



Faith's New Story: Science or Sense?

Dr. Rachael Kohn

Two thousand people packed Sydney Town Hall to hear an anti-religion cosmologist go head to head with a religious philosopher on the origins of the universe. Lawrence Krauss, the Foundation Professor of the School of Earth and Space Exploration and director of Arizona State University's Origins Project, who is known for his impatience and impertinence when performing in front of an audience (wearing his orange sneakers), was true to form on this occasion when he debated William Lane Craig, a Christian with two Ph.D.s in philosophy. It was one of four such events on an Australian tour, and as in Sydney, the cities of Brisbane, Melbourne and Perth were all sell-out audiences.

The intellectual result was not particularly edifying, given Krauss talked over and shouted down his opponent, while William Lane Craig was too much of a gentleman to do the same. Furthermore, the audience, which was probably divided down the middle, would have found the detail of the arguments hard to follow. As the moderator in Sydney, I was only marginally ahead of the audience, having read both their works, which were of such a radically different nature, that it was difficult to get any engaged discussion on the subject of origins. Of course, the format is not one that lends itself to mutual illumination, and so it raises the question of just *what these now popular events are meant to achieve*.

Entertainment? That's possible, if you're the type that watches 'the fights' on television, but most thoughtful people are not. Education? That too is doubtful since a lay audience would have to take most of the science on faith as much as they would have to accept the view that philosophy can tell us anything about the origins of the world. So, my hunch is that what we are witnessing is a bizarre consequence of changes in the religious landscape that have caught some people off guard. Rather than delve into what those changes are, some, like the Cosmologist and the Christian perpetuate some fairly traditional definitions of what is science and religion, while they also capitalize on the general confusion in the population at large.

So what we are seeing is a contest for followers: while the aggressive anti-religion movement takes strength from the religious illiteracy of a large swathe of the public, the defensive religious response hopes to capture new followers among the undecided, the confused or the **'no religion' category**. Either way they are making hay, otherwise why would a gentle soul like William Lane Craig subject himself repeatedly to the punishing antics of Lawrence Krauss? In fact, the event was organised by the City Bible Forum as a money raising and publicity exercise. They were not disappointed.

Not all Christians however are tempted into the circus ring. I know other Christian Biblical scholars, who are keenly aware of the secular anti-religionists but who refuse to engage in these contests in order to 'prove' that they possess an intellect every bit as sophisticated as their scientific opponent. I'll return to why they choose not to, later.

Let us be clear however, which of the two bodies of knowledge is on the defensive today: the contest for the hearts and minds of the populace is about the value --or not --of *religion*. For these

public forums do not arise from a ‘beleaguered’ scientific sector of society which needs to promote itself against an all powerful and impermeable religious sector. For we are long past the Age of Enlightenment and as a result, 1) religion has long lost its role as either established or all-powerful and 2) most people today, including religious people, are not antagonistic to science, but the reverse, they recognize its importance in their lives. Indeed, a great many religious people study the sciences and are drawn to them, especially to medicine and all its cognate disciplines, as well as the non human sciences of chemistry, engineering, pure mathematics, physics and astronomy.

The question must be asked, ‘what gives these public showdowns oxygen?’ Why is anyone interested in witnessing these often painful events that are high on humiliation and low on illuminating dialogue?

I’d venture to say that there is a degree of **public nervousness and uncertainty** about the future, which it is hoped such ‘debates’ may help to clarify. Perhaps the people who watch them are hoping for a clear victor, who will confirm the way to go? After all, our societies are fracturing under the strain of difficult questions with huge implications: should the uniqueness of marriage between men and women be defended or consigned to the dustbin of history? Should children be raised by their biological parents or anyone who fills out a form and promises to care for them? Should violence and pornography be allowed continued presence on the internet, TV, radio, and the theatre? Should we hold on to our traditions of Common Law or should we accept other forms of law derived from religious traditions that hold different values than our society has enshrined in legislation and in our constitutions? Should we endeavor to guarantee jobs for our citizens even if that means foregoing some international treaties on climate change? How can we even believe that climate change is anything we can stop if, as I learned from an astronomer in a previous Sea of Faith conference, the impact of sunspots is both greater than anything humanly generated and also unstoppable? The latest report from the UN on climate change throws even more doubt on the recent certainties that only a couple of years ago the Australian government was willing to back to the tune of billions of dollars of lost revenue.

Given these huge issues which we are meant to ‘vote’ on when we go to the polls--and I haven’t even mentioned boat people arriving on Australian shores by the thousands every month, nor the wars that are taking place in the Middle East where we have troops and may have more troops in the future—it is no wonder that the once confident West is far from sanguine, far from calm.

But how can the debates between believers and atheists on whether God exists offer direction or solace? The answer is far from obvious, but in light of the challenges and anxieties that governments seem less and less able or willing to solve, both religion and science are as important as they ever were in providing some direction, if not also some kind of comfort.

Will the logical, pragmatic, materialist, objective approach of science provide the matter of fact responses to questions that have values at their core? Or will the ancient wisdom, the customary rituals and the moral traditions of age-old religion provide the stability and encouragement that human communities seek?

Let it be said, that in the past, before Galileo was threatened with excommunication and long after, human society has always required a mixture of both science and religion. Acquiring knowledge of the natural world has never eluded human curiosity, and Galileo was neither the beginning nor the end of scientific discovery. His story of censure was a blip, and a political one at that – all to do with the

power of the Pope – rather than a true reflection of the way our species, including the clerical class, has scoured the natural world for answers to its human questions, while at the same time holding out a transcendent realm as the repository of our spiritual longings and moral aspirations.

It is therefore a matter of great importance to recognize that at this very advanced point in our western civilization, we are witnessing a concerted effort on the part of some to literally kill-off one side of the human cultural imperative to seek understanding of a spiritual kind. A.C. Grayling for example delivers a low blow when he reduces belief in God to the infantile fantasies of children, equivalent to faeries at the bottom of the garden. He shows a shocking lack of understanding of faeries – to say nothing of God.

It is reassuring however that even in today's popular culture there is some awareness that the anti-religion, anti-God movement is not a game-set-match situation. The recent showing in Sydney of an off-Broadway play by Mark St Germain called *Freud's Last Session* challenged the theatre going public to question their assumptions as they witnessed a vigorous debate between two historical figures on the question 'to believe or not to believe'. Based on the book, *The Question of God*, by Dr. Armand M. Nicholi, the play explored the starkly opposed views of the religious critic and founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud and the Christian apologist, writer and Cambridge professor, CS Lewis.

The imagined meeting of the youthful Lewis and the dying Freud in London was far more successful in presenting the arguments for and against belief than the arid debates which have recently been staged between believers and atheists. Why? Because such views are rarely held with an aloof intellectuality, which is an academic conceit, but are almost always a product of our personal biographies, and therefore utterly seared on to our very being, interwoven with our lives and loves and hatreds. And that interplay is what *Freud's Last Session* reveals, the emotional life of the two characters, their relationships to their fathers, their proximity to death, and their ability to love are part and parcel of their worldview and their belief in God or absence of it. Their passionately stated arguments, even the shouting and fits of temper, are timed in the play so that the other can answer, and vice versa. It is a controlled situation, allowing one to consider each person's views in turn. In other words, it is contrived, but its also illuminating.

What the play shows is that regardless of how plausible an explanation for faith is proffered, such as the desire for a substitute father driving a person's belief in God, it **does not in any way nullify the value of the religious experience nor render it any less transformative in one's life**. The positive values of hope, trust, love, humility, and joy are significant enough in the life of Lewis, for example, to confirm the rightness of his choice to believe, having been an atheist for years and an unhappy one at that. His new-found belief was of such value in his life that it could survive and even thrive on his continued questioning and probing the theological and moral dimensions of Christianity. Belief was just the beginning of faith, which remained a lively and fulfilling yet uncharted adventure.

In contrast, the certainties that Freud had uncovered and 'proved' to himself and a growing body of followers in the psychoanalytic movement, offered intellectual stimulation to be sure, but also was a source of ongoing frustration – for he could not understand people like Lewis, who possessed a fine mind but nonetheless chose to believe in the unbelievable, a God who loved his earthly creation yet did not shield it from suffering. What kind of love was that? What kind of God was that? For Freud, the question of theodicy understood from a very basic almost infantile notion of a son desiring a

father's protection, was unanswered by a God, who simply accepts the existence of good and evil. Freud raged against this God because he lost his daughter and little grandson to disease, he narrowly escaped losing his surviving daughter Anna to the Nazis, and later he would learn that his sister and other members of his family were murdered in the Holocaust. God was simply a weakling, much like his own father, whom he did not respect.

The play also reveals that despite the intellectual satisfaction of his formidable theories and explanations, they left little room for other parts of the human spirit, which lay fallow. For example, he did not develop any appreciation for music. In fact, music irritated him. In the play Freud perpetually turns off the music emanating from the radio. Lewis finds this a curious aversion (one is reminded of the old saying, music soothes the savage beast...). Music of course is the most powerful yet mysterious of the arts. It is an unseen force, yet it ravishes one's emotions and uncovers memories long thought forgotten. It is a pre-intellectual language.

In a final ironic twist on the debate between believer and unbeliever, Lewis remarks on the old man's love of gods – that is, the marble, stone and clay effigies that crowded his desk. Freud was a self-acknowledged obsessive collector, and he simply could not be parted from the ancient divinities he liked to admire, fondle and tally. Were they a reminder of the essentially artistic creation that he believed God was, or were they a playful joke that Sigmund was having with himself: to wit, that he, debunker of the Gods, possessed more of them than anyone else! From Lewis' perspective, however, Freud's idols were a paltry, lifeless reminder that the real divinity is never reducible to the material world, but inhabits existence by inhabiting one's consciousness.

After one of the productions of *Freud's Last Session* I was invited to hold a conversation between an atheist, a psychoanalyst and a Christian in the theatre. This seemed like a good idea at the time, but it turned out to be another painful exercise. While the psychoanalyst was thoughtful and nuanced and by no means anti-religion, the atheist could hardly contain his anger at the outrageous stupidity of belief. Being a 6 foot 6 former rugby league player, now an author and columnist, who is known for the red bandanna he always wears on his head, Peter Fitz Simon, was a formidable opponent.

However, what struck me about him was the anger and the objectionable nature of his comments that bordered on the rude, and prompted someone in the audience to chastise him. Meanwhile, the Christian on stage was thrust into a defensive posture, and by comparison he looked like the lightweight. Being an adult convert, with Lewis' books tucked under his arm, he appeared somewhat precious about the unique truth of Christianity. They were never going to have a civil conversation, regardless of my efforts.

Yet this either-or, black-and-white attitude to belief not only makes me squirm, it is a world away from what I observe among many thinking Christians and Jews, and some Muslims (like the psychoanalyst I just mentioned) and Buddhists.

Religious life is not only changing, it changed a long time ago, and one of the watershed moments in our lifetime was the publication of John T Robinson's *Honest to God* fifty years ago. It put into modern language what some medieval religious philosophers already knew: that the anthropomorphic God of Hebrew poetry and legend or in the Greek gospels only pointed to but did not capture God. The ineffable one of the Hebrew Bible, the one that could not be named, was truly a divinity beyond materialistic conceptions. Even the incarnation in Jesus was less meaningful as an historic event, than

in what it suggested about the relationship between man and God. The gospels are not a biography of Jesus but a teaching about the meaning of God for man.

Religious life is also changing practically: it is shifting *away from* the denominational boundaries, which were once carefully guarded, and *toward* a practical unity that focuses more on experience than on creeds, on activism than on liturgy, and on living an integrated life than on attending the Sunday service alone or at all. This is partly due to the secularization of society in which the theological schisms of the past mean less to a populace, who barely understands what the term Christian means, let alone Calvinist, Baptist, pre-millennialist, and post millennialist. As for the latter, a focus on the 'end times' is not as important as finding God in the present. People are drawn to the simple experiences of prayer and meditation, and a sense that they can have a relationship with God that is like a great warm embrace.

Indeed, experiencing a personal encounter with God, 'hearing God speak' and living in God's love, however that is imagined, is much more pertinent to people today, many who would call themselves spiritual, than debating if God exists. That may seem oxymoronic, but the truth of God is not in the proof by argument but in the spiritual transformation that sensing God can work in one's life.

Of course, experiencing God is not the preserve of one religion alone or indeed one church alone. But the independent Christian fellowships that have sprung up all over the US and spread further a-field, have brought that experience to a much wider audience. Churches like the Vineyard and the COC, the Christian Outreach Center, are innovative and young, and they have definitely changed what people expect from church. Facilitated by a practice called 'soaking prayer,' (similar to the charismatic movement of the 1970s) the hierarchical conventions of clericalism are removed and a close relationship with God is experienced. Not surprisingly, the introduction of 'soaking prayer' to England has brought people back into what were once empty inner city churches. The sacred has returned. In a sense, people are taking God into their own hands, allowing God into their hearts, directly rather than through the formalities of church liturgy.

Furthermore, the presence of other religions in the public square and the encouragement of inter-faith learning and dialogue has made even the most committed of believers engage with the contributions of other traditions. The Rev'd Charles Ringma one of Australia's prominent Christian activists based in Brisbane, who taught missiology for years at Canada's Regent College and also in the Philippines, is a leading proponent of a post-denominational, post-Protestant Christianity, which not only draws on the vast Christian tradition of 2000 years, including monastic life, but also looks to other religious traditions for spiritual insight and wisdom.

Like one of his mentors, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who was greatly interested in Buddhist practice and thought, Ringma also finds the wisdom of Buddhism apposite to his own spiritual journey. In addition, he has always been drawn to a life in community, so his more recent involvement in the Northumbria community in Scotland, combines the intentional communal living, with Celtic spirituality. Northumbria is one of a growing number of non-denominational 'small c' Christian communities which exist both in space and also in time – on the internet. Similarly, Eremos in Australia is a 'dispersed' intentional, 'small c' Christian community which comes together from time to time but exists for most of its members online.

There are many examples of this eclectic approach to living a religious life with fewer concerns about doctrinal 'purity'. I think of the two doctors, a married couple that I interviewed last year.

Sea of Faith Network (NZ) Annual Conference 2013

Cecile and Mervyn Lander are both specialist medical doctors, both Anglican priests, and both Zen teachers living in Brisbane. Intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally they have lived a life that has been demanding, but highly rewarding. They attribute much of their success to open communication, a shared faith, and a contemplative practice that includes both Christian and Zen meditation. As parish priests jointly in charge of St Paul's Anglican church in Brisbane, for almost 14 years, they also ministered to a congregation, alongside their busy medical practices.

I spoke to them in December 2011 for the Christmas program and their views on the meaning of Christmas demonstrates their universalist and activist kind of faith. The Rev'd Mervyn said Christmas is about 'Christ born in every child' and the Rev'd Cecile said Christmas is only meaningful when demonstrated in the way one lives day to day. Theologically, they both point to the future of faith that is profound but less beholden to literalist understandings of scripture. They trace their theological roots back to John T Robinson whose book *Honest to God*, which was a theological turning point in their life of faith.

The other day, I interviewed Marcus Borg, the Biblical scholar who has been a leading light for the 'progressive Christians' as they now call themselves. He's the author of many books including *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* and *The Heart of Christianity*. Similarly freed from literalist readings of scripture, open to the insights of other faiths, especially Buddhism, Borg was even insistent that the more accurate way of describing Jesus' actions was to borrow a term more commonly associated with Buddhism. Jesus was 'compassionate' rather than 'merciful,' since the latter in English presumed a God that was superior, almighty, and 'up there', who deigned to show mercy to his woeful subjects. (The Hebrew term is rachamim – from rechem, womb has a more loving, 'containing' connotation.) I would say that Marcus is influenced by the current pervasive use of the term 'compassion,' including the 'Charter of Compassion' promoted by the post-denominational Christian and former English Catholic nun, Karen Armstrong. It is of course the word most often spoken by the Dalai Lama

Borg is a pivotal example of the way faith operates among today's highly influential Western theologians, which as you know include people like Don Cupitt, Stanley Hauerwas and John Shelby Spong. It is worth noting that Borg remains in dialogue with the more conservative Anglican Bishop of Durham (2003-2010) and Biblical scholar, NT Wright, and their joint book of dialogue, *The Heart of Christianity*, demonstrates the way in which their theological differences need not result in exclusive posturing and name calling, but in a deepening dialogue and discovery of common Christian ground.

Today, the option is not what brand of Christian are you, but are you willing to be Christian at all? Perhaps one could say it is 'minimalist' Christianity that is being proffered, but for those like Borg or Ringma and countless others in the 'emergent church' movement, it is *essential* Christianity, shorn of its many non-Biblical and non-functional dogmas, its uninspiring rituals and its tribalism. If this sounds very Protestant – then let me admit that to a large extent this self directed, innovative, and eclectic approach to being Christian derives from the grass roots voluntarism, which characterized the Protestant Reformation and cast the lay people as the priesthood of believers.

But it is by far not confined to that wing of the Church, because in today's world people are either losing their religion or choosing it. Let me share with you another development that is afoot but is far more subversive due to the nature of the Roman Church. While Catholics love the idea of a Pope, who

provides comfort and unity and is a shining light to the faithful around the world, as is the Dalai Lama to Buddhists, many of them, particularly women religious and priests, are weary of the constraints that the Vatican imposes on them. A recent Australian study by Chris McGillion and John O'Carroll called *Our Fathers: What Priests Really Think* (2010) revealed that most did not agree with the imposition of celibacy and a significant number thought that women should be ordained. Currently, I'm reading a book by a senior Jesuit, writing under pseudonym, that pretty much tears down the whole hierarchical edifice of the church which he regards as unsustainable.

The editor of an online Catholic magazine just wrote me saying that there is "a profound change in relation to the religious and spiritual dimension of life that humanity has ever seen, and it is scaring the living daylights out of people." He said "I have a sense that one of the big changes is that educated people are well over this 'tribal' sense of religion with different peoples running around fighting others to prove "my God is bigger or better than your God". Some still want to play that game but most of society is over it. There's this opening up of people's minds and interest in understanding the spiritual beliefs, experiences and understanding of others. Programs such as yours, and all the inter-religious dialogue going on in the world at the moment, would seem to point to this."

And this development happily is not just happening at the lay level but also right at the top. I note that one of the first things I read on the accession of the new pope was the book he coauthored with the Argentinian chief rabbi, which displays an openness and mutually edifying and respectful dialogue about the things that matter most to them as a Catholic and a Jew. Not surprisingly there was a vast common ground on which they both stood.

Brian Coyne, the editor of the aforementioned online Catholic magazine, was right to identify this sea change as a development among the educated, but it is also reflected among younger people who do not see much sense in dividing their religious world further than it needs to be. Right now, the pluralist environment, with Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Jews, is divided enough, without further dicing and splicing it. People in their faith traditions want to encourage relationships and develop a larger common ground, which is more easily and genuinely done by working together, partnering in action. A recent study by Joan Daw, for the Yarra Institute for Religion & Social Policy in Melbourne, showed that students in Catholic schools were extremely keen to be involved in social justice projects, often with people of other faiths, while the theological teachings of the Church were of minor importance to them. A young Australian Buddhist monk, Freeman Trebilcock founded an interfaith organization in Melbourne called Inter-Action in which people of different faiths come together to work on projects for the common good. There are countless examples of projects like this.

In my synagogue, Rabbi Jeff Kamins has opened its doors to other denominational expressions of Judaism, turning it into a more inclusive congregation than an exclusively "Reform" branch of Judaism. Furthermore, his sermons extol a God that is the ultimate mind or force of life itself, rather than the personal anthropomorphic descriptions of the Hebrew Bible, which he reads as having metaphorically instructive value and meaning. Rabbi Kamins follows the lead of the great 12th Century Jewish philosopher Maimonides, who stated categorically that God was at one with the discoveries of science, and if it was not so, than the belief is wrong not the science. Pity the Church didn't pay attention to Maimonides when they were wrestling with Galileo's discoveries. The Jews had no problem with them.

Sea of Faith Network (NZ) Annual Conference 2013

On the other hand, Maimonides might have waxed less enthusiastic were he alive today given some of the questionable practices which science has condoned and some of the terrifying results it has had. It is interesting to note that hitching one's religious beliefs to the scientific bandwagon can be problematic for other reasons. The man who discovered the big bang was a priest. Yes, the Belgian priest Georges Lemaitre. (He studied as an engineer, was a decorated artilleryman in World War I, and then switched to mathematics while studying for the priesthood in the early 1920s. He then moved on to cosmology, and to Harvard and eventually on to MIT where he emerged with a second doctorate in physics.) Pope Pius on hearing of the discovery of the Big Bang was delighted, and said in 1951, that the science proved the Genesis story of creation: that out of nothing, there was Light. But the priest scientist, having been elected to the Vatican's Pontifical Academy, cautioned the Pope against such a view, saying "As far as I can see such a theory remains entirely outside of any metaphysical or religious question." (I am indebted to Laurence Kraus' book for this account.)

I agree. At the very least, it puts theological thinking at the mercy of scientific knowledge, which can be a good thing if it means that believers accept the medicine of doctors in lieu of faith healers. It can be a bad thing if it denies that chaplains, priests, pastors and even faith healers can help people face their suffering with courage, grace and hope. Accepting scientific knowledge is entirely different from adopting the ideology of scientism, an epidemic today, which believes there is only one kind of truth and it is scientific, while other kinds of knowledge yield no truths.

It is imperative to realize that there is a particular kind of knowledge that reveals the truths of scripture, truths which transcend materialism.

Values transcend the material world. The value of love, for example, is in no way captured by material 'scientific' indicators. To reduce love to a surge of chemicals to the brain or to deluded longings, or to a marriage contract or to the number of sexual acts performed or times "I love you" was said is to never grasp the manifold meaning of love, nor its power to transform one's consciousness and life. Similarly, to reduce God to either a delusion or to a creed, to either an argument about the origins of the world or to the proof of heaven is to miss the ultimate value of God as an idea of infinite variety whose object, to quote Michael Benedikt, is 'the good'.

"Likewise, attention to God's wisdom and power magnifies its object, which needs magnification because it is the youngest and weakest force in the universe, namely the force of good. *God is the Good We Do* (2007:58)

We will never know whether God is **just** an idea but we do know that it is the oldest most resilient idea that humanity has ever conceived of, because we know we cannot live without the good, which is the most delicate and difficult value to maintain in a world red in tooth and claw.

We are in danger of shutting down this religious sense, this religious intuition, which is a truth very different from what science offers. I am reminded of Blaise Pascal who knew very well the difference between them. The 17th Century mathematician, who contributed to the burgeoning field of science, understood that 'the heart has its reasons that reason does not know.' The religious sense is this heart sense, and possesses a rationality that goes beyond the kind of knowledge that science seeks to uncover. But Pascal, a gambler and womanizer, was also deeply aware that it is a spiritual knowledge easily drowned by diversions. Today we have many such diversions, but certainly one of the biggest is scientism, the belief that all things worth knowing are essentially material.

Sea of Faith Network (NZ) Annual Conference 2013

Today we are seeing a growing number of people wisely answering the secularist anti-religion critics, not in slanging matches, but in their deeds. They are doing wittingly or unwittingly what Pope Francis advised when he called the church to ‘the periphery’ – to those on the outside, perhaps those who are the ‘nones’ (no religion) on the census. He said, ‘shepherds should smell like their sheep’. Being among the people, not removed from them, is where believing in God matters because to quote Michael Benedikt, ‘God is the good you do’.

Rachael Kohn
2013

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Dr. Kohn taught Religious Studies at Sydney University, and in universities in England and Canada, and was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Letters by the University of New South Wales in 2005 for her “outstanding contribution to fostering religious understanding” in the Australian community.

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