**11. Is the Bishop an Agnostic?**

*In January 2007 Bishop Richard said that if proof of the existence of God depended on scientific evidence he would have to declare himself an agnostic*

‘Atheists are getting bad press’ was the lament of an Auckland academic, calling for more respect for non-believers in an article in the *New Zealand Herald* in January 2007. Here was a new twist in religious debate. It is usually Christians who lament bad press while non-believers and other faith communities go scot-free. I felt immediately sympathetic with the author and penned a reply for the *Herald* a few days later. I expressed the hope that people might be defined by what they believe, rather than by what they do not, and suggested that ‘humanist’ was a better word for those committed to human wellbeing from a non-religious base.

I wrote that in my experience the ‘god’ atheists did not believe in was not one many Christians believed in either. Such a god was very often an image left over from Sunday School days, or the product of populist caricatures purveyed by crusading atheists like Richard Dawkins. I agreed with Dawkins that the existence of God cannot be proved by science, and said that if my faith in God was dependent upon scientific proof I would have to declare myself an agnostic. Science cannot prove it one way or the other.

The conjunction of the words ‘agnostic’ and ‘bishop’ in the same article was too much for the *Herald* to resist and a reporter, Patrick Gower, was dispatched to conduct an extended interview. The media delights in sniffing out whiffs of heresy among church leaders and the *Herald* clearly thought it was on to a winner here.

Patrick and I had a lengthy interview. He listened carefully, asked good questions and went away with what I judged to be an intelligent understanding of contemporary theology. But knowing how easy it is for reporters to get religious issues wrong, I sent him a two-page email next day, setting out with crystal clarity a summary of my views on key issues. I emphasised the need to look for the deeper meaning of a story rather than to take the story literally. Many might put the story about Jonah and the Whale, for example, in the same childhood category as Jack and the Beanstalk. But this is a story of God’s love for all: Jonah wanted to avoid preaching the word of God in Nineveh, the Sin City of the day, but was redirected courtesy of the ‘whale’.

However, I was not greatly surprised when the *Herald* ran a major article entitled *I’m no wishy-washy believer* which made scant reference to the substantive points I was making. Whether it was Patrick or an editor who had slanted the story, I could not tell. The article said I did not believe in Adam and Eve, nor in the Virgin Birth. What it did not say was that I believed both stories conveyed deep truths in symbolic form, Adam and Eve being generic figures as part of a drama showing the unity of all creation, while the Virgin Birth story pointed to the unity of human and divine natures in Christ.

Reaction to the article was extensive. Prime Minister Helen Clark rang to congratulate me on having the courage to raise contemporary issues of faith in public. But the *Herald* was not finished. Weekly columnist Garth George took up the cudgels. Garth, who could always be counted on for a robust traditional opinion on any matter social or religious, referred to the *Oxford Dictionary* definition of an agnostic as ‘a person who believes that nothing is known or can be known about the existence and nature of God’. This customary definition of ‘agnostic’ was totally disconnected from my use of the word ‘agnostic’. I was talking strictly about scientific proof of God’s existence, not other ways of knowing God. I have yet to meet any church leader or member who believes God can be proved by science.

Garth George further wrote that ‘once a parson reaches a certain level of authority in the (Anglican) church it is well-nigh impossible to dislodge him’. This too is totally untrue. Bishops and clergy are all subject to judicial processes if they breach doctrinal or moral guidelines. I emailed Garth asking him to correct these two major errors, but he declined. Instead he published his views again in the evangelical *Challenge Weekly* which he was editing at the time. This time he published a letter I wrote in response.

I was grateful for the support of my fellow bishops a week later who, meeting in Nelson, issued this statement:

As bishops of this church we regret the way in which the media and talkback hosts have caricatured Bishop Randerson as agnostic and unbeliever. We know, firsthand, that his faithful ministry over 42 years as vicar, social justice commissioner, bishop and dean has consistently reflected the conviction that the nature of God is revealed in Jesus Christ, whom we call Son of God. Bishop Randerson has spoken clearly and personally about the reality of the resurrected Christ.

Garth had the grace to include the bishops’ statement in his next *Herald* column.

Reactions to the *Herald* article fell into three groups. There were letters of concern to the bishop, one demanding that I recant or resign. Another wanted me to affirm my faith in God as a ‘Supreme Personal Being as stated in the creeds’. This gave me pause for thought. Had I been reciting the creeds all my life and missed this reference? I consulted the Anglican prayer book and found no mention of God as a supreme personal being. I wondered about the level of teaching from our pulpits. To one of the clergy I wrote:

As an orthodox believer my own convictions stand clearly within the historic creeds affirmed by the Anglican Church. It is important that clergy themselves are well informed on such matters and able to interpret them accurately to parishioners. It is also important that the Church be able to communicate effectively a contemporary understanding of its beliefs to a huge constituency which includes both its own members as well as many in the wider community. The appreciation from large numbers of people has been astonishing.

As the bishop was away it fell to me to reply to these letters and in every case I offered to meet with the parish concerned. Only one parish accepted the invitation and twelve of us sat round over lunch. I was looking forward to a good dialogue but it was all rather strange as no one seemed to want to say anything.

I also received a few emails from avowed atheists. For different reasons than the concerned clergy they were equally adamant that religious imagery should not be changed. I could almost hear an anguished wail from my computer: ‘You’re not allowed to change anything’. I felt the atheists had well-polished arguments for demolishing traditional religious images but were left without a target when faith was interpreted in a 21st century context.

But the largest number of responses was from people inside and outside the Church who identified strongly with what I said. Some were folk who had abandoned the Church long since, others were interested bystanders, and some were people still in the Church but hanging on by their fingernails. Comments from the many letters and emails I received included:

I really appreciated your article and interview with the *Herald.* For many years I kept my struggle over the dissonance between my views and the words we say in church to myself. I also imagined I was probably the only person who felt like that. In retrospect I am astonished I thought that. The reason probably is that it is rare for such views to be discussed in church, whereas each week we repeat the same words from the prayer book, and there is no indication they are not being accepted literally by everyone.

Your description of your faith experience – in touch with something other – and the impact of the awareness of mystery and the paradox of it being personal and yet unable to say clearly what is ‘on the other side of that’, resonates so much with where I find myself to be.

You have been instrumental in my return to Anglicanism after 35 years. I admire your courage and integrity and have felt supported and encouraged in my faith journey these last two years.

My first encounter with Richard Dawkins[[1]](#footnote-1) was in an interview with Kim Hill on National Radio in December 2006. I listened as she first interviewed Dawkins by telephone from Oxford, UK, on his book *The God Delusion[[2]](#footnote-2).*  For the next half-hour Kim and I discussed the book and the author’s arguments.

I said to Kim I thought the book the most dishonest I had ever read because Dawkins’ attack on religion was based entirely on caricatures and fundamentalist viewpoints. Totally absent from the book was any reference to contemporary religious scholars such as Rowan Williams, Karen Armstrong, Marcus Borg, Tom Wright or Walter Wink. Academic integrity requires an impartial overview of a topic, not a narrowly selected set of extreme views to support a pre-determined conclusion.

Dawkins is well aware of alternative views and worked closely on a public education issue with the then Bishop of Oxford, Richard Harries. Together they wrote a letter to Prime Minister Tony Blair protesting at a proposal to introduce the doctrine of creationism into a state school science curriculum. The letter was signed by eight bishops and nine senior scientists, and Dawkins notes that the letter was drafted by the Bishop of Oxford. Church and Science lined up to oppose religious fundamentalism, but Dawkins nonetheless ignores intelligent religious thinking, presumably because it would undermine his atheistic crusade.

But lop-sided as his arguments are, Richard Dawkins has a large global following among the growing numbers today who know next to nothing about the historic Christian faith. Gone are the days when most might have some awareness of the basics of Christianity, even at a Sunday School level. ‘What’s Easter?’ a teenager asked me once. And there’s the reported comment from a young modern at a Christmas parade: ‘Isn’t it outrageous that now even the churches are trying to jump on the Christmas band-wagon?’

Caricatures abound in the popular mind. Speculative theories are advanced that Jesus didn’t die on the Cross but was revived from a death-like coma, married Mary Magdalene and they both lived happily ever after by the Dead Sea. A religiously uninformed population is unable to critique the theories of Dawkins and others, and hence take their theories as authentic. There is also a genre of journalists who delight in stream-of-consciousness, caricature-based polemics against the Church. Like Dawkins, they exclude any objective or intelligent assessment. The global outrage over the Danish cartoon mocking Islam some years back deters any journalist from a similar attempt today, but it is open season for attacks on Christianity.

Dawkins has a legitimate target in religious fundamentalism. Belief by some churches in the imminent end of the world leads to conclusions like ‘don’t bother working for peace or justice, to help the poor or save the environment: the world will soon end and all those problems will be forgotten’. Mainstream religion is at one with Dawkins in attacking such gross theological and ethical distortions.

Richard Dawkins directs much of his energy to showing the irrational nature of belief in God. But what would constitute a contemporary understanding of God in the 21st century? And when we talk of ‘God’, what sort of image is in our mind? The traditional image of God as a supernatural being is well-established and has been a source of strength for many both past and present. But if, as I experience, God is mystery, can there be different images of a mystery which human words and images cannot adequately express?

American theologian Marcus Borg suggests there are two very different understandings of ‘God’ in the Christian tradition.[[3]](#footnote-3) One is of ‘God as a Being’, the other of ‘God as Sacred Presence’. The two are not mutually exclusive, one expressing the transcendence of God, the other the immanence, or presence, of God. Karen Armstrong[[4]](#footnote-4) offers a similar, but slightly different, distinction between ‘God as a Being’ and ‘God as Being’, a distinction that resonates strongly with my own experience.

There is no irrefutable argument to prove the existence of God; in fact the whole question is wrongly construed. When someone asks: ‘do you believe in the existence of God?’ the question is usually understood as ‘do you believe in “God as a Being”, a supernatural person who created the universe, governs the affairs of the world and can intervene for good or ill’? In popular thinking, how you answer that question defines you as an atheist, agnostic or believer.

This is where Dawkins gets off on the wrong track to start with. Assuming that the faith question is about belief in the existence of a supernatural being, he cites Bertrand Russell’s analogy of a celestial teapot.[[5]](#footnote-5) Russell hypothesises that a china teapot is in orbit between Earth and Mars. The teapot is too small to be observable, so no one can prove it doesn’t exist, but who in their right mind would believe it actually does? So it is with the existence of God, says Russell, and Dawkins agrees. The proposal cannot be disproved but anyone with an ounce of common sense would regard it as ridiculous.

With this *argumentum ad absurdum,* Dawkins dismisses any rational basis for belief in ‘God as a Being’, but perhaps we should be grateful to him. For in demonstrating one absurdity, he unwittingly demonstrates an even greater absurdity, and that is trying to address the question of faith within this kind of framework. I want to suggest that the question of faith is not one of intellectual assent to the *existence* of ‘God as a Being’ but arises out of our *experience* of ‘God as Being’, a reality at the heart of human life. Nothing can be proved or disproved, but there are experiences that may be shared of a mystery that people interpret in different ways. I see ‘God as a Being’ as a traditional image of ‘God as Being’, but not the only image.

What are some of those experiences? I was once asked by a man dying of cancer in his 60s to conduct his funeral. He was not a religious person, but wanted a funeral that respected the integrity of his non-religious beliefs. I have conducted many such funerals over the years and was happy to accede to his request. When I asked him how he viewed life and death, he said: ‘I don’t believe in God, but I have a feeling of being part of something bigger than myself.’ I was amazed because his words are the same ones I would use to describe my core experience of God. I feel part of something bigger than myself, something that transcends all human life and creation and links me to every person and part of creation.

Other people express such feelings in other ways. In a personal reflection Tim Murray, a retired Australian headmaster who spent his teaching life in church schools, writes that he ‘attended chapels and churches regularly for 50 years, received communion, read lessons, even preached an occasional “sermon”, sang in choirs, read religious poetry, directed religious plays and festivals… so that the language and atmosphere of religious activity…was absorbed through the pores of the skin’. ‘But’, he asks, ‘now that I am “free”, where am I?’ And pushing beyond all the religious words and images to something deeper, he pens these words:

Somewhere deep in our destiny

there’s a dimension

no microscope has power to penetrate,

no telescope has strength to see –

a dimension without which

we are unimaginable.

No sense can make it tangible;

nothing tangible can make it sense.

It is the still point around which

we revolve and

have our being.

It is utterly and infinitely central.

Some might call it conscience,

the essence of self,

the whisper of the soul,

depth, destiny,

purpose, meaning,

mystery.

Some might call it God.

Why try to find a label?

Why try to tie it down?

By definition it is beyond our grasp because

it is beyond our reach – but it has to be there.

Without it our world would not turn.

Many will know the words of Dag Hammarskjold, second Secretary-General of the United Nations:

I don’t know who or what put the question. I don’t know when it was put. I don’t even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone, or Something, and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Hammarskjold records an experience of otherness, of mystery, something that cannot be put into words, but from which arose his vocation to serve others. This sense of vocation came strongly to Moses as he tended his father-in-law Jethro’s sheep on Mount Horeb. It was doubtless a slow day when Moses turned aside to see a bush alive with fire. From the bush he heard a voice that spoke of the suffering of his people Israel, and called him to the risky task of confronting Egypt’s Pharaoh and leading Israel out of Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land. When Moses enquired as to the name of the One who was calling him, the enigmatic reply he received was ‘I am who I am’.[[7]](#footnote-7) The name conveys the sense of being, or essence, consistent with the image of ‘God as Being’.

Other people express their sense of ‘something bigger than themselves’ in other ways. I asked a church study group once what they felt God meant to them – forget words, creeds, pictures, just quite simply their bottom-line lived experience. There was a long silence but at length a woman in her 40s, a hospital nurse and mother, said: ‘Well I guess for me it’s a feeling that whatever happens to me in life, I am never alone.’

I have often quoted the words of Cathy Benland who, in 1987, made a submission to a New Zealand Royal Commission on Social Policy on *The S-Factor,* where S stood for Spirit. ‘What would be the common elements,’ she asked, ‘of a spirituality most New Zealanders might identify with?’ Among the elements she listed ‘a sense of awe in the face of the mystery of existence’. Many would identify with her words when we stop to ponder the miracle of our universe.

Kate Brignall, an English doctor in Wellington for a year’s sabbatical in 2012, offers another perspective on God in this sense of ‘mysterious other’. Kate and I spent extended sessions in Bellagio’s coffee shop in Hataitai exploring our understanding of God. Shortly before returning home Kate wrote:

The true human identity is God

that which is unifying, beyond, ethereal

within us and yet perceived beyond us

that which gives meaning and purpose

Calling the selfish self to the selfless self

that which is truth of being

touching, reaching, communicating

that which binds all things in the universe together

stars, sky, sea, earth and every living thing

that which tends, nurtures, is life-giving

a reflection of ultimate goodness

that which resonates deep within the soul

this is what I call God.

Think also of events which bring tears to one’s eyes. Tears are a sign of being touched at the core of our being by things that are profoundly real. Typically they catch us when we experience great grief over the loss of a loved one, or when we see others experiencing such loss. Or contrariwise in the experience of great joy, when people who had been lost to one another are re-united, or when some amazing and totally unexpected outcome happens for a family experiencing natural disaster such as a flood or house fire. Or when people act with unrestricted compassion and generosity to assist complete strangers facing urgent need, be it at home or abroad.

Or again when people have the capacity to transcend a massive loss and act with greatness of spirit. One such example moved the nation a few years ago when a young Christchurch mother, Emma Woods, spoke of the death of her four-year old son, Nayan, who was tragically killed by a car that spun out of control. Emma said of little Nayan: ‘We had a perfect day at Playcentre, played lots of games together, and had a good time at the mall. I have no regrets about that day – we had fun together.’

And of the young driver of the car: ‘We are pretty clear we don’t want this to be the defining moment of his life. He is young, only 17. He has got his whole life ahead of him and we hope he will use it to do good things, to be good with people, and maybe eventually to be a good father.’ I know nothing of Emma’s spirituality, but her words are an astonishing statement of wisdom and generosity in the face of unimaginable grief. She has drawn on the deepest resources of spirit, while acknowledging the extent of the loss and pain she will feel through long years ahead.

I offer these experiences and reflections as examples of ‘God as Being’ rather than ‘God as a Being’. ‘God as Being’ is like the air we breathe, or the water in which fish swim. It is the life-giving milieu in which we exist. It is that which lifts us beyond ourselves to some larger vision and love. The faith question is no longer ‘do you believe in the existence of a supernatural being?’, but ‘what do you experience at the heart of life?’ People name or describe these experiences in many different ways, religious and non-religious. It is not about proving the existence of anyone or anything - simply how we interpret basic human experience.

Such experience is universal through time. Both Moses and Dag Hammarskjold found their vocation arose from an encounter with mystery. And when we are moved by a reconciliation between two people who had been lost to one another, we find an ancient parallel in the story of the Prodigal Son[[8]](#footnote-8), a young man who took his share of his father’s inheritance and blew it all in riotous living. Broke and friendless he heads for home, his mind rehearsing speeches of abject humility and apology. But his father sees him coming, dashes out to meet him and, waving all speeches aside, welcomes his lost son home and throws a party. The dynamics of human life and relationships do not change.

Many might identify with these experiences without putting them in a religious framework. As I said, nothing can be proved. People find a framework to express their experiences and choose to live within it. For the Church, ‘God as a Being’ or ‘God as Being’ is at the heart of these central experiences in life. Words and images express the nature of God through stories, music, paintings and icons which form a rich and evocative heritage. But interpreted in a literal manner the heritage can become a barrier to understanding. Much of the heritage is symbolic, pointing to powerful truths lying beyond and beneath what appears on the surface. Faith is not in the heritage, but in the deeper truths to which the heritage points. To attempt to shoehorn such richness into the straitjacket of facts or rational proof is a singularly blinkered endeavour.

‘God as a Being’ has been a central part of the heritage and points to a supernatural person who acts with wisdom, love and care for all God’s people. The image works powerfully for many in encountering God, and hence is to be honoured. But increasingly in the 21st century it is an image that has become a barrier for many, for several reasons.

First, it is an image that comes from the traditional religious framework of a three-decker universe of heaven, earth and hell, a universe peopled by gods, demons, angels and spirits. There can be symbolic meaning to these concepts, but for many today such symbolism is unreal, and the whole framework rejected.

Second, there is a tendency towards anthropomorphism, to construct God in our own human image. A well-attended address by Lloyd Geering[[9]](#footnote-9) , entitled *How Humans Made God,* discussed this theme. As I shall show later, I disagree with Geering’s conclusion, but he lucidly set out the dangers of anthropomorphism. Awareness of this danger dates back 2,500 years to the classical Greek era when a philosopher, Xenophanes, satirised this tendency thus:

But if cattle and horses and lions had hands or could paint with their hands and create works such as men do, horses like horses and cattle like cattle, (they) would depict the gods’ shapes and make their bodies of such a sort as the form they themselves have.

In other words, if the horses wanted a god they would choose a horse. It could not, of course, be any old nag that whinnied and wheezed, grew old and died. It would have to be a horse characterised by the finest of qualities – power, wisdom, eternal youth, leadership and protection of all the equine race. The danger of having an image of God as a supernatural being is that we append to a human image such qualities as all-loving, all-wise, all-knowing, all-powerful, eternal and pre-existent.

The concept of a pre-existing Being leads into the third problem, that of the ongoing, sterile debate with science about cosmic origins. A pre-existing being, it is argued, must have had a hand in the formation of the physical universe. But since time and causation did not exist until the universe was formed, concepts of pre-existence and first cause have no meaning outside the existing cosmos. In truth, neither theologian nor scientist has an exact answer about cosmic origins. Endless debate leads nowhere. Science and religion are complementary. Concepts of evolution and the Big Bang add much to our knowledge of the physical workings of the world. Religion offers wisdom about how we live within that world, our sense of connectedness to all people and the earth, our sense of care for all that is.

By contrast the ‘God as Being’ framework avoids fruitless debate with scientists about the beginnings of the universe, yet I have never heard a public debate between theologian and scientist based on anything other than ‘God as a Being’. I once debated the question of cosmic creation with a scientist in Auckland and took the ‘God as Being’ approach. Such an approach bypasses the customary sterile arguments and opens the way to a fruitful discussion on how religion and science can work together on key ethical issues such as in medicine and technology.

The problem of evil is a fourth major issue with ‘God as a Being’. It cropped up with the Asian tsunami in 2004, or with the more recent Christchurch earthquakes, or at the personal level when someone we love is dying, or has been killed in a road accident. Did God send such disasters? Or why didn’t God intervene to prevent or remove such human tragedy? The concept of a supernatural being who intervenes, or doesn’t but should, is a product of anthropomorphic thinking, a problem avoided by other images of God.

For myself in recent years I have felt increasingly comfortable with the reality of God as mystery. I do not need to have answers to all the ‘Why?’ questions about life and the universe. Like the man I quoted at the outset, I have a sense of being part of something bigger than myself. I have a sense of being cared for. I understand God as love or spirit. In prayer I feel I open myself to such love and spirit which provides a sense of spiritual well-being. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, describes his experience of prayer: ‘I feel I am being attended to.’ It is an experience which is intensely personal without necessarily feeling there is literally a Person on the other side. One could describe the mystery as trans-personal. It is an experience which clarifies vision, re-sets directions, reminds one of one’s calling and values, and helps one reach out with compassion to all in need.

The language the Church uses in worship is almost entirely based on the traditional concept of ‘God as a Being’. It is a language that assumes God is a Person to whom we pray, who hears our prayers and responds. For those whose experience God as Being rather than a Being, the language requires a more symbolic interpretation. Impersonal language is not the answer since, whichever image one feels most at home with, the experience of God is the same, and the experience is intensely personal.

The experience of ‘God as Being’, a mystery of love and spirit, is the reality that I find makes better sense than the image of ‘God as a Being’. It is the God image that works for me, while I acknowledge other images, or no image, work better for others. It is the same reality that drives our work of caring, justice, peace-making, reconciliation and environmental stewardship. The test is what image and framework works for us in experiencing and living by the deepest realities of human existence.

And here is where I disagree with Geering’s conclusion in *How Humans Made God*. He concluded his lecture with a quote from the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72):

We must replace the love of God by the love of man as the only true religion. The fate of mankind depends not on a being outside it and above it but on mankind itself…My wish is to transform friends of God into friends of man, believers into thinkers, devotees of prayer into devotees of work, candidates for the hereafter into students of this world.

To which Geering added:

In the evolving world of human thought the idea of God has now done its work and a great work it was. It is over to us, as humanity come of age, to shoulder responsibilities we once expected the heavenly parent to do for us.

What Richard Dawkins and Lloyd Geering have in common is a simplistic choice between God as a supernatural being or humanism. The choice might be described as a theological bipolar disorder. Each limits his view of God to one exclusive, albeit traditional, image of God as a supernatural being. Each demolishes that image, Geering in a more sophisticated and erudite fashion than Dawkins. Each concludes the only alternative is humanism. Each ignores the whole concept and experience of God as mystery, or ‘God as Being’. And sadly, the bulk of their hearers lack sufficient theological awareness to critique this fundamentalist dualism.

In what sense is God ‘real’? God as a supernatural being has a sense of reality even if one cannot prove the existence of such a being. But God as mystery may seem vague and unreal. In either case reality lies in the life experiences out of which any concept of God grows. The best analogy is that of love. No one would deny the reality of love. It is one of life’s most powerful forces, and hopefully there is no one who has not experienced that reality, however remote love might be in some of life’s sad situations. Where does love come from? Is it from some outside source, some reservoir of love on which we can draw, perhaps like one of Plato’s forms? Or is it something that springs into a relationship spontaneously whenever two people act lovingly to one another? Whatever one’s view, the reality of love is the same.

CK Stead’s prize-winning novel *My Name was Judas* (2006) stirred another important element in public debate in New Zealand. The novel is a well-researched book, and a good read, and I had a stimulating cup of coffee with the author to discuss it. The book raises questions about why we call Jesus the Son of God. Is it because he worked miracles? Or is it something else? Jesus once asked his disciples who they thought he was. Peter replied: ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’[[10]](#footnote-10) It is the same question people ask today, and many different answers are offered.

From the outset Christians came to see in Jesus the revelation of the divine mystery. Talk of God as mystery can be somewhat vague and not much help to ordinary folk wanting clues on how to respond to the many complexities of daily life. If one speaks of God as love, then in Jesus the fullness of that love is clearly seen. Jesus disregarded all boundaries and conventions that stood in the way of reaching out to the broken-hearted, the poor and despised. His words and actions brought hope to those on the margins of life while challenging the comfortable perceptions of the rich and powerful.

To call Jesus ‘Son of God’ expresses the belief that in Jesus the true nature of God was fully revealed. The late English Bishop John Robinson described him as a ‘window into God’, and in common parlance one might say he was a ‘chip off the old block’. There are two important things to note here. First, for those who have dismissed the idea of God, Jesus cannot be Son of God for there is no God to be son of. For them, Jesus may be a revered prophet, sage or source of moral wisdom, along with others throughout history.

Second, there can be no proof that Jesus is the Son of God. One cannot prove the existence of God, and neither can one prove that Jesus was the Son of God. It is a question of discernment and choice, the interpretation each person makes of life’s central experiences, and the values and commitments one chooses in consequence.

Nonetheless, many attempts have been made to prove that Jesus was the Son of God. In the popular mind the Church’s teaching that Christ was born of Mary the Virgin with no human father is seen as such an attempt. With a human mother and a divine father Jesus’ humanity and divinity are neatly demonstrated. The trouble is that most people today don’t believe virgin births are possible. Many hence dismiss this idea out of hand. If belief in a virgin birth, along with sundry other miracles, is seen as essential to faith, then many turn back before they have even started.

The difference between literalism and symbolism is key to resolving this dilemma. As long ago as 1922, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York appointed a commission of bishops and theologians to examine key Christian doctrines.[[11]](#footnote-11) It took 16 years for the commission to report, and on the Virgin Birth some members believed there had been a literal virgin birth, while others saw the birth story as symbolic. What they all agreed was that the essential truth of the story was that in Jesus both divine and human natures were completely at one. The literal truth or otherwise of the birth narrative was not essential to faith, but the perception of Jesus as Son of God was.

A 75-year-old church member once asked me if I believed in the Virgin Birth. He had been an Anglican all his life, holding significant church positions. I said I most certainly did believe in the Virgin Birth, but in a symbolic manner as just outlined. He replied that in all his years in the Church no vicar had ever explained that to him. I was appalled. Here was a key article of faith which a doctrinal commission had lucidly addressed 75 years ago, but no one had ever spelled it out to this life-long Anglican. Again, it made me wonder what level of theology goes out from the pulpit.

C K Stead assumes that Jesus’ status as Son of God depends upon his miracle-working capacity, an idea he then proceeds to debunk. His novel is written as a reflection by Judas 40 years after the death of Jesus. Judas writes of a childhood upbringing as a friend of Jesus – their homes, play, education, conversations. As they become adults, Judas observes Jesus taking on more of a leadership and preacher role and gathering crowds around him. Talk of Jesus as a Messiah alarms Judas, who thinks the people are getting carried away.

Judas explains how many of Jesus’ so-called miracles were really no more than ordinary human events exaggerated into miraculous divine acts by incredulous supporters. Thus a man with an evil spirit was cured not by divine power, but by Jesus’ calm manner: Jesus had a way of talking to people that helped them into a peaceful frame of mind. And the story of Jesus raising a man from the dead was likewise an exaggeration by his followers: the man was only close to death. The disciples’ various accounts of resurrection appearances are no more than the kinds of voices and visions bereaved people often experience in thinking of the dead, Stead suggests via Judas. On the assumption that Messiahship depends on the ability to work miracles, Stead dismisses any claims about Jesus as Messiah because there were really no miracles to support such a claim.

In reducing divine miracles to the status of exaggerated accounts of human events, Stead provides a useful counterpoint to a different kind of exaggeration – that which exalts the divinity of Jesus, portraying him as a godlike figure who descends from heaven, strides across Palestine subverting the laws of nature with amazing miracles and, after his death, is brought back to life and returns via a cloud to heaven. Such a picture denies the very point of the incarnation, namely that Jesus was fully human, identified with us as human beings and thus opens a new and fuller perspective on God.

The interplay between these two views captures precisely the theological dilemma that has occupied the minds of the Church’s scholars from earliest times: how can the divine and the human be found together in the person of Jesus? In rejecting the divine, Stead errs on one side of the dilemma, just as an emphasis on Jesus as divine miracle-worker errs on the other. Stead compounds his error by concluding his novel with the words: ‘Our friend was not the Messiah, nor will there ever be one.’

So what sense can we make of this? What does it mean to say that in Jesus the human and the divine were both at one? For me it does not depend on miracles and whether they are to be understood literally or symbolically. I see Jesus as Son of God because Jesus’ life and teachings reflect fully the love, truth and justice of God. Jesus’ followers regarded him as Son of God and Messiah on the same basis. The Messiah was the one long expected by the people of Israel who believed that his coming would usher in a new order in which the light and love of God was central, and a peaceable kingdom of universal justice and wellbeing would blossom. In Jesus the disciples saw this fulfilment, and committed themselves to his cause.

This awareness did not result from some miraculous suspension of the laws of nature. Nor did it arise from intellectual proof. Rather it was a truth forged through long days and nights on the road with Jesus, listening, thinking, watching, through days of euphoria to days of darkness when all seemed too hard. But slowly the dawning of the conviction summed up in Peter’s words: ‘Lord, to whom else can we go? You have the words of eternal life.’[[12]](#footnote-12)

Stead’s novel is useful in immersing Jesus fully in the human condition. But his debunking of miracles does not undermine faith in Jesus as Son of God, because faith does not depend on miracles. Stead speculates in an interesting manner about miracles, but it is a peripheral debate. At the end of our coffee conversation I said I hoped my theological critique of his book was not offensive. ‘Not at all,’ he replied. ‘I would have been upset if you had said the book was not well written.’

In this chapter I have sought to share how my own thinking about God and Jesus has developed over a lifetime. I am sure there is more still to understand. I have sought to emphasise that the existence of God is not something one can prove or disprove. Popular preoccupation with the question of the existence or otherwise of a supernatural being diverts us from the real question about God. That question is what we experience at the heart of life, something which, while being ultimately a mystery, nonetheless gives us a sense of connection to all life, people and creation, something experienced in the nature of love, something which changes our lives and calls us to be agents of change for the wellbeing of others and the earth that sustains us.

I believe many are leaving the Church, and others not even considering joining it, because the Church is not making clear the symbolic nature of much of its teaching. There are clergy who interpret their faith literally, and so teach their congregations. There are others who, espousing full well the symbolic truth, do not query the literal dimensions of a story in case it upsets people. In so doing they may well create a sanctuary of doctrinal certainty for the gathered few, but at the huge cost of alienating many others. The Church does little to provide an intelligent and robust expression of its theology in the public arena, abandoning the field to atheists, humanists and others to peddle their own anti-religious messages to an undiscerning community.

1. Richard Dawkins, emeritus fellow of New College, Oxford, is well known as a global crusader for atheism. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bantam Press, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Speaking Christian,* 2011, chapter 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *The Case for God,* p.20. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *The God Delusion*, pp 51-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Markings,* Faber & Faber, 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Exodus* 3.14. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Luke 15. 11-32.* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Lloyd Geering is a highly respected New Zealand theologian and former professor of religious studies, who over a lifetime has made a major contribution to the discussion of religion in society. As Principal of Knox Theological Hall in 1967 he was charged by the Presbyterian Church with 'doctrinal error' and 'disturbing the peace and unity of the church' over an article he wrote entitled *What does the resurrection mean?* He was acquitted of the charges. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Matthew 16.16.* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Doctrine in the Church of England,* SPCK, 1938 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *John* 6.68. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)