation, and of religion. In this sense, philosophy is very important to religion, and religion is a proper subject for philosophical study. Philosophy and Theology are not completely distinct or antithetical disciplines.

Why specifically should people believe in Jesus?

If one comes to believe that there is a supreme Spirit with a positive purpose for creation, it will be reasonable to think there will be humans through whom this Spirit will disclose its nature and purpose. It is then not a matter of setting the very various religious teachers in competition with one another to see who is the best. It is rather a matter of finding a teacher who speaks to one's own condition, given one's own upbringing and temperament, and who enables one to establish a positive and life-affirming relation with Spirit. People of different times and cultures will find different teachers, who are taken to understand and even realise something of the cosmic purpose in their own lives.

The claims made for Jesus are quite distinctive. He was not a person who wrote or recited a Scripture, like Moses or Muhammad. He was not a person who was claimed to have attained Enlightenment, and taught the way to it, like Siddartha Gautama. He was not a prophet who foretold the future, like Isaiah or Jeremiah. He was claimed to be a man who actually incorporated his followers into his own life, and in doing so liberated them from evil and united them in a loving union with the supreme Spirit.

This is an extraordinary claim. It can be spelled out in many ways, but at their heart is the claim that Jesus was actually a finite manifestation in human history of the supreme Spirit itself, an incarnation of God – not an avatar like Krishna, who always remained wholly divine, but a real union of human and divine. It is because he is human that he can share in the joys and sufferings of human life. It is because he is divine that humans can be incorporated into his divine life. It is only if one can accept that such an ontological union is possible, that it was realized in the life, death, and rising again, of a Jewish man, and that the will of God is that all humans should finally participate in it, that one can be said to 'believe in Jesus'.

The fact is that millions of people believe themselves to encounter the supreme Spirit in Jesus, and find a sense of liberation from evil by what they take to be the spirit of Jesus. They find Jesus to be a source of moral demand, forgiveness, empowerment, and reconciliation. They believe that he was a person in whom human and divine natures were so united that he could be taken as the human image of God, and the one who can enable humans to share in the divine.

There is much for philosophy to do in trying to show the coherence of such beliefs, but in the end a Christian will say that we do not choose to believe in Christ. We are chosen by Christ, and from that point our philosophy must be, as Anselm said, a feeble attempt to understand our faith.

You argue we should avoid fundamentalism about religious belief. What is fundamentalism and how can we avoid it? Are fundamentalists generally inconsistent with how they interpret Scripture? Why shouldn't we be fundamentalists?

Christian fundamentalism is the belief that all events described in the Bible are literally true, and that there are no errors in the Bible. Many Christians think that there are demonstrable errors of fact and some unacceptable moral views in the Bible, which is a compilation of many texts written over many years by people of very differing views, and showing a general development from polytheism to belief in an ethical monotheism. But

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it contains four written records of Jesus's life, and gives the historical context of his teachings, and so it is an invaluable expression of the disclosure of the divine nature and purpose in and through Jesus.

There isn't just religious fundamentalism though. Some atheists should probably also be considered fundamentalists. How would you respond?

I do not think fundamentalism is the best term for those who think that only science provides truth about reality. They are epistemological minimalists. What their view entails is that there are no truths in morality, art, history, or even ordinary human feelings, thoughts, intentions, and relationships. The natural sciences alone do not deal with evaluations, and often try to eliminate talk of purposes or of conscious states as having no causal efficacy. There are many reasons, not just religious ones, for having a richer ontology, and for admitting more sorts of explanation than belong to natural science. Indeed, the assertion that only science provides truth is not itself a scientific statement, and so is self-refuting.

How do you respond to the atheist who argues that atheism is a simpler hypothesis to theism (or something close to it)?

In one clear sense, it is simpler to say that there is one source of all beings, with one general purpose in creation (to produce a rich and diverse set of values) than it is to say that this immensely complex universe just happens to exist without any explanation. In any case, simplicity is not the only intellectual virtue. The coherence and integration of a complex, diverse, and valuable whole is arguably a greater one.

The Future

Should we expect more books or articles to come out soon?

No; the time for silence has come.

Out of all your books that you've written, is there one book that you want to be remembered more than others?

Any books that survive usually surprise their authors (who now reads JS Mill's *A System of Logic*, which he thought his best book?) But I think that *The Christian Idea of God, Christ and the Cosmos*, and *Sharing in the Divine Nature*, form a trilogy which states my philosophical and religious views most adequately. If anyone wanted to read just one short book, then *Spirituality and Christian Belief* is in effect a summary of what I think about Christian faith (and, indirectly, about all religious faith) today.

Looking back at your incredible career, what stands out the most to you?

I suppose being a Canon Professor at Christ Church, Oxford, where I got to hear beautiful music and fascinating lectures, and to unite religious devotion and intellectual exploration, and actually got paid for it. More generally, I found that being a minister of the church was an ideal way of keeping in touch with many of the problems of human life and preserving me from just being stuck in an ivory tower of abstract thoughts.

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