

ALISTER E. McGRATH

A Response to Richard Harries

I am most grateful to Richard Harries for these very appropriate and helpful responses to my Boyle lecture, which I know were greatly appreciated by the audience at St Mary-le-Bow. He raises some very interesting points and I shall respond to each of them briefly.

First, can we think of theology predicting things, not simply offering explanations of what is already observed? It is a fair question, discussed particularly during the heyday of Logical Positivism, with its emphasis on the importance of verification, linked with a suspicion of metaphysical statements of any kind. It is also an important question in contemporary philosophy of science, with a growing awareness of the issues caused by ‘singular events’ – that is, things that have happened in the past, which are in principle unrepeatable, and hence cannot be explored using predictive approaches. One obvious example is the unique event of the ‘Big Bang’. Another is the biological history of our planet, so subject to happenstance on the one hand and the regularities of ‘the laws of nature’ on the other. Charles Darwin was clear that his theory of natural selection could offer an account of what had happened in the past, but it was incapable of predicting what might happen in the future, except in the most general of terms. Theology seems to me to be primarily about thinking through the implication of some past singular events and using the lens that they provide – whether directly or indirectly – to make sense of, and give direction to, life. Perhaps theology cannot predict; it can, however, be judged in part on the basis of whether it makes rational and existential sense of what we observe around us and experience within us.

Secondly, Richard rightly points out that ‘making sense of things cannot of itself tell us whether or not that view is true’. I fully take this point. There has to be something more than simply an ability to accommodate information or observation. As historians of science have pointed out, such observations often prove capable of being fitted, with a greater or lesser degree of intellectual violence, into a remarkable variety of frameworks. Richard is right to emphasise our human limitations, which place significant, possibly severe, limitations on our capacity to comprehend. Perhaps this is most obvious when we begin to think about God, and instinctively try to reduce God to the intellectually manageable, rather than attempt the somewhat more challenging task of expanding our minds to take in the greater reality of God. The constant challenge that the theologian faces is to demonstrate that theology is intrinsically reasonable on the one hand and yet not limited to what the human reason can prove on the other.

I confess myself sceptical of too-neat theories and slick answers to difficult questions. It is remarkable that we are able to make so much sense

of things. Yet all too often we are left with a deep sense of standing on the brink of something that lies beyond our capacity to describe, analyse and rationalise – what theology rightly terms a ‘mystery’ in the proper sense of the term, meaning something that is simply too great for us to wrap our minds around. Yet I take some comfort that we are able to see something of the deeper structures of physical and spiritual reality – enough to reassure us that there is something ordered and meaningful, in the midst of the chaos and apparent meaninglessness that so often assails our senses.

Thirdly, I gladly concur with Richard’s statement that an ‘all-embracing explanation of life’s meaning and purpose’ is required, such as that provided with the Christian faith as a whole. This is an important point, as it opens up deeper questions of value and meaning, and does not simply focus on the question of intellectual commodiousness. One of the themes I would have liked to explore in greater detail, if space had permitted, is the manner in which Christianity as a whole coordinates the great themes of truth, beauty and goodness within its view of reality. Can something be true and evil? Or ugly? These questions are not discussed adequately at present in the field of science and religion, but they call out for deeper examination. Richard’s example of the late Mikhail Kalashnikov’s misgivings about his own creation brings home to us the need for us to integrate truth, beauty and goodness in our lives, rather than compartmentalise them, perhaps even to the point where we separate them out, or focus exclusively on one alone. A fully-orbed account of reality, capable of sustaining us existentially and morally – and not just intellectually – is clearly called for. If science is morally blind (which, I must add, is no criticism of science) then, simply because scientists are also human beings, they will want to explore deeper questions than those which can be answered by science – precisely because life is bigger than what the scientific method can uncover.

Finally, I concur with Richard’s estimation of the value of the writings of Austin Farrer, particularly his little book *A Science of God?*. Farrer has never quite secured the readership he deserves, although those who have discovered him find themselves more than amply rewarded by wrestling with his ideas and approaches. One of the more welcome implications of the dialogue between science and religion is a realisation that science can be enriched by insights from other disciplines, helping to set the scientific enterprise in an informing context. As Pope John Paul II wisely wrote in 1988: ‘Science can purify religion from error and superstition; religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes. Each can draw the other into a wider world, a world in which both can flourish.’

In conclusion, I thank Richard Harries for his very gracious and penetrating response to my lecture, and look forward to this discussion continuing. There is much more that needs to be said. Between us, we have begun a fascinating conversation, which I trust will be picked up and extended by our readers.