

Essay Review

Paul Helm

**Science and Christian Belief
by John Polkinghorne (London, SPCK,
211 pp. £9.99, 1994)**

I

Professor Polkinghorne has become well-known as a proponent of a positive relationship between science and the Christian faith. This book, his Gifford Lectures delivered in 1993–4, is a further contribution to this project. It has sometimes been difficult for Gifford lecturers to square the topic of their lectures with the terms of Lord Gifford's endowment. Professor Polkinghorne's justification lies mainly in the approach he offers to evaluating faith and science, a 'bottom up' approach. That is, he looks at the data of the Christian faith in what he considers to be a scientific spirit; detached, fair-minded, and as far as possible without preconceptions, but ready for surprises. This does not mean that he offers a defence of the faith along the lines of classical natural theology, but that he adopts what he calls a 'Polanyian' approach to the data. In the second place Polkinghorne brings together the very varied data of the natural sciences and those that bear directly on the Christian faith, and asks whether it is possible to discern the face of God in them? Professor Polkinghorne believes that it is, and emphasises throughout the book that such questions cannot be answered by compelling argument but are a matter of personal judgement based upon the evidence.

The chapters of the book are structured in terms of the various clauses of the Apostles' Creed. Each chapter has the form of a survey of those arguments and other general considerations which bear upon the truth of the relevant clause in the Creed. In some cases, as in the chapters on humanity and knowledge, the discussion is almost wholly scientific and philosophical in character, while in others it is more biblical and theological. The author obviously delights in interacting with what others have written, and there are running exchanges with the likes of Stephen Hawking, Keith Ward and David Pailin. It is in conversation with other writers, rather than through straight exposition, that Polkinghorne seeks to disclose his own views, and it is not always possible to avoid gaining the impression of eclecticism.

The result of this general approach is a book of considerable ambition. For example, Chapter 5, 'Jesus' consists largely of a survey of the gospel evidence, particularly the question of its authenticity. The author picks his

way through the minefields of New Testament scholarship with great confidence, excusing the definiteness of his views on the grounds of his amateur status but succeeding, in the eyes of at least one other amateur, in making a number of illuminating remarks about the bearing of the gospel data on the authenticity of the portrait of Jesus that they paint.

So what overall picture of the relation between science and Christian belief emerges? One in which, if one adopts the method which Polkinghorne believes to be the correct method in science, the propositions of the Apostles' Creed will be rendered plausible. The first and obvious corollary of this approach is that, in keeping with his view of science as being 'critically realist' in the character of the disclosures that it makes, Polkinghorne adopts a firmly anti-reductionist stance towards the assertions of the Creed. Frequent parallels are drawn between the course of science and the course of Christian theology; sometimes these are overdrawn, as in places where the author compares the character of Christian theology to that of a scientific theory.

One of the methodological problems that lies behind a work such as this is that both the language of the Apostles' Creed, and of the New Testament is, when compared to current scientific and philosophical theories, severely underdetermined. What this means is that there is room for more than one such theory, though not for just any theory, within the parameters set out by these documents. The method which Polkinghorne adopts might be called a progressive narrowing down of the options. The New Testament rules out certain views and rules in others. Current science and metaphysics does the same. So the reasonable thing to do is to concentrate on the overlapping segments of the parameters, in those cases where they do overlap. This is of course a reasonable decision to take, but having taken it we cannot then use the findings of science to confirm the faith.

What I think is intended by this strategy is some of the prestige that science enjoys in virtue of its methods will rub off onto Christian theology. If broadly the same approach is taken to faith as to science, then we shall be entitled to place broadly the same confidence in the claims of Christianity as we do in the findings and results of natural science even though, in the case of the faith, nothing like scientific experimentation is possible. I think that this is what Polkinghorne intends; it would be too strong a thesis to say that he thinks that science confirms the Christian faith, too weak to say that science illuminates or illustrates it. So the argument is not that science provides evidence for Christianity in the manner of a natural theology or a theology of nature, but that it confirms its character. The reading of the gospels which Polkinghorne uses, and which he thinks when considered in a manner analogous to that in which a scientist views his data, tends to the confirmation of the Christian faith, is, I imagine, fairly conservative and orthodox. Though the character of the faith that it confirms as valid (p. 8) is a fairly orthodox one as well, it is not wholly so, as we shall see.

In drawing out parallels in this way, and in this indirect way allowing science to confirm the Christian religion, Polkinghorne defends a number of important theses about the Christian faith. As already noted, he has no truck with instrumentalist or expressivist accounts of the Christian faith. The propositions of the Apostles' Creed, or at least most of them, assert a variety of types of proposition, some historical, some metaphysical, which the Christian church has taken to be true; not true for me or true for you, but true without qualification. So that Christian faith is basically cognitive in character leading to practical, expressive and instrumental consequences; but truth comes first, just as technology is only possible because scientific theories are close to reality.

This cognitivism has an interesting consequence when, in the final chapter, the author considers alternatives to Christianity, alternative religions. He cannot, as many prominent thinkers on the relation between the various religions do, claim that Christianity is one of several equally valid paths to God. For the price one has to pay for saying this is a non-cognitivist or expressivist view of religious language, is a price too high for Polkinghorne. If Christianity is true, then religious claims that are incompatible with central Christian claims must be false. So without going so far as to claim that Christianity is the sole source of theological truth (a position somewhat misleadingly labelled as exclusivism) Polkinghorne does claim that it has central truths unobtainable elsewhere; not a monopoly, but a near monopoly. This leads him to make some wise remarks about dialogue and toleration in religion:

The only basis for honest dialogue is the humble but firm presentation of one's own understanding of truth. A consensus purchased by down-playing the status of Jesus, which these lectures have sought to defend, would not be worth having. For me, Jesus' resurrection (usually neglected by those seeking a pan-religious synthesis) is sufficient in itself to mark him out as historically unique. (p. 186)

This is well said, and worth saying. Given such a statement, and the author's overall methodology, it is a pity that while affirming the centrality of the resurrection of Christ Professor Polkinghorne favours universalism, or near universalism, in which those denied a first chance are given a second. It is not clear which datum of the New Testament supports this. One of the puzzling features about the methodology of this book, a book in which questions of methodology are placed so much to the forefront, is that while at times the author pays a great deal of respect to the detail of the New Testament (no doubt many would say an excessive amount of respect) at other times, for what appears to be no reason other than personal preference, he flies in the face of its teaching. Where in the New Testament is there clear teaching that those who die outside Christ will be given another chance, much less that they will be saved?

It may be that it is true that they will be saved, and he would be an odd Christian who did not hope that they will be. But in the face of so much

to the contrary in the canonical documents, those documents which are constitutive of the faith, is it not wise, for sound methodological reasons if for no other, not to pronounce on this issue? Of course, as Polkinghorne says, it is wise to take a view of theology which permits the progressive exploration of truth, and not allow it to be held in thrall to past understanding alone. But if past understanding is to be overthrown, the new understanding must be more securely rooted in the data than the view that is being abandoned. Yet it is hard to see how Polkinghorne's theory of a second chance is more soundly rooted in the new Testament than are the obvious implications of (say) 'It is given unto men once to die, and after this the judgement'. It is a puzzle why Polkinghorne does not take his own sound advice (p. 6) and on this question confess his ignorance.

Despite these words of criticism, it is another valuable feature of Polkinghorne's use of scientific method to illuminate and confirm Christian theology that that method is not procrustean. The scientific method to which he adheres is not a naive rationalism. If the crucial events of the Christian faith can be likened to crucial experiments in the progress of science, for their transparency and the control they exercise on the remainder of the data, they nevertheless allow for surprise, though the degree of surprise that may be expected (if this is not a self-contradiction) is greater in theology and religion than in science. (Here, at least, is one place where the author acknowledges a lack of parallel between the two disciplines).

A very ordinary scientist today possesses . . . much greater overall understanding of the physical world than was ever possible for Sir Isaac.

The situation in theology is entirely different. The Object of its study is not open to manipulation, nor can he be caught in our rational nets. Every encounter with divine reality has the character of gracious gift and it partakes of the uniqueness inherent in any personal meeting.
(p. 7)

A final pleasing feature of the book is the clear and ready way in which scientific and metaphysical questions are distinguished. One frequently hears and reads that in their latest speculations about the Big Bang cosmologists and others are coming ever nearer to specifying (and even dating!) the moment of Creation. Polkinghorne will rightly have none of this.

Theology is concerned with ontological origin and not with temporal beginning. The idea of creation has no special stake in a datable start to the universe. If Hawking is right, and quantum effects mean that the cosmos as we know it is like a kind of fuzzy spacetime egg, without a singular point at which it all began, that is scientifically very interesting, but theologically insignificant. When he poses the question, 'But if the universe is really completely self-contained, having no boundary,

or edge, it would have neither beginning nor end: it would simply be. What place, then, for a creator?', it would be theologically naive to give any answer other than: 'Every place—as the sustainer of the self-contained spacetime egg and as the ordainer of its quantum laws. God is not a God of the edges, with a vested interest in boundaries. Creation is not something he did fifteen billion years ago, but it is something that he is doing now. (p. 73)

II

So there are many things which Polkinghorne says, and says well, in these lectures. However, it has to be said, that alongside this, there are places at which the level of argumentation is not very high. This is partly due to the ambition of the whole work; these are lectures about God, the universe, and everything else, and the lecturer does not rest content until he has said something about everything. Also, at many places the author modestly cites authorities for the views that he adopts rather than arguing for those views on their own merits.

One of the noteworthy features of the theological position presented in the book is the strong expression of human free will which the author adopts. He clearly feels very strongly that unless human beings are endowed with indeterministic or libertarian freedom, then they are puppets. The strength of conviction about this emerges at various points in the lectures. I shall examine two of these, and the contribution which they make to the overall argument about science and religion that is presented here.

In discussing the mind-body problem, the mysteriousness of which he rightly acknowledges, as a bottom-up thinker Polkinghorne starts from the fact of consciousness, our awareness of ourselves and our environment, and our ability to act intentionally (p. 10–12). Free will is assumed (p. 13). This leads him to question whether natural selection can offer a complete account of human evolution (p. 16) and, eschewing the explanation of human indeterminism in terms of quantum physics (p. 25), he opts for sensitive dynamical systems, as he did in his earlier *Science and Providence*, (London SPCK, 1989). He appeals to unpredictability in principle to ground our necessary ignorance of the future (p. 25). How we move from that to claim that the nature of reality is as such unpredictable is not clear. No argument, as far as I can see, is provided. Yet the transition from a recognition of human ignorance about the nature of reality to claims that that reality is unpredictable in character is crucial for the introduction of indeterministic free will of the sort that Polkinghorne yearns for. Surely more than a mere ontological conjecture is needed to ground free will, particularly when the assertion of free will plays such a crucial role in the author's overall view of Christian theology?

Not only does an argument seem to be lacking, but in making such a conjecture Polkinghorne appears to deviate from his own announced

strategy of calling in scientific method to illuminate and confirm the validity of the metaphysics of Christian theism. For such conjectures about human freedom are clearly bits of unscientific speculation. Polkinghorne sees this, and takes refuge in a Samuel Johnson-like assertion of our free will under the guise of the open future. Would it not be equally if not more scientific to reappraise the status of our consciousness in the light of science?

The open future returns in chapter three, where Polkinghorne, citing Keith Ward, claims that whatever a necessarily existent God decrees must itself be necessary. This seems doubtful. The universe might be the outcome of an eternal decree and that decree be other than it is, the universe being contingent. He claims that the motivation behind the idea of God's timeless eternity is a desire to preserve God from transient influences, but it is more likely that those who assert such timelessness wish to do justice to the divine fullness of being for whom there is no past irretrievably over, nor future outside his knowledge.

So *Science and Christian Belief* is something of a mixture, more successful as a synopsis of many wide-ranging debates, and so as part of a 'cumulative case' for Christian theism, and also as a provoker and stimulator of thought in these difficult areas, than as a book that carries conviction by the force of its argument.

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Templeton Foundation Essay Awards

The editors of *Science and Christian Belief* would like to congratulate Prof. Colin Humphreys and the Revd. Dr. Ernest Lucas for prizes awarded recently by the Templeton Foundation for their articles which appeared in the journal:

E. Lucas, "A Short Introduction to the New Age Movement" and "Scientific Truth and New Age Thinking" *Science and Christian Belief* 4, 3-25, 1992.

C. Humphreys, "The Star of Bethlehem", *Science and Christian Belief* 5, 83-101, 1993.

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