

**BALLIOL COLLEGE CHAPEL SERMON,
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**And he is before all things, and by him all things
consist.**

Colossians. I.13.

**Douglas Dupree told me when he invited me here
tonight—for which I am very grateful—that lay
sermons are often apologetic in flavour: they are
attempts to link Christian belief to the speaker's day
job. My research has metaphysical, but little
theological, relevance. I am interested in artificial
intelligence and, in particular, language processing
by computers, such as engaging in conversations
with them of the sort that could be said to show
personality or emotion: trying to construct the kind
of talking computer you might want as a long term
friend or companion. I have been doing this sort of
thing for so long I can hardly remember why, but I**

know it goes back to early days in Cambridge and working as a research student at a tiny outfit called the Cambridge Language Research Unit, run by a charismatic woman called Margaret Masterman—a woman who effectively founded computational language processing in Britain, an early student of Wittgenstein, a co-founder of a graduate college and an early advocate of women priests, though she did not live to see any ordained. She would have liked the phrase “artificial intelligence is the pursuit of metaphysics by other means” had she been the one to think of it. She was undoubtedly the greatest intellectual influence on my life, or at least so I thought until recently.

However, she was not a person with the serious University job—that was her husband, and it was tacitly agreed between them that she was the creative force and he had the dry-as-dust job in the philosophy of science. Richard Braithwaite became

my doctoral supervisor as a favour to his wife, even though he had no interest at all in my work, and didn't pretend to have one. Supervision was not taken so seriously in those days—it was assumed you would get through by yourself. He had written the then standard work on the structure of scientific theories called *Scientific Explanation*. However, his reputation today rests not on that work but on two essays he threw off rapidly: the first was his inaugural lecture. He had been elected to the Knightbridge Chair in Moral Philosophy, there being only two philosophy chairs at Cambridge and this one was going. But he knew nothing at all about ethics, so he gave a lecture on what he did know about called “The theory of games as a tool for the moral philosopher”, and in doing so created a wholly new subject.

Later, in 1953 he gave the Eddington lecture: “An empiricists view of the nature of religious belief”.

Again, and in a fit of almost absence of mind, he managed to found another new area of research. That is normally now called expressivism and its best known proponent is Paul van Buren: namely, the view that religion consists essentially in moral stories, not truth bearing claims, and which have the power to change lives. As he himself put it: "the meaning of a religious assertion is given by its use in expressing the asserter's intention to follow a particular policy of behaviour". That view has a certain plausibility: it is likely that the parable of the Good Samaritan has been involved in many more moral decisions than any calculation based on Mill's utilitarian calculus of the greatest good or on the application of Kant's rule normally known as the categorical imperative. It also led, for Braithwaite, to an appreciation of novels as moral guides: he would have agreed, had he known it, with the novelist Joan Didion's remark: "we tell ourselves stories in order to live". Braithwaite shared more

with Wittgenstein that he probably realized—the men did not get on well, though Braithwaite provided the famous poker in the anecdote---they shared the belief that religion and science were discourses that did not contradict each other, though both were important, and in the philosophical power of novels.

I mention this fragment of intellectual autobiography—what our near neighbours would call formation or Bildung----to show how wrong one can be about one's own influences: he was in fact as original and influential as his wife, and they were both wrong about that. I absorbed far more from him than I knew, and not in ways related to my thesis; perhaps supervision has its virtues after all. He had something in common with Sullivan the composer, of Gilbert and Sullivan fame , who always thought he would be remembered for his sacred and classical music and not for those Savoy operas.

But Braithwaite's view completely sidesteps the issue of the truth of theological assertions. Another more recent view that also does that, and one to whose discussion I contributed in a small way, is Dennett's recent writing on evolution and false beliefs. Dennett, one of the world's more popular philosophers, was originally the in-house philosopher of artificial intelligence, but he has latterly become obsessed with evolution, not so much as a theory of species formation but as a key to mental development.. Last year he tackled what was for him, as an atheist, the puzzle of why false beliefs seem to survive so well: not only religion, but beliefs such as one's own good looks or that one will recover from an incurable disease—all beliefs that seem to have positive effects on those who hold them, independently of their being true or not. "How can evident falsehoods be evolutionarily privileged?" he asked himself.

I think Dennett's view, and I am not giving a proper account of it here, is absurd—there is simply no way particular beliefs can be linked to any evolutionary transmission mechanism we know of. But my reason for mentioning it is that, like Braithwaite, although from within the anti-religion camp this time, it sidelines all issues of truth in favour of survivability. Unlike Braithwaite, and of course Dennett, I think one cannot completely avoid the issue of what is true in religion, as opposed to what works, what makes one better, or fitter to survive.

I think one can and must adopt some kind of stance, to use a word Dennett likes, about the universe as a whole and the truths of religion, though it is not a scientific stance. Having a stance towards the universe as a whole, its origins, nature and future as far as we can know it now, is quite different from Braithwaite's moral expression of intention.

The philosopher F.P. Ramsey, a younger colleague of Braithwaite, whose work he published posthumously, as well as a brother of the future Archbishop, said this long ago “Weighing 24 stone, as I do, I am not impressed by arguments about the size of the Universe.” I am in the same position more or less, but am impressed not only by its size but by what we know of its nature in the very large and the very small. I still am in awe of the old question “why is there something rather than nothing?”

A key principle of most modern philosophy of science, which we owe mostly to Quine, but which was also clear in Braithwaite’s *Scientific Explanation*, is that scientific theories do not confront the world at the level of individual statements at all, but only as complex wholes—in religion, as in science, we can opt for theories that confront the world as a whole and give satisfaction,

or not, at that level; we can take on what seems to us the best fit with all we know. As Braithwaite put it in his Eddington lecture, one does not need to make every individual claim or entity fit the world---just as one does not expect to locate anything corresponding to an Schroedinger Wave Function in the world. It is the whole that counts. Many scientists accepted the General Theory of Relativity as a satisfying, almost aesthetic, whole long before there was any evidence in its favour. It just felt right

Such wholistic views usually cannot be refuted, of course, but that is no consolation at all. The important notion here for Christians is the possibility of a view that the whole universe may in some sense be personal , or have mental characteristics. This seems to me a perfectly plausible possibility, as discoveries at the very largest and smallest scales become increasingly mysterious and quite unlike the simpler models of

only a few decades ago. Stephen Hawking said a very odd thing earlier this year, which he intended as a retreat from the vaguely theistic language he had used in earlier books. He said, and I paraphrase, that God was not needed for creation—it was only necessary that there be the laws of physics and creation would then follow. Whatever he meant by that, it is an extraordinary remark: what could it be for the laws of physics to exist before there was any matter at all: before the universe was, in that phrase cosmologists used to like, the size of a grapefruit?! Far from a retreat, such a position implies the existence of immaterial laws predating all matter—what could that be a but a universe that was fundamentally mental, as the old 19C idealist philosophers held, and from which it might seem a short step to the personal?

The doctrine of the incarnation is a great mystery: it is not simply about a God become man, Jesus Christ,

but also contains the extraordinary idea that that man was in some way involved in the whole of creation from the very beginning. Today's Epistle contain these words: "And he is before all things, and by him all things consist." That is a most extraordinary idea—unique to the Christian Religion---and one whose scope and meaning it is not easy to grasp. But it can be very satisfying as a view of the otherwise cold, hard, universe in which we live. It may even be true.

**T S Eliot may not have intended to depress us all as he did with the well-known lines from East Coker:
"The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters,
The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers,
Distinguished civil servants, chairmen of many committees,
Industrial lords and petty contractors, all go into the dark....."**

Consider that, if the Universe is indeed personal, as Christian theology maintains, they may all go forward into the light, and in ways we cannot now understand.

Even the merchant bankers.