

## Lemsford lecture 7<sup>th</sup> March 2010

From acts 17

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ....For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring."

Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.'

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.'

Over the next few weeks I am sure that politicians will be appearing in the media to tell the Great British Public things that they know: 'I know that the Great British Public will agree with me', they will flatteringly smooch 'when I say that we need the best schools, the cleanest hospitals, the most vibrant economy, the best equipped army, the most secure nation, and that therefore on May 6<sup>th</sup> they will be voting Tory, Labour or Liberal Democrat'. If they are feeling in a somewhat Aristotelian mood and wish to fill out their argument, the Great British Public may be flattered with a middle axiom – somewhere between the aspiration and the appeal for your vote – but I guess increasingly less so, as soundbites are valued more for brevity than rigour. Of course the Great British Public may well, like Bernard and St Paul's Athenians, be roughly in agreement over the causes of better schools, vibrant economy, and well-equipped army, but will be equally divided over which way to vote. If in these days public debate is to have its arguments so compressed into soundbites that little remains between premiss and conclusion, between aspiration and appeal in this case, how are we ever to come to rational conclusions based on anything more than hunches or tribal loyalties? Is a really convincing argument ever going to be properly presented again as a means of leading people

to a course of action, or are we all at the mercy of advertisers and spin doctors? That is the question which I want to tackle in this lecture.

But some will say, isn't it ironic that these Lenten lectures in this church, take for granted that some part of your argument will not be rational at all, but based on articles of faith – specifically the Christian faith? Who is the church to lecture people on the use of rational argument when they prefer the blind assertions of revelation? 'Jesus Christ is Lord' – how do we know this - because the Bible says so – why – because God says so – not a terribly convincing argument either.

So in our account we shall have to factor in the question of revelation, and therefore at this point we must say something about what we mean by revelation.

Revelation comes from the Latin translation of a greek word meaning unveiling. To cut, as I'm afraid we shall have frequently to do, a large subject into bite sized junks, this means that traditionally theology has strictly speaking understood revelation as an event or a text which says something about God or the world, that was not known until that point, and was not a conclusion which necessarily could be arrived at by independent means. So for instance saying that revelation teaches you that the world is beautiful, is not really revelation in the strict sense,

because lots of people of all faiths and none come to that conclusion not by revelation but just by looking at it – sometimes theologians distinguish between general and special revelation, but it helps our argument to think of revelation in the strict sense. Revealed theology is also sometimes contrasted with natural theology.

So for instance in liberal theological circles in the eighteenth and nineteenth century particularly in Germany and England it was seen as a good thing if the revelation of God in Jesus Christ could be reduced to conclusions which any civilised person could support. Jesus became not a revelation of God in my sense, but an exemplar of the holy life and wise sayings which could be derived and corroborated from and by other sources. All the historical and particular elements to Jesus' teaching were seen as an embarrassment. Now there is nothing wrong with this liberal approach, it still has many followers today – but one needs to be aware of what one is saying – if Jesus simply confirms or lives out in full what others have taught and believed, then remove the life of Jesus from history and one could still have the same set of effective beliefs and values by which Christians live, just without the particular life of Jesus Christ. Thus revelation is either abolished or its meaning is radically altered, so that it no longer means the unveiling of the unknown, but the confirmation and illustration of the

independently known. As I say I am not wishing in any way to rubbish this option – I happen not to hold it – but it is of course very convenient when it comes to the role of faith in public life – if we can say as Christians that we don't want to add anything unique, distinctive or indeed divisive to the discussion, but simply to hold up a person who exemplified rational liberal values. I will be making the case for a more distinctive and traditional sort of revelation, which will of course be more difficult than this mediating liberal option, because I happen to believe that there are irreducible elements of the Christian faith which cannot be arrived at outside of God's revelation in Jesus Christ – but I do respect the liberal option and note its advantages.

The opening video clip and bible reading were both examples of what might be called an argument – not in the sense of a row, but in a methodical movement from premises or axioms to conclusions. 'All horses in the yard are black', 'Lucky is a horse in the yard' therefore 'Lucky is black'. That is an example of a good simple deductive argument. Not a very complicated or interesting one to be sure, but a simple example to start with. The idea in any such arguments was to start with as few axioms as possible and to generate as many necessary conclusions as possible – few axioms, many conclusions – that was your aim. There is a supreme example of this in the ancient world, which will

undergo a very interesting twist when we come to the 20<sup>th</sup> century – it is Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*. Euclid's elements from around 300BC, started with only ten axioms, though he called the first five postulates – and went on from those to fill thirteen books with thousands of propositions. Even by today's standards it is a remarkable achievement. So high was the regard in which it was held, in the ancient world nearly every other branch of knowledge wanted to model itself on Euclid's elements – theology included. The great strength of Euclid's geometry was also however its greatest weakness – it only dealt with Platonic ideal forms – the ideal triangle, circle, line, point, etc. it never sullied itself with anything which was a material object found in the physical world. The greatest advantage of this was that the axioms were all what Kant would later called analytic truths – things that you can know just by thinking about them, and not by experiencing them in the real world. The problem was that that made exact imitation impossible for nearly any other science – physicists, chemists, biologists, engineers, let alone poets and ethicists, are all concerned to some degree with things which are real and material, and therefore they could never be quite as neat as Euclid. Plato thought that was a basic mark of the inferiority of such disciplines, Aristotle his pupil, just thought that was how things were. Aristotle therefore in the *Prior and Posterior Analytics*, divided up

science by what sort of axioms they had. So for instance whilst the theologian Nicholas of Amiens was the first to try and make theology look like geometry, he had to admit that his axioms were not self-evident like those of Euclid, but articles of faith – thus theology was not a true science. Thomas Aquinas believed theology to be what Aristotle called a derived science, because its axioms were not self-evident but could be derived from other sciences. Duns Scotus, like later on Martin Luther, thought that theology, again using Aristotle's terminology was a practical science, which was a sort of upside-down science, because rather than arguing *from* axioms, it proceeded *towards* a known goal – in theology's case a good and holy life.

The rise of what we call modern science or Enlightenment science was achieved by the overcoming of an ancient philosophical prejudice – and it started with a local lad in the seventeenth century – Francis Bacon first Viscount of St Albans. Divided between followers of Plato and Aristotle, philosophers up until the seventeenth century were very worried about the nature of the material world. The world of logic, syllogisms, and perfect triangles all seemed so neat and tidy for the organised philosophical mind – but the material world seemed untidy, chaotic, nothing was a perfect shape, and things like colours and textures were ambivalent. Worse still the only way we could know this

world is through what Kant would later call their phenomena – our sense perceptions of that world – we could not know the thing in itself – and we all know how unreliable sense perceptions are – is that dress blue or green, I can't see properly in this light, I'm drunk, I'm dreaming, I'm hallucinating, I'm looking at a different angle, I wouldn't have called that a hill, when I look at an oar in water it appears to be bent. Bacon's so called inductive method, basically said 'tough' and 'so what' – if you want to know about the material world then you have to find a language – what would become known as an observation language in science – with which to talk about it with some precision. Now Bacon was hampered by the fact that he wasn't very good at maths, and of course one of the greatest aids to talking about the material world is the application of mathematics to it, and that was what Descartes and Newton were later to do – those developments combined were to give us what we know as the scientific method. To know about the material world you have to observe it closely and carefully using your senses rather than consulting ancient philosophers.

There was also a problem with the inductive method, known as the problem of induction. Let us suppose to give the usual example, we wish to know what colour ravens are. You go and find a lot of ravens and you find that they are all black – so you conclude that ravens are

black. But how do you know that there is not a very illusive and secretive white raven which runs away whenever it sees ornithologists? Well you don't, but you just hope that given the huge number of black raven sightings over the years, and the complete absence of white ravens, your conclusion that ravens are black is a reasonable one. The counter-example is of course swans. Many people will only ever see white swans, and so we might by the same theory conclude that swans are white, but as it happens there are a very small proportion of swans which are black, even if many people have never seen one.

But what does all this have to do with faith? Well quite simply, the scientific method was so successful that any discipline which sought to teach a body of knowledge that could not be derived by such a method, was seen as increasingly suspect. This was of course true of theology – theology was based upon knowledge derived from divine revelation, and as David Hume so clearly saw this meant that it failed the Enlightenment test. The Enlightenment said that all knowledge should build upon things which are self-evident – necessary and deductive truths, analytic truths like Euclid's geometry – or upon things which are evident to the senses.

Now in one sense this was a philosophical turnaround – philosophers had always supposed that if you had to chose between knowledge

based on God's infallible revelation and knowledge derived from something as unreliable as the human senses, then the *rational* thing to do was to go by revelation. What the Enlightenment realised particularly as European powers began to form their empires, was the trouble is that God's revelation was always transmitted through human tradition. Muslims, Hindus, and Christians could not agree what God's revelation was; higher criticism of the Bible, meant that it too could now only be seen as a vehicle of revelation and not its infallible expression. It wasn't so much that revealed revelation was irrational it was just equivocal and contested, whereas the scientific method seemed to be building up a solid base of successful and uncontested results. Again as David Hume saw, and as Michael Polanyi later so beautifully expressed in a political metaphor:

If divine revelation continues to be venerated, its functions – like those of the kings and Lords in England – are gradually reduced to that of being honoured on ceremonial occasions. All real power goes to the

nominally Lower House of objectively demonstrable assertions.<sup>1</sup>

For the first half of the twentieth century philosophers went slightly over the top in support of the scientific method. A group of Viennese philosophers, such as Mauritz Schlick and Rudolph Carnap, produced a philosophy called logical positivism. Logical positivism by its infamous verification principle took Enlightenment principles to the next level – you can say what you like, said the logical positivists, but if it isn't self-evident or verifiable by observation, then not only is it false, but it's just meaningless. Now the rest of this lecture will basically be trying to narrate why after climbing this logical positivist mountain, philosophers have more or less unanimously come down the other side. But first we need to have a look around the mountain top and see what we can see. Firstly logical positivism summarily dismissed all theological statements as meaningless. Famously A J Ayer the Englishman who brought logical positivism from Vienna to England, in a large book took only just over two pages to dismiss any notion of the idea of God. Secondly not only God disappeared but more or less all metaphysics disappeared, along with moral statements, aesthetic statements, even statements like 'I

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<sup>1</sup> Polanyi, 1998, p266

love you', seem to become meaningless by the verification principle. After all a marriage based on rigorous, continuous, scientifically recorded and logged observations, is I would suggest probably going to end in a divorce court and possible with a harassment charge. Thirdly there are a group of interesting present day people at the top of the mountain. They are called the New Atheists and their leader is Richard Dawkins – please do not take my word for this – look for instance in Anthony Flew's book *'There is a God'*:

'it would be fair to say that the 'new atheism' is nothing less than a regression to the logical positivist philosophy that was renounced by even its most ardent proponents.'

Anthony Flew incidentally for nearly all his long and distinguished career was one of the world's most ardent and eloquent atheist philosophers. God has kept him alive for so long – he is now 87, because at 81 he was to perform one of the most famous volte-faces in twentieth century philosophy when he declared his conversion to a belief in God, though not it has to be said to the sort of personal God of Christianity.

Because I am interested in this area people often ask me whether I've read Richard Dawkins' stimulating and cutting edge critique of religion

– to which my answer is no, not really much of it, because it's all a bit second rate and about sixty years out of date. One needs to understand something about the history of ideas – very often ideas are like streams – they start high up in the rarefied and remote mountain tops of academia where no-one notices them until much later they plunge into the ocean of everyday culture – everyone knows what the sub-conscious, quarks, DNA, and genes are these days – but when they were first talked about they were confined to specialist circles. The New Atheists are saying things that A J Ayer, Carnap, Bertrand Russell and the early Wittgenstein were saying far more eloquently decades ago, and writers such as Flew and Keith Ward have really pretty comprehensively debunked – if you want a good modern day logical positivist who is keeping the faith alive I would go for Bas van Fraassen rather than the New Atheists anyway. I think one thing that Flew is very good at is showing the contours of this mountain – it starts with David Hume, reaches a peak with logical positivism, and then comes down the other side, so that today analytic philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga, Thomas Tracy and Brian Leftow, are just as likely to be theists as atheists. Whereas Dawkins would like to convince us that residual religiosity is simply Arnold's 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,' now in permanent retreat from the modern world – Flew and others provide

a convincing case that such self-assured and radical atheism is simply another phase in philosophy which will no doubt leave its mark and its disciples, but is actually now itself in terminal decline.

But now in the last part of this lecture let us come down the mountain, and seek to understand why faith is once again a respectable topic for public knowledge and debate. Well firstly the disintegration of logical positivism was largely self-inflicted – it was as though its chief protagonists had sobered up, and were increasingly likely to find themselves apologizing for their over-indulgence - in England for instance, A J Ayer admitted that the problem with logical positivism in hindsight was that most of what it said was simply false. A good example of this was the verification principle itself which though it took a variety of forms said something like: ‘If a statement is not self-evident and you can’t verify it with observation then its meaningless’. The problem is that it is of course self refuting: is the verification principle self-evident – no – can you verify it by observation – no – well then it’s meaningless! It’s rather like the famous ending to David Humes book, *The theory of knowledge*:

*‘Let us ask, does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning*

*matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames; for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.’

To which philosophers ever since have replied: do David Hume’s books contain abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number – no – do they contain experimental reasoning concerning matters of fact and existence – no – therefore.....

The most famous philosophical self-repudiation was that of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Just after the end of the first war a brilliant young philosopher called Ludwig Wittgenstein was peddling an essay of sublime genius called *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* around various publishers. Unfortunately it was so sublime that no one understood it. Frustrated and disappointed Wittgenstein gave the manuscript to his friend Bertrand Russell and told him he no longer wanted anything to do with it. Russell took him at his word, realised that no one would ever understand it, wrote an introduction saying ‘this is a work of logical positivism’ and got it published. Because people didn’t understand it, no one ever dared to say to Russell – look here, whatever this is, it certainly isn’t logical positivism pure and simple – so the early Wittgenstein is often thought of as just another representative of the Vienna circle – there is no doubt each influenced the other, but he was simply not interested in the same things. However Wittgenstein a

notoriously unstable genius, and believing that he had said everything that needed to be said, gave up philosophy, was for a short time a primary school teacher, then toyed with the idea of becoming a monk, then designed his sister's house. He later returned to philosophy in Cambridge, but then also repudiated everything that logical positivism stood for, and forced philosophy to take what later became known as the linguistic turn.

Up until that point philosophy and logical positivism particularly had largely concerned itself with deciding whether propositions were true or false. But propositions were reliant on language for their expression. Now philosophers knew that language was often ambiguous and tricky – so very often philosophers – Gottlieb Frege is a good example – took against what they called natural or ordinary language and tried to create a more precise and constructed language – Esperanto and scientific languages are examples. The problem is as we know, that whenever scientists want to communicate or influence the wider society they have to do so in ordinary language, which does not obey the rules of their laboratory – that is why there is often public debate over how we understand a particular scientific development.

Wittgenstein basically came to see this whole enterprise as useless – language can't even convey what coffee smells like to someone who

has never come across it said Wittgenstein, so why should we assume it can tell us about this great chaotic universe. Language is such a chaotic, unruly, ambiguous, poetic leviathan that we can't hope to tame it and decide whether propositions made from it are true and false – all we can do is try and clarify or show what they mean. To take our earlier example about Lucky the horse in the yard – it's only in fact a valid argument if we talking about the same yard, we have assumed that the sentences are not spoken thousands of years apart, that by horse we don't mean donkey or toy horse, that we know precisely what the colour spectrum of black is, and what do we think of a mainly black horse with some white marks? This twist has radical implications for the relationship between philosophy and theology. If the linguistic turn is taken, then philosophy can't possible hope to adjudicate the truth of sentences like: 'There is a God' or 'Jesus Christ is the revelation of God' – it can only, and this is still an absolutely vital task, get people to sit down and clarify what such statements mean. This is ever so important for religious language, which has such a variety of settings and uses, such rich use of poetry and metaphor, that very often people may mean very different things by identical religious statements.

One of the particular problems of language for the logical positivists was that people tend to see the world through their language. And if

their world suddenly becomes populated by new scientific terms then they see the world through those terms. So observations won't be clear and unequivocal but filtered through what the observer already understands the world to consist of – it's called the theory-ladenness of observation and it is crippling to logical positivism. Nowadays we might well hear people say upon seeing someone's erratic behaviour: 'It's in the genes' or 'That's been bubbling up in his sub-conscious for years' – but those statements are only comprehensible to a culture which has absorbed some basics of psycho-analysis and genetics into everyday use.

Logical positivists accused people of faith of relying on meaningless articles of faith as guiding their knowledge. But they were blind to articles of faith which modern science had taken on board: modern science had assumed that the world was not an illusion, that it was ordered, that it was intelligible, that it was constant and obeyed certain laws, that it was describable with language, that it didn't fake things when scientists experimented on it – like humans might do if they were made to unwillingly participate in scientific experiments – but these were themselves all articles of faith. And logical positivism ruled out even asking certain questions like: 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' Or 'How is change possible'? Questions which had fascinated

ancient philosophers. One of the reasons that logical positivists were so blind to such beliefs and questions is that there is a very good explanation, maybe even a very good scientific explanation for them, as Richard Swinburne says: the best explanation of all these things is that God exists and that he created the world. Hence it is ordered, and beautiful, and intelligible, and constant, and it is there rather than not being there. If good science is about giving reasonable explanations, then God created the universe is a very respectable scientific explanation with quite a lot of evidence for it. It's a nice simple explanation and scientists were always supposed to favour simplicity.

But now back to our old friend Euclid. Euclid had been going strong for well over 2000 years. But people were worried about his fifth axiom or postulate – the parallel postulate. It didn't seem as obvious as the others. By 1763 there were 28 attempted proofs of it – all were wrong. Mathematicians started developing non-Euclidean geometries – i.e. ones which never used the parallel postulate. A hundred or so years later a young genius called Albert Einstein in his general theory of relativity of 1915 suggested that maybe in fact real space, the space we live and move in wasn't Euclidean. He was right. It wasn't that Euclid's deductions were invalid – it was just that they described a sort of space which wasn't ours. The problem was that, if you remember,

philosophers had always held up Euclid as a model of how subjects ought to organise themselves – Newton and Kant were absolutely committed to Euclidean geometry – and these giants of Western thought fell with these discoveries – real space and time was far more mysterious and strange than they had supposed. Interestingly Dawkins who is always on about following the evidence wherever it leads, merrily says in the *God Delusion* that Einstein was an atheist.

Interestingly, though Einstein did not believe in a personal God, he did write ‘I am not an atheist’ – it would be tempting to ask Dawkins what word in that sentence he does not understand. Also interestingly, Dawkins the outstanding biologist, says very little about physics in his work – either because physics in the twentieth century hasn’t really been on his side, and also probably because he doesn’t really understand it.

In conclusion the point about the story of Euclid’s demise is that it is also the demise of what we call foundationalism. Euclid supposed that human beings should build big knowledge up logically from small certain foundations. That way sure and certain progress could be made. That ideal, that aim, that method, I would submit has dominated Western epistemology ever since. The Enlightenment narrowed the method down to allow only self-evident and evident to the senses

building blocks. Faith and knowledge founded on revelation or religious experience has been sent as Polanyi put it, to the political wilderness of the Upper House. I want to suggest that real living human being, even communities such as the Royal Society do not function in a foundational manner anyway – and it is a false ideal. The rot set in with Karl Popper and Wittgenstein. Popper said you can't find solid bedrock for human knowledge, you just have to drive the piles into the swamp as far as you can go. Wittgenstein said in a similar metaphor – the rigorous philosopher is simply the one who digs as far as he can – until 'his spade is turned'. The Enlightenment metaphor for human knowledge as a vast and solid structure built on rock is simply idolatry for the material world – the Bible uses the same metaphor and reminds us that God is our rock, and that Christ is made the sure foundation.

When builders build on swampy ground they talk of putting down a raft of concrete to stabilise the building. The metaphor has switched from a structural one to a maritime one. Philosophers as diverse as Neurath, Bhaskar, Clifford, Plantinga, and Lorenzen have all used the metaphor for human rationality as a ship afloat upon the high seas, secure and stable, but lacking the ultimacy of a fixed structure. Even more flexible and open is a metaphor of Quine taken up by Rorty, Putnam and Swinburne, of human knowledge as a vast web or network, rather like

the internet with no centre or base but every node relating to everything else.

To return to where I started – public figures will often tell us what we ‘know’ – they will start with a supposedly foundational belief that we will all share, and work up to the particular conclusion which they hope they can persuade us to sign up to. In this they will often assume that reason and evidence are to be promoted, and articles of religious faith to be avoided. People will also probably have pretty set ideas about what counts as evidence, and what exactly is reasonable, though often they will not be able to tell you why. I don’t think such clear lines, between faith and knowledge, between reason and revelation can be drawn – I believe rather, that who we are and what we believe, is far more like a web or a network, constantly undergoing minor adjustments and reconfigurations. Sure there will be some fixed point, some things we hold on to all our lives – the laws of thermodynamics, the love of our parents, the existence of God – all those are pretty set points for me – but there will be a constant negotiation over what we mean by evidence, whether for instance religious experience or prayers heard counts as evidence, negotiation over how reason interprets and joins together articles of faith, reason will be informed by revelation, and reason will also sift true from false revelation, so that in this ever

shifting living organic network truth might be known and discovered –  
and who knows such an untidy process of discovery might actually be  
classed as fun.