

THE SECOND

COMING

Religion

All the best from *the Skeptic*

1986 - 1990

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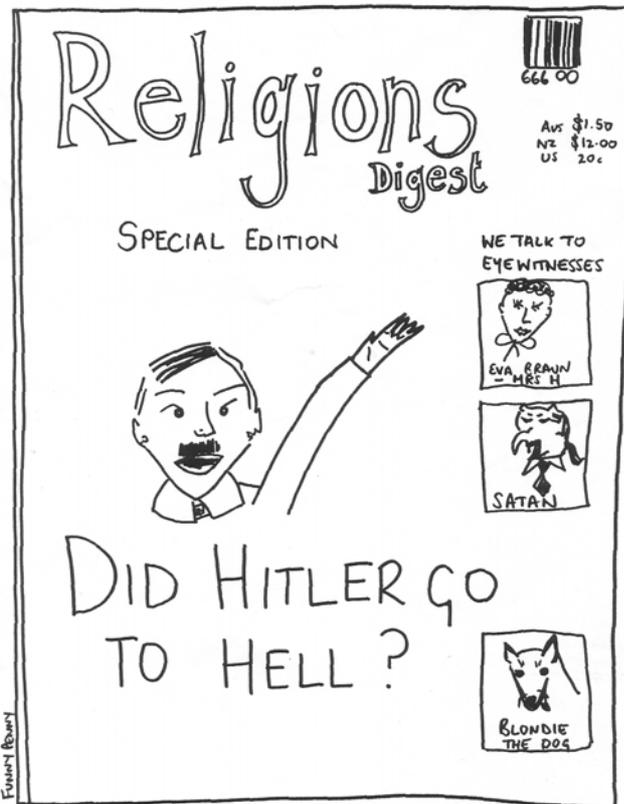
All the best from *the Skeptic*, 1986–1990

Religion

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&
Richard Saunders





Religion

Vol 8 No 1 - 1988

Scientific tests of Turin Shroud in doubt

Controversy has again broken out about the Shroud of Turin following the announcement that the number of laboratories to be used for carbon dating the relic has been cut from seven to three, seriously jeopardising the scientific validity of the result.

The Cardinal Archbishop of Turin first announced in October 1986 that. “Recently wishes were expressed from church and scientific circles about radiocarbon dating of the Holy Shroud; the issue was put to the Holy Father who gave his authorisation to it, following the advice of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences”.

The seven laboratories approved for testing are thought to be: University of Rochester, University of Arizona and the Brookhaven National Laboratory, NY (all United States); the Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit at Oxford University, and the UK Atomic Energy Authority’s Harwell Laboratory (both United

Kingdom); the CNRSCEA (France); and ETH, Zurich (Switzerland).

The Harwell and Brookhaven laboratories were to have used the beta-decay counting method (from CO₂ introduced into miniature gas proportional counters) and the other five were to use ion counting techniques employing an accelerator as a mass spectrometer, to determine the ratio of C-14 to C-12 ions. It was considered valuable that two different methods be used, thus adding to the possibility of an accurate dating. Six of the labs had previously been evaluated with 'blindfold' measurements on samples of Egyptian linen and Peruvian cotton supplied by the British Museum. Their findings were generally in agreement with the BM's own datings of c.2500BC and AD 1200 respectively.

Prof Luigi Gonella, science advisor to the Archbishop of Turin, announced late last year that the agreement had been abrogated and that only three laboratories (Oxford, Zurich and the University of Arizona) would be used. Therefore the laboratories using the beta-deca technique were dropped, as were the laboratories of the pioneers of Carbon 14 testing (Dr Harry Gove at Rochester and Dr Garman Harbottle at Brookhaven) who had also originally suggested the radiocarbon dating.

Prof Gonella has refused to give a reason for the reduction in the number of laboratories.

Drs Gove and Harbottle rejected claims that the use of seven laboratories would have damaged an excessive amount of the shroud. They estimated that an area equivalent to two-and-a-half postage stamps would be required, which would be taken from around scorched areas currently covered with patches.

They were also concerned that the use of only one testing technique by only three laboratories could lead to anomalous results which would therefore leave the results open to interpretation.

During the earlier blindfold tests at six of the seven laboratories, five of them had come within a standard deviation of the correct date for the Egyptian material, while the one at Zurich came up with "a wild anomaly 1000 years off" because the sample was prepared improperly.

"With the Shroud of Turin", Dr Harbottle said, "suppose you have three labs doing it and this happens. What are you going to do now? Are you going back to the archbishop and say 'Sorry, we did it wrong. How about some more pieces of the shroud so we can do it over again'?"

Concerns have also been expressed about the security of samples to be analysed during all stages of the tests, including collection and transmittal, to ensure there are no doubts about the result.

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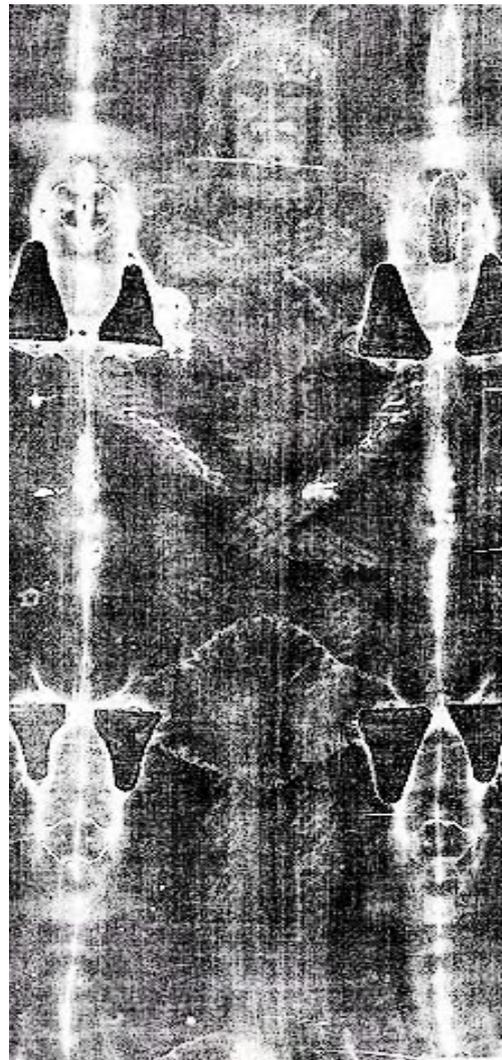
The Shroud of Turin a fake!

Tim Medham

Although most readers of this magazine are probably already aware of it, it is worth stating for the record that the Shroud of Turin has been officially pronounced a forgery, although not without dissent.

Cardinal Anastasio Ballastrero of Turin has confirmed that scientific Carbon-14 tests at three laboratories in England, Switzerland and the US have dated the cloth that bears the image supposedly of Christ to between 1260 and 1390 AD, with 95% certainty, thereby showing it to be a medieval artifact rather than dating from the first century AD Palestine.

The fact that the three laboratories agreed on the dating was a major blow to supporters of the shroud's authenticity, although some have refused to be swayed.



Father Peter Little, director of the Holy Shroud Information Centre in Sydney's Surry Hills, told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "What the scientists have said and done doesn't make the slightest difference. The shroud has tested the validity of the measuring devices, and found them wanting, rather than the reverse."

The shroud, supposedly the burial cloth of Christ after his crucifixion, has been a contentious issue in the Catholic Church and in scientific circles for some time, but especially so since an investigative body called the Shroud of Turin Research Project (STURP) seemed to validate the shroud with a number of tests, although not carbon dating. The latter technique would have used too much of the shroud, according to church officials, for them to sanction its use. However, intervening years have reduced the sample size required, thus making the church's intransigence increasingly untenable.

Originally it was agreed that seven laboratories would be involved in tests, using two different techniques. This was later changed by Turin to only three labs and all using the same method. This was seen by some as leaving an "escape clause" for the followers of the shroud should one of the three labs show an anomalous result, which would have cast greater doubt on the results than if only one out of seven labs was out of kilter.

Unofficial results were released before the official announcement by the Turin Cardinal, causing much anxiety and angry comments from the church. Many scientists have come out against the shroud's authenticity over the years, but a greater publicity campaign in favour of the shroud has convinced many people, Catholic or otherwise, that the shroud was genuine. The present result would have come as no surprise to sceptics, and while it is true to say that the Vatican has never endorsed the shroud, many Catholics will obviously be facing a test of their faith. It is interesting to note that the shroud will still be regarded as an important holy item by many, according to the Cardinal of Turin, even though it has no real link with Christ.

Readers wishing to know more about the background of the shroud and earlier scientific tests are advised to seek out *Inquest on the Shroud of Turin* by Joe Nickell, as it may be your last chance. The recent announcement has most likely put paid to an active and potentially lucrative market in books, articles, lectures, exhibitions, movies and TV programs on the shroud.

Book Review

Bare-faced Messiah:

the true story of L. Ron Hubbard by Russell Miller (Michael Joseph, UK)

William Grey

Dianetics is a form of psychology developed by Lafayette Ron Hubbard in 1950.

The central claim of Dianetics is that we are scarred with traumatic experiences ("engrams") which prevent us from realising our full potential. Hubbard proposed a method of treatment ("auditing") to eliminate these "engrams".

Dianetics is a garbled Freudian theory set in an occult framework. It is a curious blend of pseudoscience and occult nonsense, replete with absurd neologisms. Hubbard developed it into a religious cult, promising salvation to its initiates with aid of secret knowledge which he alone was able to reveal - at considerable expense.

Several years later further innovations were introduced which spawned the Church of Scientology. Scientology added even more ludicrous absurdities to the voodoo science of Dianetics.

This bizarre amalgam of mysticism, psychotherapy and pure science fiction was developed in Hubbard's book "The History of Man", which he introduced as "a cold-blooded and factual account of your last sixty trillion years". It is described by Miller as "possibly the most absurd book ever written". It emerges, for example, that many "engrams" can be traced back to previous incarnations as jelly-fish and clams, not to mention our even more extraordinary previous lives on other planets.

This nonsense nevertheless made Hubbard a millionaire. How did this sort of gibberish manage to become such a powerful influence in millions of lives? The answer to this question lies in the extraordinary character of Hubbard.

Miller is fascinated with the character and career of Hubbard, who started life as a penniless writer of pulp science-fiction and went on to become a fabulously wealthy guru who was able to convince millions that he alone was able to save them and the world.

Scientology is a secretive cult, and Miller had to labour hard to compile this dossier on the life of its founder. He juxtaposes extracts from the organisation's "official" accounts of Hubbard's life with a very different picture pieced together from information he has gleaned from a large number of sources. These include identified and anonymous ex-members of the organisation, and extracts from such US Government



sources as Internal Revenue, naval records, the FBI and Veterans Administration archives.

Hubbard emerges as a man of great charm, energy and imagination. He was also a pathological liar, totally unscrupulous, ruthless and completely untrustworthy. Hubbard was a charismatic crook.

Eventually, Hubbard became unable to distinguish between fact and the elaborate web of fantasy which he constructed about his life.

A number of acquaintances have reported that Hubbard developed an early conviction that the most effective way to amass a fortune was to start a religious cult.

The effectiveness of exploiting religious sensibilities in order to dip into the pockets of the gullible with impunity has been repeatedly confirmed -recently, for example, by such evangelical movements as Jimmy Bakker's *Praise the Lord*. A familiar irony, illustrated yet again in the course of this book, is the way in which movements ostensibly committed to the pursuit of freedom and autonomy so often become authoritarian and repressive, psychologically enslaving their members.

A tricky social policy question which emerges from, but is not addressed in the book, is the extent to which the state is justified in banning organisations like Scientology. There is certainly a case for treating such movements as social nuisances. Scientology was outlawed in Victoria in 1965. However a subsequent appeal to the High Court in 1983 found that the movement qualified as a religion, at least for tax purposes, and thereby it was afforded some measure of protection.

There are a lot of important issues which Miller's book does not address. While the character of Hubbard must be a central factor in explaining the success of Scientology, it remains extraordinary that such nonsense should have influenced so many people so deeply.

By concentrating on the character of Hubbard, Miller deals only incidentally with the structure and nature of Scientology, and its dangerous but powerful combination of pseudoscience and pop religion presented in a highly regimented and authoritarian social structure.

More light is shed on these aspects of the Church of Scientology by Stewart Lamont in his book *Religion Inc: The Church of Scientology*.

However, although Lamont, like Miller, helps to illuminate Scientology, our knowledge of this wealthy and secretive organisation remains incomplete. Miller's book is an absorbing tale of an extraordinary individual. But it's certainly not the last word.

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Book Review

Anatomy of Religion

by Adrian Crees

Freshet Press, 2 Lyttleton Ave,
Castlemaine 3450.

Harry Edwards

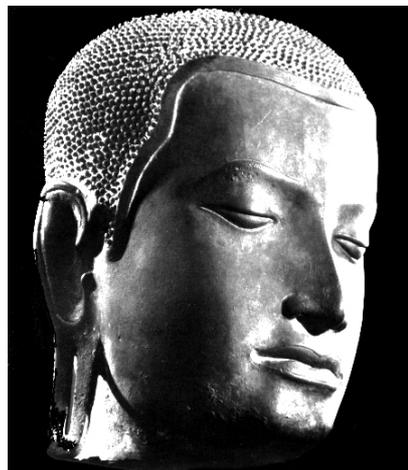
While essentially a critique of the world's main religions, *Anatomy of Religion* earns a place on the Skeptic's bookshelf for two reasons: firstly, it includes chapters dealing with general superstition, sects, cults and missions, and ends with a plea for scientific thinking; and secondly, the not-too-philosophical or in-depth treatment of the subject allows one to easily perceive the parallels between the bases from which religious thinking arose and current New Age beliefs.

Concise chapters examine the history, sociology and psychology of Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, and the author takes a look at religion in China and the USSR.

Released co-incidentally at the time of the Salman Rushdie Satanic Verses controversy, I found the historical insight into the founding of the Islamic faith and the Koran particularly enlightening, and while it evoked a feeling of despair to learn of man's submission, obedience and intolerance arising from teachings based on myth, superstition, fantasy and the ramblings of an hallucinating epileptic, it reinforced an understanding of the need to promote the cause of rational thinking.

An intellectual lightweight like myself will find the book informative without being too verbose, and enjoy the commendable free flowing style that allows a little subtle facetiousness without undue sarcasm.

A primer, a reference, absorbing and eminently readable, it pointedly focuses on the insanity of irrational belief systems.



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Cultish Behaviour

Ross Martin

As a crown prosecutor, skepticism (in the sense that all assertions are to be examined critically and investigated by reference to such objectively verifiable facts as are available) is a professional habit. However, it is rare that I ever have occasion to bring that habit to bear, in a professional sense, to any issues other than quite mundane ones relating to the credibility of burglars' alibis and so forth.

One case that sticks in my memory may interest connoisseurs of ratbaggery. It related to a bizarre North Queensland religious community, headed by a man who claimed to be able to go into a trancelike state during which he literally spoke with the voice of Jesus Christ. During the trances, he would give detailed instructions to his followers gathered around, about how to live their lives, and about the coming end of the known world (an event known as "sangaa") when true disciples would be taken to Heaven, clad in new heavenly bodies and white raiment and returned to Earth to live simply, travel and spread the word. While the Voice was making his revelations, his words would be transcribed, later to be digested by the faithful in private contemplation.

An inner circle, consisting of a hierarchy of male acolytes, was charged with the responsibility of giving comfort and support to the Voice in his mission. I might add that the Voice was already in a position of considerable comfort, being fully supported by his followers in a farm commune completely supplied with properly engineered buildings and all necessities.

The acolytes bore exotic titles such as Pearlbearer, Crownbearer and Thronebearer, and were made privy to "higher knowledge". The acolytes spent their nights in the Voice's apartment on the commune on the pretext that they had to be available at any hour for the wisdom that might pour forth from the Voice.

The higher knowledge consisted of such gems as:

- * Women, the daughters of Eve, are not to be trusted;
- * God values homosexual love higher than heterosexual love;

- * Adam and God had a sexual relationship in Eden, but Adam, having seen the animals coupling, asked God for a mate. God acquiesced on the condition that Adam not forsake him, but Adam did forsake God (sexually) and so was banished. This Divine Snit is

the "true" basis of original sin.

* The first thing Jesus did upon his resurrection was reconsummate his relationship with his beloved disciple, John.

Not surprisingly, the charge faced by the Voice (and of which he was ultimately convicted) was indecent assault on a male.

More surprising was the number of followers he possessed (around 150 men, women and children as I recall). Not all followers were specifically told the Voice's sexual views, but I was informed that at least reason for suspicion was there for anyone with eyes to see. To the general run of follower, the Voice adopted a facade of piety and sexual purity.

The passion and sense of apocalypse the trial generated among his followers and the members of a disillusioned splinter group responsible for the allegations against him also surprised me. The approach of the Voice was not to admit his homosexuality as a "weakness" and ask for forgiveness (a la Jim and Tammy) but, apparently, to make it a dogma of faith that he was innocent.

Upon his arrest, I understand that he told the faithful charges would not proceed; when charges proceeded, he told them he would not be committed for trial; when committed for trial that he would not be convicted. Despite the doubts which the obvious failure of the Voice's prophetic powers must have engendered, the faithful remained firm in their belief. As far as I know, they still do.

The Voice went to trial twice - the first (the one which I prosecuted) miscarried as a result of incorrect and inflammatory television reporting. So thick was the atmosphere of paranoia surrounding the trial that when it miscarried, the splinter group opposing the Voice was convinced that the Voice was so powerful and influential that he must have planted stooges in the television station to disrupt the trial, even though the television report said things about the Voice far worse than any of the Crown's actual allegations.

The splinter group were of the view that it was a master stroke of subtlety for the Voice to arrange such a television report, which no-one would think emanated from the Voice himself.

The supporters of the Voice saw in the television report the direct hand of the Divine, disgracing the Voice publicly in order to save him by forcing the abandonment of the trial. Naturally, he was not disgraced among the "true believers". It is interesting how such a proposition serves to reinforce the persecution ideology of the community - "we of the higher wisdom" versus "the evil outside" seems an even more compelling world view if God himself,

through a television report, seems to be doing his best to distance the community from general public acceptance.

The Voice was eventually placed on a bond, and the splinter group (still fervent believers in the mainstream Christian tradition but no longer followers of the Voice) lives as next-farm neighbours of the Voice and his supporters, waging theological battles of a monumental insignificance.

In the end, one is left at a loss to know what to feel for those whose lives have been profoundly affected by the Voice, some of whom have followed the cult for decades, and indeed for the Voice himself.

The members of the splinter group seem merely to have transferred the absolute passion of their convictions in support of the Voice to another cause, albeit a cause radically different from that of their former faith. Of such people it has been said that they cannot be convinced, only converted. On the basis of my experience, that is true.

Those still loyal to the Voice live in a ‘logic tight’ world where theory and evidence are hopelessly confused. Any evidence at all is “interpreted” as positive proof of the theory, such “interpretation” occurring by reference to the theory itself. This is so no matter how much violence is done in the process to the common sense such people would normally apply unhesitatingly in other areas of their lives. A great many of the people in both camps are highly educated and intelligent. Pity for them seems patronising, sorrow seems affected. Their vice is merely to possess a proclivity to a species of irrationality to which we are all prey.

Contempt for the Voice and his hypocrisy is a harsh judgement - the evidence seems to suggest that he was born into the cult, which originated in Indonesia decades ago, and that he is merely the latest incarnation of a line of “Voices” (along a similar principle to that by which the Phantom operates). Thus, the Voice, while not free of responsibility, may plead in mitigation that he is to some limited extent a victim of his background.

I wish I had the wisdom to uncover a “proper” response to the moral dilemmas presented by these people. An initial, unworthy, response is mocking laughter followed by an urge to try and sell the story to *People* magazine. Common decency suggests, however that people who devote their lives, albeit misguidedly, to an ideal which they perceive as high and noble deserve better. To think of these people as deluded or mad does not assist, since, clinically speaking, they are neither. Perhaps they simply stand as warnings against the perils of an excess of ideology,

kindred to the victims of the Cultural Revolution, the Holy Innocents, and the Jonestown victims.

Nevertheless, to treat people simply as danger signs is to ignore their complexity and to ignore the extent to which they are innocent of or responsible for their failings.

Such speculations are (for me at least) interesting but ultimately idle, for I suspect there is no “righteous” position to be taken, nor any great purpose served in searching for one. The challenge presented by people such as the followers of the Voice is not met by navel gazing but by humbly attempting to dissuade these people of their folly.



The Fall of Lucifer

Alan Towsey

While in Brisbane last year, I went to Expo 88, and was persuaded to visit the Pavilion of Promise where, in a blaze of modern technology, state of the art laser light animation and special effects, the “highly acclaimed” musical, *The Scroll* by Bruce Stacey, presented the Christian story, from the fall of the angel Lucifer (Satan) and the subsequent fall of Man through to mankind’s ultimate salvation, in dramatic form.

When I was asked what I thought of it, I remarked that it was a pity it began with a myth about the fall of “Lucifer” which does not appear anywhere in the Bible.

(In case you are not familiar with it, it goes as follows: Apparently the leading angel in Heaven, called Lucifer, beautiful, brilliant and majestic, the chief musician, second only to God in Heaven, the “Son of the Morning”, became overweeningly proud, and wanted to take God’s place. He appears to have collected quite a following among the angels, and for his pains was cast out of Heaven, becoming the Devil, and his followers becoming his demons. So he decided to get his own back on God by attacking God’s new creation, Man, and luring him away from the true path.)

Over the next few days, I was assailed by born-again Christians who threw quotations at me to “prove” me wrong. Most of them seemed to me to have no relevance whatsoever (people read into them what they will), but at least three are worth considering. They are Isaiah 14:12–14, Revelation 12:7–9 and 2 Peter 2:4. So let’s take a look at them (from the Authorised Version).

Isaiah 14:12-14: “How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High.”

Now that seems to clinch it, doesn't it? Plain as the nose on your face! But hold on; let's take a look back at the beginning of the chapter. Verses 3-4 read (New English Bible: “When the LORD gives you relief from your pain and your fears and from the cruel slavery laid upon you, you will take up this song of derision over the king of Babylon:”.

And verses 12-14 form part of the song which follows. So what we really have in fact refers, on the Bible's own authority, to the King of Babylon, a taunt at his fall! As the content clearly shows, it is a prophecy concerning the downfall of Babylon. And further, why would Lucifer say “I will ascend into heaven” if he was already there?

The interesting thing is that, since in Isaiah's time (the 8th century BC) the main enemy was Assyria, with whom Babylon was having just as much trouble as Judah, modern scholars tend to think that Chapters 13 and 14 were written in the 6th century, with some traditional material thrown in (Peake, 1982, p.499). The name “Lucifer” does not appear in any modern translation, and is probably due to a misunderstanding by medieval translators.

The Hebrew word is *hélél*, defined by Brown, Driver and Briggs as “Shining One - epithet of King Babylon. Is. 14-12 ... How art thou fallen, shining one, son of dawn, ie star of the morning. (cf Assyrian *mustilil*: epithet of (Venus as) morning star.)” The Greek word used in the Septuagint is *eósporos*, rendered by Liddell and Scott as “Morn-bringing; as Subst., ... the Morning Star, Lat. Lucifer.” In Latin, *lucifer* means “light-bringing; the Morning Star, the planet Venus” (Marchant and Charles).

So “Lucifer” in fact refers to the planet Venus, metaphorically applied to the King of Babylon, whose coming fall is compared to the planet Venus which rises in the morning for a brief period of glory before being eclipsed by the sun.

However, by New Testament times, the legend had developed in detail among the Jews that Satan had in fact been the leader of the rebellious angels, who had apparently refused to bow down before Adam, on the grounds that they were made of light while he was only made of clay, and as a result had been cast out of Heaven into Hell.

The legend may indeed have been partly due to a misunderstanding of Isaiah 14, and partly due to the influence of Greek myths about the struggle between Zeus and the giants for the mastery of the universe (Asimov, 1981, pp538-40). It finally found its way into the pseudepigraphal “Book of Enoch”, which is referred to in Jude 14 and was well known to the early Christians.

Strangely enough, the wide-spread currency of the story in the English-speaking world seems due more to Milton's “Paradise Lost”, which develops a whole epic poem around the legend [paralleled by the Dutch poet Vondel's verse tragedy “Lucifer” (1654)], than to anything else, even though most English-speaking Christians have never read it! In fact, for many years I used to think that was where the story came from, never having been able to find it in the Bible.

Revelation 12:7-9: “And there was war in Heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in Heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.”

I was familiar with this, but it was the first time I had ever heard the Book of Revelation, a prophecy concerning *things to come*, used to substantiate this myth.

If you read the whole chapter and study the context, you will easily see that it all hangs together to refer to a vision the author claims to have seen regarding events yet to take place. When I pointed this out, I was blandly informed, yes, the book is about the future, but this particular bit refers to the past! On what grounds that assertion can be substantiated I cannot work out. The events described clearly take place in sequence, and are linked together. If one is past, they are all past; if one is future, they are all future. If one had never heard of the Lucifer myth (and we have seen that there is no Old Testament authority for it) no other interpretation would be possible.

Many scholars are agreed (Peake, 1982) that the Book of Revelation was written about the end of the 1st century AD or early in the 2nd. Its author was not the same John who wrote the gospel or the epistles - he does not claim to be. It was quickly rejected by the early Church, on the very sensible grounds that the events, which it predicted would “soon” come to pass, very obviously had not, and it was therefore considered spurious. It was not till the 3rd century that it somehow came to be regarded more favourably.

It could scarcely be regarded then, in any case, as

a reliable witness to the myth we are discussing.

2 Peter 2:4: “For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment;”

This epistle again is a spurious book. It claims to have been written by the apostle Peter, who died about AD 67. But modern scholars are almost unanimously agreed (Peake, 1982) that it was written much later, somewhere in the first half of the 2nd century AD, the last book of the New Testament to be written.

Among the grounds for this view given by Peake are the differences in style and approach from 1 Peter, its reference to the letters of Paul as being already a body of scripture circulating throughout the Church (which they certainly were not at the time of Peter’s death), and the fact that it uses a good deal of the Epistle of Jude, which is ascribed by most Protestant scholars to the early 2nd century, and even by Catholics to after AD 80. The scholars point out, among other things, that Peter, an original apostle, would scarcely have borrowed a complete letter from Jude, who was not an apostle, and that Jude would scarcely have bothered to circulate as his own an extract from an already well known letter of Peter.

Doubts as to its authorship and authenticity were raised for some 300 years after its first appearance; doubts which have been confirmed by modern scholarship (Peake, 1982).

Why, then, was it ultimately accepted? Probably because it offers a handy explanation as to why Jesus had not returned before his own generation had passed away, as he had predicted in Matthew 24:34, Mark 13:30 and Luke 21:32, predictions which his followers confidently believed.

But in any case, whether or not the book is genuine, the verse quoted, according to Peake, refers to Genesis 6:1-4, which tells how certain angels were punished because they came down and fathered children by the beautiful daughters of men, thus *resembling* the account in Enoch, but in no way substantiating the “Lucifer” myth.

To sum up, then: the supposed reference in Isaiah is a prophecy concerning the King of Babylon, and the two New Testament “references” not only refer to something quite different, but are also contained in books of doubtful authenticity.

There is also the logical objection to the story: why would God permit a rebellion in Heaven, of all places, when all he had to do was point an omnipotent finger at the offenders, and whoosh!, they are no more? And how do angels make war? Being immortal and invulnerable, they cannot be affected by any weapons. Do they just push and shove, like Japanese Sumo

wrestlers? It all seems like a piece of anthropomorphic Eastern imagery.

But these points are really irrelevant to my present thesis, which is that the Bible simply does not support the myth of the fall of Lucifer. It is, however, significant that the story is not mentioned in any of the Creeds, and is not therefore obligatory belief for any Christian.

Why, then, has it persisted for so long? Milton’s poem may have influenced its spread in modern times, but, as we have seen, it was believed long before that. In my view, it was accepted because it offers a convenient explanation for the existence of evil, personified by Satan, in a world created by a supposedly omnipotent, all-good and all-loving God.

Historically, of course, the explanation is much simpler. The early Hebrews had no concept of Satan. Everything, both Good and Evil, emanated from God. But during the Captivity in Babylon, they became acquainted with Persian cosmology, and the eternal struggle between the principles of Light and Darkness, Good and Evil, and took back with them the concept of the “Adversary” (the meaning of “Satan”) of God.

This is well exemplified by the two differing accounts of the same event given in 2 Samuel 24:1 and 1 Chronicles 21:1. In Samuel, God incites David to take a census of the people, and then punishes this “crime” (the Hebrews must have had the same attitude to taxes and conscription for war service that we have!) by slaying 70,000 men by pestilence. In Chronicles, written a couple of centuries later, Satan is blamed for leading David astray, the chronicler apparently feeling that there was something akin to blasphemy in suggesting that God would induce someone to commit evil and then inflict a horribly disproportionate punishment for the offence. The comparatively recent concept of Satan offered a convenient way out. It is, in fact, the first mention of Satan in the Bible.

Alan Towsey is a retired school headmaster and investigator of Biblical history.

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Biblical History & Prophecy

Simon Brown

The glossy brochure placed in the letterboxes of most Canberra homes in mid-April was an impressive public relations exercise. It advertised a series of talks, illustrated with slides, collectively called the Joseit Report.

The talks, given over several days from April 29 to May 14, had catchy titles like “Conflict over Sinai!” and “Petra - red stairs to the sun!”, and they promised to answer questions such as how the ancient Egyptians built the Great Pyramid, and whether or not the Egyptians were actually a super-race.

The presenter was Peter Joseit, and the series was sponsored by the Seventh-day Adventists, though whether or not Joseit is a Seventh-day Adventist himself was never made clear.

The Report clearly tries to match historical events with passages and prophecies in the Bible. This brief article deals with the first talk: “Egypt - a journey into the past” given at the Albert Hall on April 29.

The lecture was well presented, and some of the slides were very good. Joseit spoke well, told some interesting stories, and for the most part his history was reasonably accurate, though he did maintain some popular misconceptions, e.g. that the pyramids were built with slave labour (the labour was provided by paid freemen), and that the ankh symbol was a form of crucifix (in fact, it is a hieroglyph that originated as a simplified sandal strap). It is only when he tried to match history with events in the Bible and with biblical prophecy that his information became unreliable.

For example, he implied that Tuthmosis IV became Pharaoh of Egypt because of two incidents, both recounted in the Bible, that removed the ruling Pharaoh (Amenhotep II) and the crown prince. The latter was killed by the tenth plague (the slaying of the first born of every creature) visited on the Egyptians by God in an attempt to convince them to release the Hebrews from bondage, and Amenhotep was the Pharaoh killed while pursuing the Hebrews across the Red Sea. There are two problems with this account: firstly, most archaeologists accept that if the events recorded in Exodus happened at all they happened over a century later (during the reign of Ramses II or his son, Merneptah); and secondly, Amenhotep’s mummified remains have been found - in fact, he was the first Pharaoh to be found in his own tomb - a fact which strongly suggests he was not drowned somewhere in the Red Sea.

Even when Joseit mentioned something that did not connect history with the Bible, it took some procrustean effort of the imagination to see the hand of God at work. An example of this was Joseit’s claim that a certain prophecy in Isaiah, concerning papyrus, had indeed come to pass. The prophecy says: “The paper

reeds by the brooks, by the mouth of the brooks and everything sown by the brooks, shall wither, be driven away and be no more.” Papyrus was an extremely important crop for the Egyptians, not only providing them with paper, but also with the material for building boats, nets and rope. Papyrus was also a valuable export. For the ancient Egyptians to have lost papyrus would have been for them a disaster of major proportions.

In fact, even though papyrus began to disappear from the Nile from the Middle Kingdom on (2040-1640 BC - well before Isaiah), there was more than enough to ensure it remained a lucrative export crop for Egypt until the 12th century AD, when rag and woodpulp began to replace it in the manufacture of paper. Even today, it stills grows in several places in Egypt - hardly a fulfilment of prophecy.

At times, Joseit’s remarks seemed very general, almost to the point of being vague: “Many believe that the daughter of Tuthmose I, Queen Hatshepsut ... was the one who found and fostered Moses.” Who believes? Not one notable archaeologist or historian was mentioned. What evidence is there for this statement?

Occasionally, Joseit sortied into fields unrelated to the subject at hand, e.g. he stated that the pyramids were constructed with amazing skill and precision, and this fact “along with many others [not mentioned], pointed out the inadequacy of the evolutionary theory of man’s development. These early builders were sophisticated, intelligent men.” This flank attack on evolution, besides demonstrating Joseit’s ignorance of the theory of evolution, is another example of his sweeping generalisations. Furthermore, it is phrased in such a way that disagreeing with him on evolution could be interpreted unfairly as disagreeing with him on the abilities of the pyramids’ builders.

On the whole, however, the talk was quite pleasant, if overlong, and even informative. No one there tried to hard sell the rest of the talks to the audience and the Seventh-day Adventists kept a very low profile. Joseit’s knowledge of history is commendable, but his efforts to match it with the Bible and with biblical prophecy failed to make a point that was either convincing or supportable.

Simon Brown is co-editor of the Canberra Skeptics’ publication, “Argos”, from which this article was taken (Vol3, No 4, June/July 1989).

Editor’s note: Reader’s interested in further information on this subject may like to read “Testament: The Bible and History” by John Romer (Guild Publishing, London, 1988).



Can Religion Be Studied Scientifically?

Patrick McBride

To some, this question does not present a problem. "Dependent as it is on subjective faith, religion withers like a leaf before a flame when the scientific attitude is brought to bear on it ... If the public in general undertook an analysis of religious behaviour, using systematic research tools, it would be the death of religion."¹

The sociology textbook in which this statement appeared probably expresses a minority view, thus it may seem a little unfair to resurrect a singularly embarrassing paragraph published in 1948. But I do so because I feel it illustrates the dangers of adopting an overly empirical approach to religion. The scientist who ventures into the study of religious phenomena runs the risk of descending into scientism.

Scientism, or the belief that science is the only true arbitrator of knowledge, is probably more prevalent among physical and biological scientists than it is social scientists. (But as the paragraph quoted at the beginning of this paper indicates, there are always exceptions.)

Although the social sciences, such as psychology, anthropology, sociology, economics and history, have clamoured for "scientific" respectability, it is arguable as to whether their methodologies genuinely meet the criteria of the so-called "scientific method". Indeed, the social sciences, because of the inexact nature of the subject of their studies, are compelled to avoid positivism, thus they would appear to be the best candidates for the study of religion.

And indeed, the social sciences have carried out important studies into "aspects" of religion. Of course, they are confined to studying only peripheral matters concerning religion; the history, sociology and psychology of religion. But to study religion itself, to look at the essence of religious beliefs, it is, I think, necessary to adopt a supra-rational approach. In other words, we must accept that religious beliefs transcend scientific analysis.

I would like to say that we could adopt philosophy as the tool most suited for the analysis of religious claims. And indeed, the philosophy of religion is a fruitful academic discipline, but at its heart philosophical inquiry is concerned with rational answers, and I fear that religion cannot furnish us with those.

Some Definitions

A discussion such as this one is dealing with vast

concepts, and as such definitions are crude and arbitrary. Defining something as ephemeral as religion is particularly risky; not every critic will be placated. But I think one should acknowledge that religion is concerned with the transcendent.

Of course, it is not necessary for religious beliefs to focus on a deity. Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and Australian Aboriginal religions are just some examples of religions which don't have a personalised God.

Thus religions are supernatural. Unlike those people who claim to possess paranormal abilities such as ESP, levitation, clairvoyance and psychokinesis, religious believers don't plead for their beliefs to be accepted scientifically. They willingly accept the transcendental nature of their beliefs.

But what is a strength for the religious believer is a weakness in the eyes of the scientists; faith has no place in science. In fact, the scientist must cultivate a healthy scepticism against all beliefs, scientific and otherwise. For at the heart of modern science is the concept of falsification.

The Vienna-born (1902) philosopher Karl Popper formulated a philosophy of science which used "conjecture" and falsification, or "refutation", to arrive at scientific claims. It was his contention that being able to falsify a conjecture actually told us more than a hypothesis which claimed to be beyond falsification.

"Every genuine test of a theory is an attempt to falsify it, or to refute it. Testability is falsifiability; but there are degrees of testability; some theories are more testable, more exposed to refutation, than others; they take, as it were, greater risks."²

Popper developed his philosophy in 1919-20 after encountering Freudian psychoanalysis, Adlerian "individual psychology" and Marxist history. To Popper, the one great failing with all of these theories was that they could not be disproved; any falsifications were rationalised away. With a little imagination, the theories could explain just about all phenomena.

While accepting that Popperism is subject to refutations of its own, and others have tried to improve upon it, I think we can still use it to define what is scientific and what isn't.

Plainly, in Popperian terms, religion is non-scientific, and incapable of being studied scientifically. Religion deals in "absolutism", science doesn't. All scientific knowledge is provisional, subject to further improvement or refutation. In short, religion cannot be falsified.

Philosophers too can deliberate upon religion, but they are no closer to providing us with an unambiguous answer, because they too are grounded in rationality. And religion is precisely the opposite. Unlike all other

knowledge, religion aspires towards the transcendental. It is unique knowledge.

William James and Medical Materialism

Earlier in this paper, I mentioned scientism and the desire to recognise only the validity of knowledge which comes to us through science. And while scientism is a defensible position, I suggest that many people would find it alarmingly rigid.

Probably even more rigid and limiting is "physicalism" or, as William James, in his 1902 book "The Varieties of Religious Experience" called it, "medical materialism". This is the belief that allegedly "religious" phenomena can be explained with reference to natural events. The medical materialist, in particular, maintains that these religious experiences are the product of physiological, psychological and chemical processes which have gone awry.

This idea of religious beliefs being due to physical dysfunctions allowed some of those hostile to religion to reject, out of hand, even the possibility of such claims being genuine. Sigmund Freud was one notable example.

In the first of the twenty lectures which comprised his book, James writes an illuminating defence against the medical materialists. In the lecture, "Religion and Neurology", he has this to say: "Scientific theories are organically conditioned just as much as religious emotions are; and if we only knew the facts intimately enough, we should doubtless see "the liver" determining the dicta of the sturdy atheist as decisively as it does those of the Methodist under conviction anxious about his soul. When it afters in one way the blood percolates it, we get the Methodist; when in another way, we get the atheist form of mindful".³

His message is simple enough: why do we assume that only religious beliefs are created under the influence of these allegedly malfunctioning physical processes? After all, isn't it possible that other beliefs, atheism for example, could be the result of the same dysfunction? Is an interest in philosophy, art or music similarly a legacy of this physiological problem? Is the scepticism of the medical materialist somewhat selective?

In the medical materialist argument, James sees nothing more than simple prejudice dressed up in pseudoscientific jargon. For instance, suggests James, geniuses must surely be the results of chemical and physical dysfunctions, but do we dismiss their works? Apparently not.

"But for the most part, the masterpieces are left unchallenged; and the medical line of attack either confines itself to such secular productions as every

one admits to be intrinsically eccentric, or else addresses itself exclusively to religious manifestations."⁴

William James demonstrates that dogmatic science is no better, and certainly no more useful, than dogmatic religion. He also alludes to the fact that there is little point in trying to distort religion by jamming it into positions better occupied by science.

Another tack adopted by the medical materialists, so James tells us, is to study the origins of religion. Apparently this represents a sort of "philosopher's stone"; they seem to feel that if religion can be demonstrated to possess an "origin", that it will evaporate within a cloud of reason.

"The medical materialists are therefore only so many belated dogmatists, neatly turning the tables on their predecessors by using the criterion of origin in a destructive instead of an accreditive way."⁵

Why have I quoted William James at such length; indeed, why have I focused on medical materialism? Surely its ghost was laid to rest a long time ago? I highlight James' work because I feel it is an excellent illustration of how scientific methods, and an emphasis upon positivism, are not suitable for the study of the religious enterprise.

Conclusion

Certainly, among many social scientists, there is a view that religion is a purely human construction; that we are forever to be lodged in the supernatural beliefs of the past.

This is a perfectly valid opinion, but opinions aren't the stuff of empirical science. At this stage, no scientist has come up with a genuinely scientific hypothesis which could demonstrate the true nature of religious experience. Perhaps it is necessary to acknowledge that religion is like art - a special and different kind of knowledge.

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2. Karl Popper, "Science: Conjectures and Refutations*", eds E.D. Klerrike, Robert Hollinger and A. David Kiline, 'Introductory Readings in the Philosophy of Science', Prometheus Books, New York, 1980. p.22
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4. William James, p.32
- 5 William James, p.33

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Biblical Prophecy ***Daniel Come to Judgement***

Colin Groves & Simon Brown

Part One of a series of examinations of the literalness of Biblical prophecy.

I **The Prophecies of Daniel**

Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, had a dream that troubled him greatly. Unfortunately, he could not remember what the dream was, so his soothsayers could not interpret it for him, even though he had threatened them with death if they failed (an attitude with which all Skeptics will naturally be in sympathy). So the king ordered that preparations be duly made for their execution, and here we may begin to question his fairness, for some who had not been consulted at all, and presumably (not being truly psychic) knew nothing of the dream were included in the order. One of these was the Jewish captive, Daniel.

But Daniel prayed, and the following night he was told by God, in a vision, just what Nebuchadnezzar's dream had been, and what it meant. Obtaining an audience with the king, he recalled the dream for him, as follows: the king had dreamed of a huge image of a man, with the head made of gold, the breast and arms of silver, the belly and thighs of bronze, the legs of iron and the feet part iron and part clay. A stone was suddenly hurled, not by human hands, at the feet of the image and broke them, causing the whole statue to fall and shatter, while the stone itself grew into a mountain that filled the whole earth.

The meaning, Daniel revealed, was this: Nebuchadnezzar was himself that head of gold. After him would come another, inferior kingdom, then another, and after that another as strong as iron; but this fourth kingdom would be divided despite marriage alliances ("mixed with clay"), and would be destroyed by the kingdom of God which would last for ever. And by the way, O King (live for ever), continued Daniel, please spare your hapless soothsayers and make my friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego provincial administrators in your kingdom.

In the 1930s, Earle Albert Rowell wrote a book, "David Dare", in which, over the course of a series of

nightly public meetings, an evangelist convinces sceptics that all the prophecies of the Bible have come to pass, therefore the whole Bible is literally true. We do not know whether David Dare is or was a real person, or whether, rather, the book is intended as a novel - a parable, presumably.

A 1985 book, "Life - How Did It Get Here? By Evolution or By Creation?" published by the Watch Tower Tract Society, takes much the same line. In a recent series of public meetings in Canberra, a Seventh-day Adventist preacher, Peter Joseit, recounted various prophecies and claimed that the ones referring to historical events had all been fulfilled, so we should take extremely careful note of the others (i.e., the apocalyptic ones). Fundamentalists clearly regard the fulfilment of prophecy as an important item in their armoury.

Among the most widely cited prophecies are those of the Book of Daniel, and of these, Nebuchadnezzar's dream seems the most widely cited of all. Let David Dare (chapter 4, pp 29-30) speak for all: the four kingdoms of the dream are Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome; after Rome, Daniel prophesied there would never be another world power, and look, there hasn't! Many people, says David Dare, have tried to unite the peoples into a universal world empire, but have failed. Napoleon and Kaiser Wilhelm II (and, add today's commentators, Hitler) need not have bothered even to try: it was already written in the Bible that they were destined to fail. Only the Kingdom of God will succeed; to which Peter Joseit and the Watch Tower book both add that the signs are all about us that the last days are here, the Kingdom will soon come, the stone hurled not by human hands is already on its way towards us.

There are two ways to look at the prophecy in Daniel, ch.2: on its own merits (as interpreted by present-day Biblical fundamentalists) and in context.

Fundamentalist interpretation

Let us start then, by supposing that the fundamentalists are correct: the Book of Daniel records prophecies made in the 6th century BC; there would be four, and only four, world kingdoms/empires thereafter; these four were Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome; and after Rome there should be no further universal kingdoms of human origin. Has all this been fulfilled?

There is the minor detail that the second kingdom was going to be inferior to the first, whereas of course the Medo-Persian empire was far larger and lasted far longer than the Babylonian. Let us overlook this ever-so-slight discrepancy for the moment.

Much more serious is the subtle shift of the theatre of operations away from the Middle East and the question of what exactly is a “world empire”.

The Babylonian Empire was really rather insignificant on the world scene (it did not even cover the whole world as known to the 6th Century BC Jews), despite the acknowledged magnificence of its capital city.

The Roman Empire, far more of a “world empire”, was centred far to the west and did not in fact even extend to Mesopotamia (the region of Babylon) except very briefly under Trajan, who captured it from the Parthians in 114-117 AD. After Trajan, Babylon reverted to Parthia. When the Parthian Empire disintegrated a couple of centuries later, Mesopotamia became part of the Sassanid Empire. The rise of Islam saw Mesopotamia brought under the Caliphate, and it was later ruled by the successive Turkish Empires (Seljuk and Ottoman).

The Ottoman Empire was perhaps the largest and longest-lasting “world empire” up to that time (it finally collapsed in 1918), with the possible exception of China. In terms of power, magnificence, brutality and the absolutism of its rule it yielded nothing to any of its predecessors.

Where are the Parthians, the Sassanids, the Turks, in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream? In what way, exactly, did they fail to “unite the people”?

On its own terms, therefore, the prophecy of Daniel ch.2, as interpreted by 20 century fundamentalists, is clearly refuted. But in a wider context this misses the point.

Historical context

As recorded in 2 Kings 24, King Jehoiakim of Judah was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, but rebelled three years later, and promptly died, leaving his successor Jehoiachin only three months of rule before Nebuchadnezzar, now in the eighth year of his reign, captured Jerusalem and hauled him off, together with (supposedly) 10,000 of his people, to captivity in Babylon. 2 Chronicles 36:6 and Daniel 1:1-2 have Jehoiakim himself taken to Babylon in chains (and, in the latter case, in Nebuchadnezzar’s second year), but contemporary Babylonian sources agree with the Second Book of Kings. Daniel even specifies that this happened in the third year of Jehoiakim’s reign, which would make it 606 BC, which is actually one year before Nebuchadnezzar came to the throne.

As Daniel was supposedly one of those brought to Babylon with his king (Dan 1:16), we must conclude that if the Book of Daniel was written during the prophet’s lifetime its author must have received very inaccurately remembered history from his informant. The errors continue. In Dan 1:21, the prophet is said to have been in Babylon until own Persian Empire.

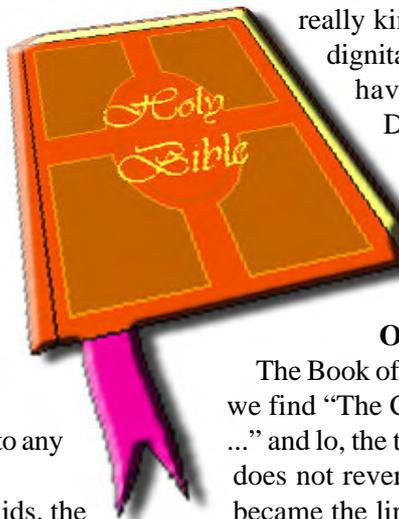
Most other commentators have agreed with Rowley. Only a few literalists have taken issue with him, chief among whom is Whitcombe (1959) who, in a wonderful exercise in special pleading, suggests that “Darius the Mede” was actually Gubaru, whom Cyrus made governor of Babylon. True, the high officers of the Persian Empire were generally Persian, but perhaps Gubaru was a Mede, no? Well, no, he was not really king, but he was a sort of de facto royal dignitary, in which case it is possible he might have taken a Persian name ... such as Darius. His father’s name is not recorded, but there is no evidence it was not Xerxes/Ahasuerus, was there? This sort of convoluted “logic” speaks for itself.

Other interpretations

The Book of Daniel begins in Hebrew. Then, in 2:4, we find “The Chaldaeans, speaking in Aramaic, said ...” and lo, the text switches suddenly to Aramaic, and does not revert to Hebrew until chapter 8. Aramaic became the lingua franca of the Middle East during the Persian Empire, i.e. after the Jews’ Babylonian exile, indicating a post-exilic date for Daniel; indeed, according to Sawyer (1987), a date after 400 BC.

Those parts that are in Hebrew are not of the fluency expected from a 6th century Jew, according to Davies (1985). There are some Greek words in the text, especially the names of musical instruments (3:5-6), suggesting according to the same authors an even later date. And the theology, numerology and apocalyptic style are comparable to the Books of Joel and Zechariah, which are dated to the late 4th century BC. The use of the term “Chaldaeans” for just a class of magician indicates unfamiliarity with 6th century Babylon: the Chaldaeans were, simply, the native inhabitants of Babylon. The belief in a Median Empire intervening between the Babylonian and Persian is likewise incompatible with an early date.

The four-metal imagery of Nebuchadnezzar’s Dream is inconclusive. Its earliest traceable use is by the possibly 8th century Greek poet Hesiod, in whose recounting of human prehistory there are successive races of gold, silver, bronze and iron (with the “heroic” race of Greek mythology intervening between the last



two). It seems to have become widespread since then. It is tempting to attribute its employment in the Middle East to the extensive Hellenisation that followed Alexander's conquests in the late 4th century, though of course this cannot be assumed.

Four-kingdom models, on the other hand, came into use quite late. Thus the Roman historian Aemilius Sura, writing somewhat before 171 BC, listed the four "world empires" to his day as the Assyrian (including Babylonian!), Median, Persian and Greek, and so did one of the Sibylline oracles (Jewish prophetic writings known from the 1st century AD manuscripts from Egypt, but thought to date from the 2nd century BC). Mention of four empires, and in particular the insertion of a Median Empire between "Assyrian" and Persian, suggests that the author of Daniel was "drawing on a fixed tradition" (Collins, 1981).

Finally, some phrases, especially the "abomination of desolation" of 8:13 and 11:31, are identical to phraseology used in 1 Maccabees, a book of the Apocrypha which describes the successful revolt of the Jews, under the Maccabees, against the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-163 BC). Was Daniel, then, written at the time of this revolt?

Maccabean revolt

The evidence suggests that it was. Many passages in the book refer directly to "the king of Greece" and the like, though they are reported as visions.

After Alexander the Great's death, his generals fought each other, some of them establishing their own dynasties over parts of Alexander's enormous empire. The Seleucid dynasty emerged as master of the Middle East.

Orthodox Jewish discontent built up continually as Hellenism, under the Seleucids, spread in Judaea: young Jewish men had even become keen on athletics, in which of course they competed naked - and, to avoid being laughed at, some of them had apparently "made themselves uncircumcised", a highly-painful operation called "epispasm".

But the final straw was Antiochus IV's desecration of the temple at Jerusalem. Traditional sacrifices had been forbidden and pagan practices introduced such as the sacrifice of pigs to Zeus ("the abomination of desolation"). This act was quite unprecedented in the ancient world; no imperial system, however brutal in other respects, had ever actually interfered with other people's religious practices. In 167, the aged priest Mattathias slew a Jew who was offering pagan sacrifice, and his followers began pulling down pagan altars and forcibly circumcising all Jewish boys. After the death of Mattathias in the following year, his son

Judah, nicknamed Maccabee, formed an army of revolt.

Daniel ch. 11 describes these events, and those that preceded them (the war and dynastic intermarriage between the Seleucids and the Ptolemies of Egypt) very precisely, but in the future tense as if prophesying them, with a tone of outrage that has convinced most commentators that the author had lived through the times himself - right up to 11:40. At this point, quite suddenly, evident wishful thinking takes over, and accurate historiography ceases. Antiochus, Daniel prophesies, will conquer Egypt, then return to Palestine where he will die. What actually happened was that Antiochus avoided antagonising Egypt and went north, to quell a Parthian revolt, and was killed there.

In Nebuchadnezzar's dream, the mixture of iron and clay in the feet of the image suggests the two attempts to make dynastic marriages between the Seleucids and the Ptolemies; and the supernatural stone that shattered the feet and then filled the whole earth is reminiscent of Daniel's view, a few chapters later on, of the Maccabean revolt as the coming of the Kingdom of God.

The erroneous insertion by the author of a Median Empire between the Babylonian/Persian actually compels us to interpret it in this way: Babylonian, Median, Persian, Greek. The fourth "kingdom", the one destroyed by the Kingdom of God, must have been that of the Seleucids - strictly speaking, the Seleucids arose from the ashes of Alexander's empire rather than being a continuation of it, but to the Jews they must have all seemed the same: idolatrous, uncircumcised people, addicted to discus throwing in the nude.

The first to date the Book of Daniel to the time of the Maccabees was the Greek philosopher Porphyry, of the 2nd century AD, and modern authors have nearly all agreed with him. In fact, as far as we are aware, all except the fundamentalists (i.e. all those with a vested interest in keeping it, in the teeth of the evidence, in the 6th century BC).

It belongs, as Collins (1981) and Grayzel (1968) maintain, to the genre known as Pseudepigraphia, writings in which the anonymous authors, wishing to draw attention to matters they considered important, would add them to their arrangements of an old author's writings. Such a view implies that there might well have been an older core, perhaps indeed written during the Babylonian Exile, to the Book of Daniel, but we may never know what it actually consists of. Notably, the Pseudepigraphia include a lot of apocalyptic writings, "visions of the last days", which is what many of Daniel's prophecies are.

The Book of Daniel has inspired great literature, art and music through the centuries, from Shakespeare to E.L. Doctorow, from Blake to Arthur Boyd, from Handel to Louis Armstrong. Let us not trivialise this richness by literalising it. More important still, let us not attribute the world's ills to God - let us do something about it for ourselves.

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II

The Reasons Behind It All

In the course of researching for this and other articles on biblical prophecy, and from reading similar articles by other authors, we've realised that one thing stands out above all else: how determined the proponents of biblical prophecy are to prove their point.

To stretch an heroic metaphor, the confirmation of biblical prophecies require two things: Herculean distortions of logic and procrustean feats of fact fitting. Despite this, obviously intelligent individuals, such as Peter Joseit and the author of "David Dare", apparently have no problem in believing in the rightness of their cause.

Of course, skepticism is not a corollary of intelligence, but something must happen to blinker these people's intuitive common sense, to encourage them to surrender any capacity for objective and critical thought, or else why go to such lengths to try and prove the literalness of the Bible, a trait shared by all Christian fundamentalists.

We think there are four possible reasons for this attitude. One or a combination of two or more of them, may satisfactorily explain their beliefs and the strength with which they hold them.

First, the need to believe in something. Beliefs provide people with some of the anchors they need to survive in the waters of a constantly changing and churning world. Anchors also help give people a stable platform from which they can observe their social and physical environment, and from there understand how

they fit in and contribute to the stream of life of which they are a part. In the case of many people, belief can become worship.

Second, the need for security. This is related to the first reason, but in a sense is reversed. Instead of encouraging people to find out how they fit in as individuals, it instead encourages them to lose themselves, their individuality, in a greater whole. They are protected by something greater than themselves, like small fish in a large shoal, and proselytise so desperately because the more of them there are the more indistinguishable, and therefore the more secure, they as individuals become.

Third, the need to know that everything will be alright in the end. This isn't quite the "she'll be right" attitude so often deplored in the stereotypical Ocker - it is much more fundamental than that, having less to do with apathy than the need to believe that someone, somewhere, is in control, and that nothing they as individuals can do will alter what is going to happen. The only effect their actions will have is on their personal fate, for example, whether or not they are saved.

Fourth, the need for supreme authority. This is related to the third reason, insofar as it is important that someone be in control. But this also covers the need some people have to be able to refer to a source of moral authority, and to believe that this authority has established a set of laws and conditions that all must obey, or else retribution will quickly follow.

The Bible teaches that the Jews suffered conquest and Diaspora (dispersion) because they failed, as a people, to keep God's law. It is this belief that encourages many fundamentalists to become involved in politics - if the whole country does not conform to God's law, then disaster will be sure to follow. From this stems not only a respect for most established secular authorities, but also a desire to wield that authority themselves, sometimes with horrendous results - there could be few governments in the world more dictatorial than Iran's, run by conservative, fundamentalist theocrats. In these situations there is always a danger of leader worship.

The next question is why do fundamentalists express these needs in the way that they do? It is simplistic to say that they find modern, secular and democratic society lacking in the qualities they consider necessary for an ideal and sustainable community, because all of us can probably find areas in our own society that could do with considerable improvement. What is unique about fundamentalists, at least the Christian variety, is the extreme stand they take, and their attachment to a literal interpretation of entirely symbolic

passages in the Bible.

Of course, it can be said that a sceptic who is an atheist, and whose belief system is based on science, is also taking an extreme stand. The difference, however, is that science is open to challenge, is based on ideas and theories that are vulnerable to new ideas and theories. A belief system based on science offers a way to interpret and understand the physical universe, but does not establish parameters within which the universe must operate.

As well, there are sceptics whose belief system is based on the Bible and its teachings as well as science, but who do not take every word in that book to be literally true. Most Christians have no difficulty reconciling a figurative interpretation of Genesis with a belief in evolution, for example.

It would seem, therefore, that fundamentalists caught in a belief system that can accept neither challenge nor change have no choice but to stridently proselytise, attacking all other belief systems as not only wrong, but inherently evil, even if those belief systems happen to belong to other sects within the same broad religious family as their own.

Fundamentalists have every right to proselytise, and to try and prove the rightness of their point of view. To that extent, at least, we as Skeptics have no reason to object or interfere. However, the tendency many fundamentalists have to mislead people, intentionally or otherwise, by distorting or lying about science and history, can only be answered by determined and rational arguments.

We may have no chance of changing the minds of the fundamentalists themselves, for all the reasons that have been given above, but at least by speaking out we will give those people who have not yet made up their minds one way or the other, a balanced and, hopefully, reasonably objective point of view.

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Major Blunders of Major Prophets

Colin Groves and Simon Brown

The second (and final) part of a series of examinations of the literalness of Biblical prophecy.

I. Who, in any case, were the prophets?

The word 'Prophet' comes from the Greek *prophetes*, literally 'one who speaks for' someone else, i.e. an interpreter. This in turn is a fairly accurate translation of the Hebrew *nabi*, 'proclaimer' (Sawyer, 1987). Prophets were the mouthpieces of God, telling the people what God required of them - forecasting the future was only incidental to their role ('forth-tellers' rather than 'foretellers' (Seitz, 1988)), and even then much of their 'prediction' reads more like an 'if you continue as you are, then the following is bound to happen', than like an unalterable futurology. In fact in some instances it is recorded that the people do change their ways, with the result that the prophecy changes.

The books of the Prophets are customarily divided into 3 Major and 12 Minor Prophets, plus the enigmatic *Book of Daniel* where of we previously spake (Groves and Brown, 1989). The Major Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The Minor Prophets contain a few passages interpreted as messianic by some, but in general - because they are 'minor' and/or didn't give themselves much space to write long messages - they are little known. The one name that is known to the public (outside the pages of a Herman Melville novel, or Ringo Starr's family) is Jonah, and that mainly because of his adventure with a large fish (or whale, as the popular imagination has it). The Lord had consigned him to the belly of the fish because of his reluctance to go and preach in the Assyrian capital, Nineveh. The ancient Assyrians, arguably the most horrible people ever to have defiled the face of the earth, had a reputation for depriving those of whom they disapproved of their hands, skins or other necessary parts, so our sympathies are entirely with Jonah, but presumably the hydrochloric acid and proteolytic enzymes of the fish's belly restored his resolve to face the outside world, and after being sucked up by the fish, he did indeed hie him to Nineveh where, astonishingly, his preaching was effective and

caused the people to rend their clothes. It is difficult to decide which story is less plausible: that of the fish or of the repentance of the Assyrians.

It is the three Major Prophets who we wish to consider here. Their lengthy writings contain much prophecy, which has been mistaken by Biblical literalists for futurology. As before, we will refer to David Dare and to the lectures by the Seventh-Day Adventist, Peter Joseit, along with a few other sources.

As a matter of fact Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are four prophets, not just three. It has been accepted ever since the work of J.C. Doderlein in 1775, in his *Ezaias*, that chapters 40 onward of *Isaiah* have a different authorship and date from the earlier chapters, and that they are known as Deutero-Isaiah ('Second Isaiah'). The evidence has been reviewed by Radday (1973) and Scullion (1982): Deutero-Isaiah is quite different from the earlier part thematically; there is no narrative linking the prophesies, which form a continuous stream; the style is quite different (sentence length and construction, vocabulary and so on are all different); and the writer has a habit of personifying objects, including the city of Jerusalem. Finally, whereas the first part purports to record the words of a prophet - Isaiah son of Amoz, who lived in the late eighth century B.C. - Deutero-Isaiah concerns the latter half of the Babylonian captivity, one and a half centuries later. It has to be said that Radday (1973) argues that, within Deutero-Isaiah, chs. 40-8 and 49-66 display so many stylistic differences that the work of yet a third prophet must be suspected: a view which seems not to have attracted much following (if anything, the 'Third Isaiah' which is sometimes believed in, is specified as chs. 56-66 (Seitz, 1988)).

The true Isaiah saw his first vision in the last year of King Uzziah of Judah (753 or 742 BC, according to different reckonings). He flourished during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, that is up to the beginning of the next century, or a little after (*Is* 6:1 and 1:1). He seems to have been a bit of an eccentric; when Sargon II, king of Assyria, captured the city of Ashdod, Isaiah (on the Lord's instructions) took to going about naked for three years as a sign that Egypt and Cush would be naked, too, to Assyrian attacks.

Jeremiah's call came in the thirteenth year of the reign of King Josiah (626 BC), and he lasted until the eleventh year of the reign of King Zedekiah (586 B.C.); he was every whit as eccentric as Isaiah, given to making practical demonstrations of his prophecies such as breaking an earthenware jar in front of the priests and elders to demonstrate how Judah would be shattered; or wearing a yoke around his neck to symbolise the yoke that Nebuchadnezzar, king of

Babylon, would soon place on Judah. His jar-breaking stunt got him flogged and put in the stocks overnight, and on his release he uttered prophesies of doom on the family of the temple officer who had done this to him. He complained bitterly to the Lord for making him a target for mockery (*Jer.* 20:7-10). He barely escaped execution on two occasions by King Jehoiakim, and he was clearly regarded as a fifth columnist for the Babylonians. Indeed, he was well treated by the Babylonians, who awarded him a food allowance; when rebellion broke out among those Jews who had not been deported to Babylon, Jeremiah inveighed against the rebels, who abducted him and took him with them, apparently as a hostage, on their flight into Egypt, which is the last we hear of him.

The son of Buzi the priest, Ezekiel was a Jewish captive in Babylon who was called to prophecy in the fifth year of the reign of King Jehoiachin, in 594 or 593 BC. When we read the instructions he believed he had received from God - which he presumably obeyed - we find once again an erratic, even bizarre fanatic who had no regard for social niceties; who shut himself up in his house, and had himself tied up to keep him from leaving (*Eze.* 3:24-5); drew a representation of Jerusalem on a brick which he then pretended to lay siege to (4:1-3); lay on his left side for 390 days to do penance for Israel, and on his right for 40 days to bear the guilt of Judah (4:4-6); and shaved off his hair and beard, burning one third of the hairs, chopping up another third, and scattering the rest to the wind, except for a few which he kept in his robe until the time came to burn them too (5:1-4). We are rather appalled to read that he was forbidden to mourn the death of his beloved wife, whom the Lord had struck down specifically to illustrate the fate that awaited Israel (24:15-27). In his wide-ranging prophecies he fulminated again Jerusalem; against the 'abominations' practised by the Jews in Babylon; against Edom, Moab, Tyre, Sidon, Egypt, etc. Would the Edomites and the rest ever have got to know of his prophecies, one wonders? Or were they uttered to give comfort to the captive Jews (see 'our traditional enemies are destined for far worse fates than ourselves')?

II. The prophets' predictions - or were they?

We claimed above that the nature of Old Testament prophecy is prediction only in the very loosest sense. We will argue that their messages were in the nature of judgements on and (often) comfort for the Jews, the inference being that they would have been astounded at the implication put on them by today's

Biblical fundamentalists, that they had exact foreknowledge of what an unalterable future had in store for the world. In this interpretation we include the messianic prophecies. David Dare and others have tended to say, 'Isaiah predicted a world-saviour, and look - he came!' We think it would be more accurate to say that Isaiah and other prophets *promised* a saviour (for the Jews, not necessarily for the world), and that Jesus saw himself as fulfilling the prophecies, not in the sense that things just happened to turn out as the prophets had foretold, but by deliberately setting out to fulfil them. Thus when Jesus sent two of his disciples to fetch him a certain ass and her colt, "All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet" (*Matt.* 21:4). How many times do we read this in the New Testament?

1. Isaiah

Isaiah has at least three prophecies that have been regarded as messianic. In one, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (*Is.* 7:14), but (v. 16) "before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good, the land that thou abhorrest shall be forsaken of both her kings". In Ch. 9:6-7 he says that the child shall be a ruler, "and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace" (or, in the NEB translation, "and he shall be called in purpose wonderful, in battle God-like, Father for all time (or, of a wide realm), Prince of peace"). Finally, in Ch. 11, "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse" (v. 1), "And righteousness shall be the girdle of his reins" (v. 5), "And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people, which shall be left, from Assyria, and from Egypt" (v. 11). In the first prophecy, 'thou' is Ahaz, king of Judah, and the land that he abhors, whose two kings are to be overthrown, seems to be Syria with Israel, whose two kings had combined against Judah; this would happen in the infancy of the child designated Immanuel ('God is with us'). As the second prophecy makes clear, the child will be of the royal house, and his own reign will usher in a period of peace and prosperity. Clements (1988) suggests that the prophecies refer to Hezekiah, son of Ahaz; but this seems improbable, as Immanuel's birth is part of the prophecy, and Hezekiah had been born before his father had even come to the throne! It seems more likely that Isaiah was indeed looking forward to a generalised time when Judah's troubles would be over, and this is how Judaism did indeed come to view the

passages; for the Gospel writers, Jesus was Immanuel, and both Matthew (ch. 1) and Luke (ch. 3) recorded genealogies to demonstrate that Jesus was, as required, of the House of Jesse (unfortunately, the two genealogies contradict each other!).

Later, Isaiah prophesied (19:5) that the river Nile "shall be wasted and dried up", and that the city-state of Tyre (19:15) should "be forgotten seventy years". As these two prophecies are thoroughly upstaged by Ezekiel (whose handling of them is treated in detail below), we will not comment further on them here.

Isaiah proper - 'First Isaiah' - ends with four chapters of narrative about the sieges of Jerusalem by Assyria, retelling (sometimes in the self-same words and phrases) the famous stories of *II Kings* chs. 18-20. Ch. 39 ends with Isaiah telling King Hezekiah that, after he is dead, Jerusalem will be sacked by Babylon; this begins to sound like a prophecy of the Babylonian captivity a century later, until we read (39:7): "And of thy sons that shall issue from thee, which thou shalt beget, shall they take away; and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon" - making it clear that this Babylonian event is to happen in the years immediately following Hezekiah's death (it didn't; and, reading the narrative that follows in *II Kings*, there is no indication that Hezekiah's sons did not remain sexually intact!).

Hezekiah, who had suffered a good deal in his reign, seemed less than concerned about his sons. "Good is the word of the Lord which thou hast spoken", he said: "For there shall be peace and truth in my days". And so ends First Isaiah.

2. Deutero-Isaiah

Deutero-Isaiah is mainly famous for the Servant Songs, which have even been considered by some authorities to form a corpus of their own, separate from the rest of the book. They are the passages that have been taken as messianic by some. They are as follows:

- *Is.* 42:1-4 The servant shall "bring forth judgement to the Gentiles"; he shall be self-effacing and gentle, but persistent.

- *Is.* 49:1-6 The servant speaks: he is called from the womb; he will both restore Israel and be a light to the Gentiles.

- *Is.* 50:4-9 The servant again speaks: he has been made learned and eloquent, he is obedient to the Lord, he is maltreated but does not hit back.

- *Is.* 52:13 - 53:12 The servant is despised and rejected; "wounded for our transgressions"; "he is

brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb”; “he made his grave with the wicked”, yet he shall see his seed.

It is the fourth Servant Song that has been reckoned most significant by those who see predictions about Jesus in the Old Testament, yet of course Jesus is not supposed to have had ‘seed’ (literally, children, as the NEB makes clear here). The ‘servant’ concept is quite obscure, and indeed the very validity of the concept of ‘Servant Songs’ has been queried (Mettinger, 1983). Mettinger points out that the Songs are actually only weakly demarcated from the surrounding text, such that one could, with equal justification, extend the First Servant Song for another five verses, and the Second for another six; and there are at least three other passages which have ‘Servant Song’ characteristics.

There are several references in Deutero-Isaiah to Cyrus, king of Persia (44:28, 45:1), which dates the passages to around 539 or 538, when Cyrus’s empire was expanding and Babylon was ready to fall like a rotten apple into his lap - as detailed in our previous article. It is worth pointing out that Deutero-Isaiah speaks in similar vein of Cyrus as he does of the ‘Servant’ (even calling *him* ‘servant’ or ‘anointed’). Identifying the ‘Servant’ as Cyrus has, of course, its own difficulties, especially that the Persian empire-builder was not particularly self-effacing, nor did he make his grave with the wicked! Mettinger (1983) and Seitz (1988) suggest that the ‘servant’ is the exiled Israel, and that the Cyrus passages serve as a counterpoint to the Servant Songs. Perhaps, of course, the ‘servant’ is the prophet himself, writing in ‘just you wait’ vein!

3. Jeremiah

One of the weakest claims for ‘fulfilment of prophecy’ comes in a recent article on the archaeological site of Petra, in Jordan (Down, 1990). After describing its location, in the Edom escarpment (on the east side of the Arava rift valley, which runs from the Dead Sea to the Gulf of Aqaba), and some of its noteworthy features such as the magnificent rock-cut facade, *Um el Biyara* (‘the place of cisterns’) and the deep narrow wadi, the Siq, that leads to it, Down quotes extensively from Jeremiah’s imprecations against Edom, thus:

O thou that dwellest in the clefts of the rock, that holdest the height of the hill: though thou shouldest make thy nest as high as the eagle, I will bring thee down from thence, saith the Lord. Also Edom shall be a desolation: everyone that

goeth by it shall be astonished, and shall hiss at the plagues thereof. As in the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah and the neighbour cities thereof, saith the Lord, no man shall abide there, neither shall a son of man dwell in it

(*Jer.* 49:16-18. Down uses some other translation, but the tenor is the same).

Down interprets this passage his own way: “‘The height of the hill’ refers to *Um el Biyara*, and the ‘clefts of the rock’ refers to what is known to the Arabs as the *Siq...*”, and goes on to maintain that the ultimate abandonment of Petra as late as the 12th century A.D. represents the fulfilment of the prophecy. So how does he decide what “the height of the hill” and “the clefts of the rock” mean? He does not say; he merely asserts it. (This is what George Orwell called a ‘bullying argument’.) The description, referring as it does to the Edomites, aptly describes the whole of that dramatic mountainous region - who specified Petra? The only settlements mentioned (in verses 7, 8, 13, 20 and 22) are Teman, Dedan and Bozrah. Petra, Down has previously argued, was the locale called Sela in the Bible (it means ‘Rock’ in Hebrew, as Petra does in Greek): in other words, it was not one of these three places. Finally, during his visit to Petra, David Down surely met the Bedouin who traditionally camp there, just as Peter Joseit did in his visit?

But what is really important about Jeremiah is the narrative of his behaviour. To this we will return in the last section.

4. Ezekiel

One of Ezekiel’s often-cited ‘predictions’ concerns Tyre, a powerful city-state in what is now southern Lebanon, and chief city of the Phoenicians. “Tyre shall be destroyed, never to be rebuilt”, he said (*Eze.* 26:4-21); “I will bring on Tyre Nebuchadrezzar, king of Babylon” (26:7); “And they shall break down thy walls, and destroy thy pleasant houses: and they shall lay thy stones and thy timber and thy dust in the midst of the water” (26:12); “And I will make thee like the top of a rock: thou shalt be a place to spread nets upon; thou shalt be built no more” (26:14); “I will make thee a terror, and thou shalt be no more: Though thou be sought for, yet shalt thou never be found again, saith the Lord God” (26:21).

David Dare claims (p. 15) that the old city of Tyre was indeed destroyed by Nebuchadrezzar, and that the new Tyre was thereafter built on an island offshore; Alexander the Great, much later (332 B.C.) used the

remains of the old city to build a causeway (“stones and timber and dust in the midst of the water” - see?), and so crossed to the island city, took it and destroyed it utterly. By contrast, the nearby city of Sidon, for which capture but not utter destruction was predicted (Eze. 28:20-3), still exists! The Jehovah’s Witnesses’ book *Life - How Did It Get Here? By Evolution or by Creation?* also makes much of this prophecy, stressing that its final fulfilment occurred more than two centuries after the prophecy was made. In one of the public lectures referred to by Brown (1989), Peter Joseit even showed a slide of fishermen spreading out their nets on the rock, said by him to mark the site of Tyre.

Tyre, Hitti (1957) tells us, was built on the mainland and at first used the large (one mile by three quarters of a mile) offshore island as its storehouse or place of retreat; but gradually the main inhabited part of the city came to be on the island, and the mainland part, though strongly fortified, became the adjunct and was called Old Tyre. In 586 the city was indeed attacked by Nebuchadrezzar, and Old Tyre was taken; but Tyre itself, the island city, was not, and the Babylonians besieged it for thirteen long years, at the end of which a treaty was made. (Tyre made a nominal submission and offered some of its aristocracy as hostages; the city remained untouched). Reading *Eze. 26* makes it absolutely clear that it was at the hand of Nebuchadrezzar that the total destruction is to take place; as the city was *not* destroyed, most of us would see the prophecy as unfulfilled. (Herm (1975) remarks that its destruction, at a time when Nebuchadrezzar was sweeping all before him, was widely expected; its survival was “almost miraculous”.) But the prophecy-as-futurology zealots insist that somehow, without a break in the text, notice of a second and finally destructive attack on Tyre is evident; so we must take the story further.

Yes, Alexander did attack Tyre when it refused him permission to enter it peacefully, ostensibly to sacrifice to the god Melkarth (whom Alexander identified with his mythical ancestor Herakles). Indeed he did build a causeway across to it from the mainland, using in part the remains of Old Tyre (so not strictly of Tyre). After a year-long siege he captured Tyre and devastated it: 2,000 of its citizens were crucified on the beach and 30,000 were sold as slaves. Some Tyrians were rescued by their Sidonian allies; some took refuge in the temple of Melkarth and were spared. Though almost depopulated, the city did survive; its fortunes revived under the Seleucids, it flourished under Roman rule, and it was the second largest city in Lebanon in the time of the crusades. Then its fortunes underwent

a further decline; it was described as merely a “populous village” by Ibn Battuta in 1326. And, oh dear, it still exists - a town of 23,000! As Harden (p. 26) notes, a major reason why so little excavation of the Phoenician city has been possible is that the modern town is still in the same place - on the self-same site. What price “Utter destruction for ever”, then?

The Arabic version of its name, Sur, is linguistically cognate with Tyre; the name, incidentally means ‘rock’, so Ezekiel was indulging in a play on words when he spoke of it becoming a rock for fishermen to spread their nets on.

A recent commentator (Klein, 1988) sheds light on this “failure of prophecy”. When Nebuchadrezzar, performing the Lord’s work, had nonetheless failed to take Tyre, no great crisis of faith ensued: the Lord would give him Egypt instead (*Eze. 29:17- 21*)! “A literalistic, one-to-one fulfilment was not required” (Klein, 1988: 135).

Ezekiel’s Egypt prophecies bring us to another matter. David Dare (ch. 3, p. 22) referring to *Eze. 32:15* and *30:12, 13*, claims that the prophet foretells that Egypt would be ruled by strangers - and look, ever since Alexander’s conquests Egypt’s rulers have been of foreign extraction! (Dare was writing well before Nasser’s overthrow of the Farouk monarchy, of course, but let it pass). As a matter of fact, what Ezekiel said was not, strictly speaking, that Egypt should be ruled by strangers, but that it should not be ruled at all (“there shall be no more a prince of the land of Egypt”). Quibbles, quibbles: the point we want to make here is more serious: a prophecy that has quite patently failed to come true occurs just a few verses before those that Dare refers to - so close, in fact, that his failure to cite them can only be regarded as blatant dishonesty. “And the land of Egypt shall be desolate and waste” (*Eze. 29:9*); “and I will make the land of Egypt utterly waste and dissolate” (v. 10); “No foot of man shall pass through it, nor foot of beast shall pass through it, neither shall it be inhabited forty years” (v. 11). One thing we can say for sure and certain about Egypt, that it has been continuously inhabited by people at least from upper Paleolithic times (and by animals for longer than that) up to the present. Yet the prophet is saying that there would be a forty year hiatus: no people, no gazelle, ibex, wild cat, jackal, millipede, sand mite, etc.! David Dare is revealed here as a fast talker, either a fraud or so breathtakingly sloppy that he must be simply laughed out of court. Zealous to ‘prove’ that a certain prophecy has come true, he somehow manages to overlook another, that is just a few verses earlier, that cannot, by the most liberal interpretation, be maintained to have been

accurate.

III. Lessons from the Prophets

But do the prophets still have a message for us today? We are sure that they do. On the most trite level it is something like this: their so-called ‘predictions’ can easily be shown not to have come true; a fundamentalist who insists that they have, and uses this supposed fact as important evidence of the validity of the entire Bible, perhaps of Christianity itself, is thereby unfairly contributing to the demise of the whole Judaeo-Christian concept. (For this reason alone, one would have thought that the fundamentalist sects would be wise to forget about prophecy-as-futurology.)

On a higher plane, and as we have emphasised before, the prophecies and the books that contain them reveal a great deal about the authors, their culture, society and their way of thinking. To the extent that the Judaeo-Christian belief system is one of western civilization’s most important influences, this provides tantalizing glimpses of much that lies behind our own culture and society and the way we think, even though the two civilizations are far removed in time and place, and also now greatly disparate in ethical outlook. In a real sense, therefore, to attribute the power of prophecy and futurology to these authors is to belittle and demean their contribution to literature and their inadvertent service to history. The fundamentalists transform these men, not into superheroes, but into clowns.

But an even more important point is raised by some passages, most notably by the story of Jeremiah wearing the yoke (*Jer.* 28). Another prophet, Hananiah, son of Azzur, took the yoke from Jeremiah’s neck and broke it saying that within two years the Lord would break the power of Nebuchadrezzar *thus*. Jeremiah replied that he hoped it would be so, but promptly went away and had another vision in which he learned that not only would the yoke of Nebuchadrezzar not be broken, but that it would even be increased. So he returned and denounced Hananiah as a false prophet whom the Lord had condemned to death. (And indeed the unfortunate Hananiah died two months later.)

The question that this story, in particular, raises is: how shall we know a false prophet? We live in the age of Salman Rushdie; if Satanic Verses nearly crept into the Koran, how do we know they were not capable of getting into the Bible too? The problem does not arise if we admit that the scriptures, however holy, were written by human beings just doing their best; but for those who insist that the sacred books were divinely dictated, the problem is acute. If God can inspire the scribe, so too can Satan.

Let us remember that many books on the life of Jesus were rejected by the early church for inclusion in the ‘official’ New Testament, because they painted an unflattering portrait of Jesus or in other ways did not conform to the orthodox theological or political view. Historically, many of these excluded books were as relevant as, and were certainly contemporary with, those that were finally accepted as the Word of God. The decision as to which books comprised the New Testament was a human one, not divine (Romer, 1989).

In any case, why would one *want* the books of the prophets to be divinely inspired? There is a world where the innocents suffer, where non-combatants are massacred, where women and children are enslaved, where captives are butchered, and the prophets gloat over this, all in the name of the Lord. Like the blood-soaked histories of the books of *Exodus*, *Joshua*, *Judges*, *Samuel*, *Kings* and *Chronicles*, they record an alien morality, a thousand light years from the ‘love your enemies’ exhortations of the New Testament, which fundamentalists *presumably* espouse. Let us leave the prophets within their context and not try to insist that they, or the kings and armies they served, have anything to do with the way the world should be. For, if they really *are* the voice of God, it is a dismal world indeed.

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CONVENTION DEBATE

The Skeptics Should Tackle Religion

Robert Macklin

Thank you for the opportunity to be involved in a debate of such potentially profound importance to Australian Skeptics, and perhaps to the wider community. The proposition is that, “The Skeptics Should Tackle Religion”.

The great pity is that it has already been decided. Much as I would have wished otherwise, the die has been cast and this makes the debate something of an anti-climax. I’m very sorry this is so; my only consolation is that it was decided in my favour. This happened on the 23rd May, during a most memorable appearance of many of our Victorian members on a programme called “Couchman”. I would like to congratulate the participating Skeptics on their contribution. You did us all proud.

Ostensibly, the subject was an American channeller - that’s spelt charlatan - who transformed herself before our very eyes into a divine entity called Mafu. Well, the Skeptics quite rightly took her and her followers to the cleaners and it was all good fun.

The programme was almost over when suddenly the redoubtable Peter Couchman turned to a member of the audience called, I believe, Father Paul Collins. Father Collins, we learned, is a Roman Catholic priest, in good standing with his church, a graduate, he told us of some 14 years deep and concentrated study of his craft; a man of real religious moment; an authority on the subject. Peter Couchman asked him to sum up the proceedings and this is what he said: “What you people (meaning the skeptics) don’t seem to realise is that what we have been involved in here tonight has been a religious experience.” He was quite specific. Elementary it might have been, he said, but it was unquestionably a religious event. Indeed, he said, the difference between his calling and the channeller’s was not qualitative, simply quantitative. He had spent 14 years at the seminary, she, on the other hand, had taken a full two days to graduate.

So already, on the word of a priest, the Skeptics had taken the fatal step. The debate was over, the issue decided. And who am I to question the word of a priest? Nevertheless, in a spirit of fair play I think it only right to go through the motions here this afternoon.

I have said that the debate was potentially of profound importance to our organisation and, perhaps, the wider community. I mean that quite deliberately. It is important only if the view that I and my colleagues are putting prevails. If that happens, an important development will take place. If our view fails, then perhaps we will simply return to the status quo. Perhaps, but not certainly. For, it may well be that the very act of bringing this motion to the meeting will alter the way in which our organisation sees itself, and therefore the way it operates and the way it is viewed by the community.

If I may, I will return to this aspect later. I mention it now, only to underline the gravity of the action we are taking - or not taking - today.

So, at the heart of it lies the proposition that Australian Skeptics should incorporate religion in the mainstream of the activities it seeks to examine and, where appropriate, debunk. In fact, I am not totally prejudging the issue. It may be that, on examination, one or other religion turns up trumps. We might find that Roman Catholicism, say, or Islamic Sufism actually fulfils all the claims its proponents make for it. We might find incontrovertible evidence for the migration of souls; for the attainment of Nirvana; for the transubstantiation of the host; for the living presence of the Rainbow Serpent

We might. But then again, we might not. I admit that the latter seems the more likely but I’m sure that none of us here would be heart broken if, through rational and provable means, the answers to the great underlying questions were able to spring forth and reveal themselves.

I say that because it has been my experience in the organisation that skeptics are among the most passionately involved in the quest for answers. We don’t approach our situation in the universe in a negative manner; we really want to know more, and if we can know the ultimate truths - if indeed there are ultimate truths - then we would want to be first with the news.

Our problem - if indeed it is a problem - is that on the way we have been disillusioned with the snake-oil salesmen who claim to know the truth of the matter and utterly disheartened with the simplistic nostrums they purvey so single-mindedly.

Now I appreciate, perhaps as much as anyone here, the difficulties involved in investigating the facts, when it comes to religion. Some of you will be familiar with my recent book, “The Secret Life of Jesus”. If I could use a very Australian analogy, it was a little like researching the life of Sir Donald Bradman, then finding there is some confusion about the first Sheffield Shield match he played in.

Apparently there were four scorers. The first, named Mark, said he scored 20 and was caught Pilate, bowled Caiaphas.

The second, a chap called Matthew, said he actually made 40 not out and W.G. Grace, the father of the game, had only ever made 39 on the same ground.

The third, a rather poetic bloke called Luke, who wrote in the vogue of Neville Cardus, said he made a brilliant century. But then, at 101, said Luke, he fell to a bodyline trap set by the opposing captain, a man named Douglas Jewdine.

The fourth scorer, called John, threw everything into confusion. He said Bradman wasn't even there at the time. And he was better known as a bowler. Indeed, on the day in question he was opening the bowling for a team called the Gnostics in Asia Minor.

But then, curiously enough, all but Mark said he had a second innings. It was a very brief appearance and the consensus was that he retired hurt while the rest of the team batted on. Indeed, there is a strong suggestion that some spectators waited at the ground to watch him resume his second innings....and it may be that they are waiting still.

And there, I'm afraid, the analogy must end. The last person I would want to offend would be... Sir Donald Bradman. His name will live while ever there is a flannelled fool on a cricket oval. The same, I fear, will not hold true for Jesus - or Yeshu'a - the god.

But, in the long term, in perhaps 50 or 100 years, he will have joined that neglected band of former gods, figures like Mithras and Zoroaster and Apollo and Isis and Zeus, who had their moment in the sun (or the moon) and then were decently put aside.

But this will only happen if organisations like ours have the will and the courage to hold high the bright flame of reason, if we are not prepared to buckle before the powerful forces of superstition.

This of course is precisely what the religionists have done with the Jesus figure of history. They have hidden the human truth behind the mumbojumbo of sacramental witch-doctoring. They have attacked reason, our only guide through the darkness of ignorance and they would keep us, mentally, in chains.

They will try, as they have always tried, to induce in us a sense of dependence upon them; and their hatred for humanity and all its works will continue to put our species in jeopardy. Whatever figure they may use, be it Jesus or Mohammed or Mafu, be they based on an historical or an imaginary personage, the religionist motives are the same: to subdue the skeptic, to

extinguish the light of reason, so that they may continue to glorify themselves in their palaces of fear.

In this they have been enormously successful. The fact that we are having this debate at all is proof of that they are promoting an absurdity, yet, amazingly, the burden of proof is on us. We are the ones debating!

Are we so cowed by them and their politics of fear and guilt that we will turn away and give them free rein to infect the rest of our human family with their disease. Or will we have the courage to simply say "NO, I will not be your willing slave; I will not sacrifice my reason and my dignity on your altar of fear and I will not stand by while you work your will upon my brothers and sisters."

That, I believe, is the real question which we are deciding today.

But why us? Why the Australian Skeptics? Why should we expose ourselves to the vituperation and hatred which, I assure you, will follow as night follows day, if we agree, in terms of the motion, to tackle religion?

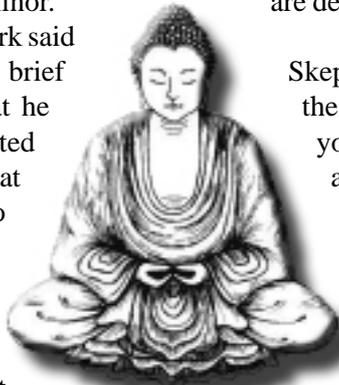
Why don't we simply play safe and, where we find them, knock over the little guys, the fringe-dwellers, the easy targets like the astrologers, the numerologists, the channellers, the faith healers and the poor old misguided water diviners?

I think that there are three good answers. The first, I would contend, is this:

The fringe-dwellers are but a superficial, even a trivial symptom of the deeper illness. They are only of marginal importance. But they can only prosper, however briefly, in a world where the religious concept - that is the belief in manifestations which defy reason - is respectable and is allowed to persist unchallenged.

So, while ever the source of the problem is ignored and only the symptoms treated, the disease will never be cured. Indeed, we might as well pack up now and disband ourselves so that each can prepare to bend the knee and seek admittance to the mystic ashram which awaits us all. I can hear the mantras beckoning like the siren songs of old. We can all go that way if you wish.

The second is more practical and goes, I suspect, to the heart of the matter. The religions assert that, underneath the clerical powerplays and the sacramental horseplay, they really care, and care deeply, about humanity. In proof of this they construct great charities; St Vincent de Paul; The Salvation Army; private hospitals; private schools; rest homes; retirement villages and the like. It is, of course, only incidental



that these activities allow them to remain untaxed and to acquire great wealth, power and influence in the community.

But essentially, they are able to say (with real justification) that the sceptical, the non-believers, simply could not care less about their fellows. In this, they might well be able to mount a very good case, despite the fact that the vast majority of charitable work comes from the public, secular purse.

But my concern is with a different kind of shelter for those among us who are in pain and turmoil: the young people, the middle aged and the old, who have spent their long or short lives being bombarded by the religionists. They have resisted and they are resisting, but they cannot do it alone, the pressures are too great. Everywhere they turn, they see that the religionists care; the religionists want them; will care for them; will hold them close.

And the alternative? There is none except solitude, unless we are prepared to offer them a home, a place where they can find that their doubts are not abnormal (or subnormal), where they can gather their internal forces and set out again refreshed, in the knowledge that someone else cares; and most importantly, that there is no price tag called “faith” in the caring.

If we don’t do it, who will? The atheists? The anarchists? The nihilists? No, there is only the Skeptics. If you say no to this motion, then, in doing so you will send them a signal, “Stay away. You’re not wanted.”

I think we are better than that.

The third reason is even more practical. It concerns our future as a species. We are told, and I accept it, that we are facing an ecological crisis. Our population is soaring beyond sustainable limits. If this continues, the inevitable result will be tragedy, either in the form of war or the desecration of the planet. Yet, at this time, the leader of the richest, the most powerful and the most influential organisation in the world refuses to allow his followers to use safe birth-control methods. Refuses to allow women to make decisions about their bodies and their futures. And he refuses these things, not on thoughtful, humanitarian grounds, but strictly on religious grounds. Those who would oppose this motion are signalling their agreement with these policies. They are demanding that we simply stand by and watch the tragedy unfold.

However, there are very good reasons to say no to the proposition that we should tackle religion. No doubt Barry Williams will put them to you far more forcefully than I, but I would not want you to think that I am unaware of the problems that could arise. The first is organisational, the second mythological.

Organisationally, we must ask ourselves if we really

want to be the repository of all those who doubt or reject the religious way? If this were to take place, then I suspect that we would grow in numbers and there would be the attendant factional divisions which, in the ACT branch at least, we are currently free from. A sudden growth in membership might be a problem, but I am not suggesting that, in any way, should we attempt to become an alternative “church for the unbeliever”. Nor do I propose that we engage in any of those organisational ventures such as rest homes or charities. I see the Skeptics simply as a focal point, an oasis of reason in dangerous sea of religious faith, a great cry of common sense above the angry mutterings of the contending fanatics.

So, organisationally, provided we remain as loose and as free as we currently are, I suspect we will be able to handle it.

Secondly, there is a danger in literalism. In tackling religion, we should be very careful to make a correct identification of the ball-carrier. There is a wonderment and a richness in human mythology and there is a very deep need within all of us to listen to and learn from the myths handed down through the generations.

Many of them, such as the Garden of Eden, are terribly destructive; others, which illustrate the continuous cycle of death and rejuvenation, are valuable and enriching to the human experience.

It is only when the myth is propogated as faith by which we should jettison our powers or reason and accept the man-made strictures which the priests will tell us flow from the myth that we should react with firmness and strength.

The trick is to separate the myth from the organisation, to tackle the ball-carrier, not the ball itself. If we did the latter - aside from being quite a useless exercise, - we would look awfully foolish on television.

Finally, I would like to make it clear that I am not advocating that we immediately undertake a programme attacking the plethora of religions in our midst.

I am not asking that we declare war on religion or any other belief system. I am asking that we make a statement that to tackle religion is within our brief - and that it is proper for the skeptics to undertake such investigations, both individually and as an organisation.

I am asking that you don’t say to me, and those like me who wish to tackle the main game, that there is no place for you in the Skeptics, that you and your works are not welcome.

I am asking, in essence, that you don’t send us away. Thank you.



The Skeptics Should Not Tackle Religion

Barry Williams

There is very little of substance in Robert Macklin's presentation with which I would personally disagree. My point of departure from his views lies in the methods we should apply to problems we both acknowledge.

The primary aim of Australian Skeptics is to "investigate claims of pseudoscientific, paranormal and similarly anomalous phenomena, from a responsible, scientific point of view". That is a worthwhile purpose, we do it well and it is what I believe we should continue to do.

Among the things we do not do are the investigation of shonky car dealers, economic predictions, ordinary (non-paranormal) confidence tricksters, political promises, advertising hyperbole or any of the myriad other dubious claims, or claimants, at large in the community. While these areas are undoubtedly worthy of investigation, there are other organisations which deal with such matters, and no doubt they do it a great deal better than we could.

As a general statement of purpose, we have always eschewed the pleasure of investigating religion *per se*, considering that it lies outside the ambit of our published aims. I believe that we do this for very good reasons both from a philosophical, and more especially from a pragmatic standpoint, and notwithstanding Rob's very persuasive case, as this paper shall seek to demonstrate.

Let us first consider what is meant by the phrase "tackling religion". At what level is it suggested that we tackle it?

Does it mean that we should investigate religion as a social phenomenon?

Does it mean that we should investigate the mundane practices of religious organisations?

Does it mean that we should investigate the fundamental beliefs and dogmas of religions?

Does it mean that we should investigate specific claims made by people, in the name of religion?

I believe that we can dispose of the first two options very quickly.

Religion, as a social or psychological phenomenon is and always has been, a fertile field of study for social scientists. There is no doubt that, throughout human history, people have involved themselves in religious practices and, I strongly suspect, people always will. In this context, the impulse to religion is a bit like masturbation; if it did not satisfy some real need within

the human species, then it is unlikely that so many people would indulge in it. That aside, there is nothing pseudoscientific or paranormal about the phenomenon of religion. Much as some skeptics might regret it, religion is an all too normal human activity.

The second option, the mundane practices of religions, are equally outside our terms of reference. Many, skeptics may consider practices such as compulsory celibacy, fasting, circumcision, ordination or non-ordination of women, ritual cannibalism or whatever, as being curious, or even outrageous, but they are not paranormal or pseudoscientific activities. To an objective observer, the rituals of religious organisations are no more peculiar than are those of football clubs, political parties or any of the other organisations in which people involve themselves. That religious organisations attract to themselves certain privileges, bestowed by the body politic, and which are not available to other organisations, is a matter of concern to many skeptics. I agree with that concern but religious organisations are not alone in attracting privileges, which also apply to sporting organisations, trades unions, service organisations and many others. They are likely to continue to do so while politicians perceive that there are votes in it. Therefore, to address these problems requires political activity, which also lies outside the ambit of the Skeptics aims.

Next, we must address an area that lies quite clearly in the realm of the paranormal; the fundamental beliefs of religions. To approach this subject, we must consider just what it is we are discussing. There seems to be no doubt that we, the human species, have a great need for certainty in our lives and that we are the only species, as far as we know, which has the certain knowledge of its own mortality. That is no easy burden to bear, regardless of how rationally we may like to view the world. Little wonder then that the majority of religions have, as a fundamental tenet of their beliefs, some form of survival of the death of the corporeal body. Whether this survival is in a spiritual form in some sort of 'paradise' as many religions hold, or whether it is accomplished through reincarnation, as others assert, very little in the way of testable evidence is ever offered in support of the proposition. More of which later.

The existence of deities is a further common factor in many, though not all, religions. The evolution of deities matches the evolution of human societies. Our tribal ancestors had a simple, animistic religion in which spirits controlled every animal, object and natural phenomenon. These spirits were used to explain almost everything that happened and were very personal to the people. As civilisation developed, these natural

spirits also became more formalised into the polytheistic pantheons of such cultures as the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans and Norse (and, of course, many others). These gods did not inhabit individual items but tended to be associated with somewhat more abstract concepts, such as the state, or war, or love, or the family. They were more formalised than the nature spirits but nonetheless retained some personalised attributes. Finally we reach the stage of having a ‘world’ god, responsible for everything that happens, or has happened. Many people claim to have personalised relationships with such deities but it is, to my mind at least, a claim that is impossible to sustain at any level of the intellect.

In this fleeting brush with the history of deism, one trend is obvious. Gods are invented to explain those things we do not understand. As we learn more about the natural world we inhabit, then our cultural gods are forced further into the realms of mysticism. “God of the gaps” is a term which I believe is applied to this phenomenon. To the Norse, Thor with his hammer was a perfectly reasonable explanation for thunder but it is unlikely to be given much credence by a modern meteorologist. A great flood which covered the whole world and from which an elite group was rescued by their deities, may have meant something to the Babylonian citizens of a riverine culture but it is not sustainable in the light of our present knowledge.

Which gets me back to my point of departure into the thickets of theological speculation. Most Australians (around 85% is the figure I have seen), when asked the question, “Do you believe in God?” will answer “Yes”. When called upon to elucidate on that assertion, most of them, at least in my experience, retreat into mumbles and scratchings of the toes in the dirt. Believers in gods to a very large degree, will not (or cannot) tell you the mass, temperature, volume, pressure, viscosity, reflectivity, colours or indeed any other physical attribute of their god. If, as seems likely, gods are without physical attribute then they are in fact abstract concepts and as such, are no more testable in a “responsible, scientific manner”, than are such other abstract concepts as love or beauty.

I suspect that there are as many perceptions of “god” as there are people doing the perceiving. Stephen Hawking, in a recent TV programme, is quoted as saying that if God represents all the underlying natural laws of the universe, then he believes in God. I find that proposition difficult to dispute. If God is used as a shorthand term for the underlying laws of nature, fair enough, but, if this pantheistic concept is accepted, it disposes of any sort of personal god, which is sure to antagonise the adherents of most religions. This sort

of god does not punish you for breaking its laws because there is no way in which you can break them. You can of course be punished for attempting to break the laws as anyone who steps off the top of a very tall structure will quickly discover. The same applies to surviving death. Of course, we all do survive death, in the sense that our constituent atoms do not cease to exist, just because we cease to breathe, but this is not very satisfactory as a religious concept.

Which is all a rather long-winded way of getting to my point that, while the fundamental beliefs of religions may well be paranormal, their very lack of specificity leaves us with no sensible way in which we can test them.

We could of course indulge ourselves in long, and ultimately fruitless theological debates, just as people have been doing for as long as they have been human, but we have to ask ourselves what does theological speculation achieve? To a large extent, theological debates resolve themselves into ever more esoteric rehashings of old arguments, without ever reaching any sort of conclusion. To my mind, the legendary debate about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin is one of the more serious examples of theological argument. That may be a naive view of the topic, but I do believe that if we were to adopt Rob’s views we would reduce Australian Skeptics to the status of a theological debating society, a fate which I believe our organisation is far too valuable to deserve and a regression that I, for one, would find most distressing.

This brings me to my final option. Should we investigate specific claims, made by people, in the name of religion? To this question, there can be only one answer, “Yes”. That is precisely what we have always done. In broad terms, every paranormal claim is made in some sort of religious context. The believers in astrology, numerology, *et al* clearly believe what they believe as an act of faith. Their beliefs are updated versions of primitive animist religious concepts. However, the adherents of these beliefs do make testable claims and those claims can be, and are tested by sceptics and are frequently shown to be baseless. The same can be said of many claims that are made in a more directly religious context.

It has never been the case that those who make dubious, but testable, claims can cloak themselves in some sort of mystical shield called “religion” and thus avoid the scrutiny of the Skeptics. Claims made for the Turin Shroud, faith healing, and the sad joke that is Creation “science” have always been investigated by Skeptics and should continue to be so investigated.

Finally, let us get away from the esoteric morass of

theological speculation altogether and rejoin the real world of newspapers, politicians, football commentators, public relations consultants, economists and fashion designers. This is the area that someone has cleverly referred to as the “marketplace of ideas” and it is in this marketplace that we skeptics have to sell our wares. Our “product” is rational thinking and that is not necessarily an easy product to sell.

Australian Skeptics is operating in this marketplace and has, through the efforts of our quite small membership, developed a reputation as a responsible organisation. Where once we had to fight for recognition, now our views are sought, particularly by the media. One of the reasons for this state of affairs is that we have denied ourselves the pleasure of being dogmatically and raucously offensive to those whose ideas we dispute. We are perceived as being a tolerant, moderate and reasonable organisation, capable of giving a sound, rational response to dubious claims. This is important in the ideas market, in which perceptions count for a great deal. We have to sell the concept of a rational, scientifically based view of the world to an audience to which that view does not necessarily come naturally.

One way to make the job harder is to alienate 85% of your potential market before you utter a word. As I mentioned earlier, around that percentage of Australians profess some sort of belief in some sort of deity. It is probably a reasonable speculation to say that more than half of these people are only nominally religious functionally they are agnostic, however, one of the best ways to force a nominal member of some religion to defend his loosely held faith is to make a frontal attack on it.

There are other organisations whose main purpose is to tackle religion and, to be frank, they are very seldom heard from in public forums, while the Skeptics’ views are very often heard in those same forums. I believe this is so because we do not arrogate to ourselves any concept of ideological purity but, instead maintain an attitude with which any reasonable individual can identify. I doubt very much if we will advance our cause a millimetre by adopting a stance of being “unholier than thou”.

Before you damn me as the ultimate unprincipled pragmatist, let me suggest that, by promoting a general idea of scepticism in the areas we do encompass, we are automatically encouraging people to apply critical analysis to other areas of their lives as well, be they religious or any other. Critical thinking is a difficult concept to learn, but it does get easier with practice. That is the practice we have always adopted and that is the practice I believe we should continue to adopt.

Rob used analogy brilliantly in equating the Christian gospels with cricketing reportage. Let me also conclude with an analogy derived from another favourite pastime of our species - war. Consider two generals, neither of them particularly engaging personalities, each in control of huge armies, each trying to win a war for his side. The major difference between them was their approach to the unpleasant job they had. They also had one other thing in common, the name Douglas. Douglas Haig thought that victory on the Somme could be achieved by sending countless men to their deaths, charging into massed machine guns. Douglas MacArthur, for all his faults, was considerably less profligate with the lives of the men under his command. His island hopping strategy in the Pacific, leaving large garrisons of his enemy behind him and out of reach of logistical support, undoubtedly saved many lives.

I have no doubt that Australian Skeptics will suffer if we insist on making frontal assaults on well entrenched opponents who hugely outnumber us. Much better to encourage a climate of critical thought in which they will wither on the vine, while never forgetting that people have the right (and are likely to continue) to believe anything they please, regardless of how foolish those beliefs may appear to us.

While I agree with many of Rob Macklin’s concerns, to do as he suggests will require that Australian Skeptics become a fundamentally different organisation from what it is now. We would become just another player on the stage of sectarian disputation, indulging in tendentious, and ultimately futile, theological speculation. We would waste our energies in chasing the will-o-the-wisp of seeking answers to the unanswerable. We would distract our attention from that which we do well - testing the testable.

I believe that Australian Skeptics is far too valuable an organisation for us to debase our currency in this way. I believe that what we do now makes far too valuable a contribution to the life of our community for it be diluted by indulging in esoteric arguments we are unlikely to win. I believe that we will continue to be regarded as a voice of reason while we continue to focus on that which we do best, calling into question dubious, testable claims and providing reasonable explanations. That is what we should continue to strive for, not to be seen as some niggling fringe group, with a pure philosophy and no audience.

I am sure that all you rational people will agree.

