

AN MIT
PROFESSOR
ANSWERS
QUESTIONS
ON GOD AND
SCIENCE



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CAN A
SCIENTIST
BELIEVE IN
MIRACLES?

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A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY



While I was an undergraduate studying physics at Cambridge University, I changed my mind about Jesus. It happened as a result of thinking about the big questions of life—and lots of other influences. Before we get into those big questions and answers, I want to tell you a bit about how the change happened, about some of those other influences, and about what happened to me afterwards.

I did not grow up a Christian. My family did not go to church. The school I attended in the United Kingdom from age seven onward was nominally Christian; daily assembly included hymns and a prayer, but like most of my fellow students I paid little attention to the words.¹ I did not believe them, but I also did not think much about them.

When I was about twelve years old I thought I wanted to be a lawyer. Relatives agreed that the right sort of preparation for a career in the law was a “classical education”: Latin, Greek, and the humanities. So that was the path I set out on, in my secondary education. After a couple of years, though, I encountered physics. It was taught by a new, young, and dynamic teacher, and was simply far more fun. I was hooked. Although my school required me to remain in courses such as history, which I considered pure torture, I specialized in

mathematics and physics for my final graduating examinations. I was just seventeen years old. Intellectual endeavor and ambition, combined with an appreciation of both the depth and the breadth of human scholarship, had awakened in me.

So when I arrived at Cambridge University, my ambition was not just to be a physicist, but also to be an intellectual—to understand and participate in the culture and ideas, and make them my own. The breadth had to come from outside the formal curriculum, which partly explains why I threw my energies into extracurricular activities: reading, music making, sports, and most of all conversation with fellow students. I went conscientiously to the mathematics and physics lectures and tutorials. But I did the problem sets and tutorial assignments essentially in my free time, between all the other activities of student life.

One of the inescapable features of the culture of a university like Cambridge is its Christian history. King's College (famous for its Christmas Eve carol service) was my home base. The glorious Tudor architecture of its chapel lay just across the quadrangle from the student bar. The crystal purity of the choir's classical and liturgical singing was (for me) as alluring as the crowded and smoky excitement of a student dance to the loud rhythms of the Beatles or the Moody Blues. Of course, we "enlightened" students and college fellows (researchers, lecturers, and professors) did not actually believe in Christianity, but we could appreciate the heritage that it had left behind. There were a few peculiar folks who not only participated in the religious pomp (which many did, regardless of belief), but also said they actually believed it. They were definitely a small minority. It was hard, though, simply to dismiss those people as stupid, since their intellect and academic accomplishments were plainly equal to those of us who were careless of religion.

Essentially none of these academic believers seemed to feel compelled to contradict the scientific understanding of the universe with which I was familiar, and whose details I was studying to master. It was not, therefore, that Christianity was agreed to be contradicted by science. If it had once been at war with science, science seemed to have won. Rather, the self-congratulatory attitude among the enlightened (including me) was that Christianity had been discovered to be irrelevant and outdated. Its commitment to past ideas was its problem, and those ideas had proven to be ineffective. Those of us who had escaped the religious trammels were free thinkers, finding out by our own efforts and intelligence what was really going on, not only in natural science but also across all the academic disciplines.

But I had as much difficulty with the enlightened attitude as I did with Christianity. It seemed pretty obvious that, despite the material benefits of science and technology, the secular society and academy was, if anything, doing a worse job at developing and sustaining the virtues that I valued: truth, integrity, rationality, compassion. My college friends were mildly surprised that my bedside reading included Plato, John Milton, Immanuel Kant, Jean-Paul Sartre, and T. S. Eliot. Those authors were already part of my determination to be an intellectual, but reading them led me to have a more balanced and critical perspective on the intellectual vanities of the day.

I gradually began to entertain the question of whether there is more to Christianity than the moldering detritus of a prescientific age or the calming opiate that helps sustain useful social structures. But there was a serious discouragement. I remember distinctly being aware that to take Christianity seriously had consequences, particularly for personal freedoms. In those days of the unfolding sexual revolution, individual freedom of choice was already being seen as the preeminent value it is today. And I prized it highly. Yet, my limited

understanding of Christianity told me that being a Christian would close off lots of options—choices, freedoms—about how to live my life. That was a major influence causing me to keep my distance, to hold Christianity at arms' length. I did not want a Lord; I wanted to be my own Lord. I did not spend too much time thinking about whether Christianity was actually true, because I already knew that it was personally inconvenient. I did not much want it to be true.

What in the end brought me to take Christianity seriously was that two of my closest friends in college were serious Christians, and I found their lives and friendship attractive. They did have some peculiarities that reflected Christian constraints on freedoms. They went to church on Sundays. And sometimes they would cut short evenings in the pub by refusing to have more than one or two beers. Through them, though, I realized that Christianity is not all about what you have to give up. And the things you do give up, like sleeping in on a Sunday, or blood alcohol levels well above the legal driving limit, are not actually all that worthwhile.

I had some appreciation of Jesus as a moral teacher and a compelling historic figure. He was, it seemed to me, attractive and inspirational, and obviously enormously influential in shaping culture throughout the world, but I had not since my early youth considered the possibility that the Christian story was factually true. At my friends' invitation, I attended some lectures that explained basic Christianity. What struck me then as completely new thoughts were that there is good historical evidence for Christianity's claims, that Christian theology makes deep sense of the world and of human experience, and that Jesus invites each of us into a personal relationship with him. I suppose that I must have encountered those ideas before then, but at that time they seemed completely fresh and novel. It seemed obvious that if the invitation was real, it called for a response.

I could see that there are good reasons for thinking that the Christian gospel is true.² I was not sure of its truth, but I realized that it was not reasonable to demand abstract intellectual certainty about the personal relationship with the deity that Christians say is at the heart of Christianity. I did not have all the answers to my intellectual questions, but I did have evidence that answers existed. It was all around me in the testimony of architecture, music, culture, literature, and my friends and other intellectual Christians I knew. I accepted the idea that Christian assurance comes from a life lived in fellowship with Christ as much as in intellectual conviction. So, one evening, I yielded my life to his lordship in prayer; and I began to follow him.



That was about halfway through my three years at Cambridge. And I have now given part of the answer to the first of the following questions.

- | *What was your personal journey to faith?*
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- | *Do you ever have doubts?*
- | *What would you say to people who want to believe but can't seem to find sufficient reasons to satisfy themselves?*
- | *Have there been thinkers over the course of your career who have made you rethink your fundamental position?*
- | *Doesn't religious belief seem like totalitarianism: someone always watching and criticizing you?*
- | *A hallmark of science is stress on reasoning; does not subordinating oneself to a religious community and its dogmatic teachings undermine that position?*
- | *What intellectual challenges do you still wrestle with?*

I shall now go on to address the others.

I don't recall any significant discontinuity in my scientific studies as a result of my conversion. I had for a long time been familiar with the general cosmological picture presented in the Bible and regarded it as part of a theological account, not a scientific treatise. In the summer vacation, I volunteered as an assistant at a Christian boys' camp in Scotland. Being there was tremendously valuable for me, probably more than for them, in getting straight in my own mind basic Christian doctrine. I recall discussing questions surrounding whether evolution was true with some of the other camp leaders, but the discussion was far less tense than is common today in the United States. The general tenor of the conversation was that it is worth thinking about as an important question, but that Christianity does not hang on evolution being false. That enabled me subsequently to think about the question without it carrying an inconvenient amount of baggage.

I also began to be involved with fellow Christians in college through Bible studies, and then, in my last undergraduate year, in student teams that helped smaller churches in the vicinity by leading their services. Through these sorts of activities, I rapidly grew in my understanding of the Christian faith and theology. I was growing as a Christian as I was growing, through my courses, as a physicist. Maybe my Christian growth was faster, since I was making up for lost time, but anyway, I think of my understanding of faith and physics as having grown up together.

An issue that I recall being a key question for me, early on, concerned the authority of the Bible. While obviously I took the Bible as the primary source for Christianity, I did not come with an implicit belief that the Bible is literally true or indeed even authoritative. In the United Kingdom in those days there was plenty of church theology and academic scholarship that was skeptical of the

Bible's authority and relevance. I went through a process of assessing how much latitude Christian belief can, and should, reasonably tolerate. I was fortunate in that the groups with whom I joined generally had theologically orthodox but not anti-intellectual views.

I won a postgraduate fellowship to do physics doctoral studies in Australia. But because of some timing issues there was a few-months-long gap after I finished at Cambridge. I volunteered to spend it as a resident assistant in a hostel for homeless men in a depressed area of England. It was run by the Church Army, a branch of the Anglican Church devoted to social ministry. The men and women of the Church Army were ordinary, but deeply devoted, Christian believers. I was impressed by their dedication and blessed by the warm welcome they gave me, despite what I now see as my rather arrogant and excessively intellectual attitude. I lived in the hostel and helped to run it for the benefit of the homeless men: quite an education of a different kind for someone with my background! In Australia my physics research opportunities were fabulous; no thanks to my own planning, which was rather naive by the standards of most graduate students today. In addition, I continued my Christian education by studying Hebrew for a year, to supplement the Greek I already knew, and studying theology, Bible, and church history in order to become accredited as a Methodist local preacher. My personal devotions and church experiences during this time were enormously encouraging and dynamic. Obviously that was partly self-selection. I went to churches that seemed exciting. But the remarkable spiritual and personal experiences of those days were for me as clear a confirmation of the reality of God's love as I had hoped for.

There were things that I gave up. I had not, at my most secular, been a deep sinner by human standards. My conversion was not a dramatic turn from evil to good, or rescue from self-destruction. It was more

of a reorienting and expansion of priorities, outward from self-centering and self-absorption toward caring for others, and, to a degree, outward from focus on abstract ideas toward personal relationships. Even today, my natural inclination is, and possibly always will be, toward ideas more than people, but following Christ did help me avoid the excesses of abstraction that might otherwise have narrowed my life. Most crucially, those habits I gave up were generally not personal pleasures and benefits sacrificed on the altar of a harsh, sanctimonious and puritanical bondage. They were bad habits that I had new motivation to do something about. I struggled to give them up, in some cases, but giving them up was what I now *wanted* to do.

There was in my life and in my thought a new subordination. I called Jesus Lord, and I intended to follow what I took to be his will, rather than my will. That renunciation of self-determination was almost as countercultural then as it is today. But as my life and career unfolded, I found, again and again, that it led me into new and exciting opportunities. I was not narrowed, constrained, and limited because of commitment to Christ; I was liberated and motivated by letting go of my own blinkered ambitions in seeking to find his call and direction. And this was as true in my scientific career as in my personal life. I was discovering the reality of the paradoxical Anglican collect for peace, a prayer addressed to the God “whose service is perfect freedom.”

Christianity certainly places great importance on the community. Jesus prayed on the night before his crucifixion for the unity of his followers. He told them the world would know they were his followers by their love for one another. You can't truly be a part of a community without some subordination, some self-negation, some accommodation to the needs, desires, and opinions of others. Christianity has, over the centuries, developed formalized communities,

such as monastic orders, which include vows of obedience, but even from the beginning the disciples lived in informal communities of fellowship. Community is not the antithesis of personal freedom or of reasoning. Everyone experiences community in some form or other. At the least, the family is a community in which subordination is obvious and good. A family without the respect for parents (which is a type of subordination) is dysfunctional and all too often leads the children in unfruitful and damaging directions. The individualism so highly prized today is not the fountainhead of reason or creativity or indeed science. To be a scientist is to be a member of an international community. It is to participate in and submit oneself to practices developed over centuries—practices of disciplined study, of rigorous criticism (including self-criticism), of communal exchange of ideas, of mutual support and assistance.

In communities at their best, reason and reflection are fostered. And that is as true of religious communities as of scientific ones. Indeed it was in the formal Christian communities, monasteries, and contemplative orders where historically ancient learning was preserved, new philosophy was developed, and institutions of scholarship conceived.

Intellectual communities are constituted by dogma: by the principles and opinions that they hold dear. That is what keeps them together, motivates their activities, and guides what is expected of their members. That is as true of scientific communities as of religious ones. When reference is made to dogmatic teachings, it is usually religious communities that are being criticized, and sometimes with good reason. But every community has dogmatic principles, and received opinions. The reasons why those principles and opinions are accepted as settled within the community might differ between different types of community; but there always are settled principles and opinions.

Christian dogma concerns predominantly revelation, the way in which God has revealed himself through the person of Jesus; the reasons for its acceptance are therefore of a sort appropriate to history and personality. Scientific dogma predominantly concerns the reproducible behavior of nature; the reasons for its acceptance are of a sort appropriate to science: experiment, observation, measurement, theory, and so on.

There is no reason to suppose on principle that a person can belong to only one community. And obviously most of us belong to more than one, say to the hiking club and the Democratic Party. The presumption of many comments concerning dogma today, though, is that the dogmas of Christianity and of science are incompatible. A person can presumably be a member of two different communities with *incompatible* dogmas (for example both the Democratic and Republican Parties) only by equivocation, by accepting and affirming each dogma within the corresponding community, but then contradicting oneself when in the other community. Christians in science are often presumed to be in this position. However, that has not been my experience.

I have not found Christianity and science to be contradictory communities. And I have not found valuing of revelation and experiment to be mutually exclusive. Because their dogmas are obviously different, and because they sometimes engage in topics in which the opinions and commitments of both are important, there are puzzles and challenges. And as I grew in my understanding of both communities, I encountered these puzzles and tried to work out thoughtful and considered positions whereby the commitments of both of the communities are honored simultaneously. This process involves a kind of intellectual wrestling: wondering about the principles widely recognized within my communities, and their interpretation and application;

trying to see ways in which the different dogmas interact so as to produce a fuller and more persuasive explanation of important questions; examining areas of apparent, or real, conflict and trying to develop pathways that lead to peaceful cooperation, rather than angry denunciation. Within the communities of Christianity and science there are people who hold to dogmas that *are indeed* incompatible. There are Christians who think that an essential part of the faith is that the world is just a few thousand years old. Similarly, there are scientists who think that reductive materialism is an essential part of science. I think both groups are mistaken, and I take appropriate opportunities to explain to each group why I think so.

This process of integration and reconciliation led me to yet broader appreciation of human learning. Being a Christian has engendered in me a greater interest in intellectual matters I might not otherwise have taken seriously. History is no longer for me the torture it was as a schoolboy. And that is in part because I see the significance and relevance of history in my Christian faith. A deeper knowledge of the history and philosophy of science, beyond the logic of the disciplines themselves, I find fascinating and of enormous help in better understanding the relationships between the communities.

Although I have never had a deep crisis of faith—strongly suspecting that Christianity is all a terrible mistake—I regularly have doubts. I can with the greatest of ease muse upon the possibility that Christianity is false, as an intellectual exercise. I can and do think about *what if* questions that propose alternative explanations for both the historical evidence and my own personal experiences. What if the witnesses made it up? What if Christians down the ages have been kidding themselves? What if I was imagining the sense I had of God's call? Doubts like these are part of thinking: evaluating and comparing different possible hypotheses to explain the events of the world and

of our experience. What is more, *critical thinking* is the attempt to evaluate questions objectively, recognizing the interests at stake and the predispositions, both my own and other people's, and trying to set them aside or compensate for them.³ Faith is the partner of critical thinking, maybe even its result, not its enemy. True faith is bred by thinking through the possibilities, wondering what makes most sense. I have thought through a lot of questions about my Christian beliefs over the years by this process, with help from writers and others who have gone before me. And I have come to a stable place in what I believe. I understand the issues and I can rest in equilibrium and act on the basis of it. The same can be said of the science I know and hold true. And the equilibrium, in both scientific and religious matters, can justifiably be called faith.

As I was steadily growing to better understand the relationships between science and Christianity, and working out my own integration of their truths, I found that other people around me were interested in and exercised by the same questions. And I began to be invited to share with different sorts of groups, Christians and non-Christians, the ways that I think about things. This encouraged me to devote more attention to the questions, and a positive feedback loop developed. Because I was a very active scientist, having during most of my career taken on demanding leadership and administrative roles, thinking about science and the Christian faith was for me, in effect, a hobby. But it was a hobby that became more than merely personal, as I increasingly was invited to speak on the subject to university audiences and the public.

A particular type of venue that appeals to me arose through what are called Veritas Forums. These are a type of event generally organized by students on their local campus, where the *big questions* of life are addressed in the context of the academy in a way that is sadly

uncommon as part of the regular academic curriculum today. The various Christian groups who are interested in these questions generally constitute a nucleus and invite other types of groups, such as the local secular or atheist organizations, to participate in engaging with spiritual, religious, or ethical questions in respectful dialogue. The invited speakers, like me, give some context and lay out ideas, often representing opposing (e.g., religious and secular) viewpoints, and then lots of questions are addressed. There is a relatively small central Veritas Forum national organization that coordinates with the local forum organizers and helps the students with logistics, speaker referrals, advice on best practices, and so on. The organization recently celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary, and the events it sponsors have gathered amazing momentum during the past ten years or so. Altogether about one hundred forums are held each year, with scores of different speakers. Many of these forums have audiences of more than a thousand people.

Over the years, I have participated in dozens of forums. I find that the most interesting part of the forum is usually the audience questions. The questions from one dialogue partner to the other are also fascinating. The questions are sometimes truly informational, people genuinely simply wondering how one can make sense of a puzzle in anticipation that there might be a good answer. Sometimes the questions are polemic, asked from a belief that they do not have a good answer, and that that fact argues against the opinion the speaker represents. My hope is that both the questions and my answers will help you to think more deeply and clearly about these vitally important matters.

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