

# Science and the Justification of Religious Belief

Rodney Holder  
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## Introduction

In the West today there is considerable scepticism about any kind of religious knowledge. We are faced with the rise of the so-called 'new atheism', represented by Richard Dawkins and his friends, who tell us that science is the only route to knowledge and religion a dangerous illusion. Dawkins propagates the idea that there is an irreconcilable conflict between science, which is the only assured path to truth, and religion, which has no basis and even glories in its lack of evidence. Faith 'means blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence.' (*The Selfish Gene*, p. 198).

So a comparison between scientific and religious claims to knowledge is very important. I think it's also important in the context of religious pluralism. There seem to be many conflicting claims to knowledge in religion, which itself poses a problem for any single claim, and especially any claim for uniqueness.

In philosophy a widely accepted definition of knowledge has been 'justified true belief'. At least since the time of John Locke (1632-1704) it has been incumbent on those who claim to have knowledge of something to justify that claim.

Locke says:

'Faith is nothing but a firm assent of the mind: which if it be regulated, as is our duty, cannot be afforded to anything, but upon good reason.'

It is a so-called 'epistemic duty' to find reasons or evidence for what we believe to be true. It's possible to have true beliefs without justifying them, but that wouldn't count as knowledge because we would only have those true beliefs by accident.

## Contents of the talk

What I propose to do in this talk is to give a brief account of how science has justified its claims, particularly over the last hundred years. I shall want to examine whether the claims made for science itself are as secure as Dawkins and others would have us believe. I shall then ask several questions about the justification of religious belief. Should religion justify itself *at all*, i.e. should religion conform to this secular model of knowledge? And if it does, how does it do so, and what similarities and differences are there between the justification of religious knowledge and scientific knowledge?

## The philosophy of science: an overview

It's often simply taken as read that science provides justified true belief. But is it true? Perhaps that is a surprising question. Most of us think science gives us pretty secure knowledge about the world. It's surely true that the earth goes round the sun and that gravity pulls us downwards, and everything in the universe is made of atoms. And

nowadays we know such impressive things as that the universe began with a gigantic explosion called the Big Bang, and human beings evolved from much simpler creatures over a period of billions of years, both of which theories we are hearing about during this course.

We know all that because scientists have done the observations and experiments, produced the theories and tested them. Indeed isn't science the most secure and rational kind of knowledge we have? Might we not rather ask, does anything count as knowledge if it *isn't* scientific knowledge?

In fact, it's not quite as simple as all this. Scientific theories change and are often superseded. After all, the best scientific theory there was at the beginning of the sixteenth century stated that the sun goes round the earth – a rather more obvious deduction from observations really, you might think. And there have been different views about whether everything is made of indivisible particles (atoms) or not. As for gravity, well, Newton's theory was overthrown by Einstein's (known as the general theory of relativity) at the beginning of the twentieth century. In fact modern theories of physics throw up quite bizarre and counter-intuitive notions such as a single particle going through two slits in a screen simultaneously (quantum theory), a man who goes on a space ship coming back to find his twin brother many years older than he is (special relativity), and space curving back on itself (general relativity). All these theories are accepted by physicists and have overthrown our older theories.

So if science offers us secure knowledge – 'justified true belief' - how come it has got so much wrong in the past? And can we actually be sure it is right now? Philosophers of science, particularly over the last hundred years, have offered a variety of answers to the question of just what science can and can't tell us about the world.

Let me begin with the movement known as 'logical positivism'. This arose from a group of philosophers working in Vienna and known as the Vienna Circle. The individual members of the group are not household names, though some on the fringes such as Karl Popper, whom I shall talk about later, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, are very well-known. In the UK the chief apologist for logical positivism was Sir Alfred Ayer (1910-1989), Professor of Philosophy at Oxford.

The logical positivists narrowed down what counted as real knowledge to what could be observed and measured. The philosopher Roger Trigg has remarked that our obsession in the UK in politics with measuring everything, from health to education, setting targets and so on, in recent years, has stemmed from a generation of civil servants who were students under Ayer at Oxford.

Logical positivism says that for any statement to count as science, and indeed for it to have any meaning at all, you must be able to verify it, that is to make an observation or experiment which shows it. This is the verification principle. The logical positivists denied that statements about God were meaningful because they weren't verifiable in that way. It wasn't just that 'God exists' is a false statement: it just doesn't mean anything at all!

If that were correct, then it would spell the death knell for theology as a subject and for any idea that you can believe in God and remain a rational person. However,

religious believers can breathe a sigh of relief at this point because logical positivism is no longer accepted by major philosophers – it’s a philosophical dead duck. For a start, its own verification principle can’t be verified! Just think about it. How could you make a measurement which verified the statement ‘The only statements that have meaning are those that refer to something which can be measured’? What does the statement itself refer to that is measurable? It’s a statement about statements and whether they mean something, not about measurable quantities.

The second point is that no amount of measurement can verify general laws, which are what science deals in. According to logical positivism you can only verify the statement ‘All swans are white’ by observing all swans in the universe. You could verify ‘Some swans are white’ by observing a few swans, but scientific laws are general statements, much more like ‘*All* swans are white’. Newton’s law of gravity states that the force between any two bodies in the universe is inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them. It’s impossible to verify! To do so you would have to measure the force between every pair of bodies in the universe for all separation distances between them, and even then you would have the complicating effect of the forces from other bodies interfering with the result.

So if you can’t verify a scientific theory what can you do? The great philosopher of science Sir Karl Popper said ‘You can only falsify it!’ Whereas no quantity of white swans would ever verify the statement ‘All swans are white’, observing a black swan would falsify it in one fell swoop. Similarly you can falsify any general scientific law, such as the law of gravity, by finding a counterexample. Interestingly, Popper thought you couldn’t falsify the statement ‘God exists’ but he was more restrained than his logical positivist predecessors. That made the statement ‘God exists’ not a scientific statement, but it didn’t make it a meaningless statement. Popper also thought that ethical questions are not scientific, but it can still be meaningful to say ‘You shall not steal’! Science just says nothing about these subjects. Nevertheless, a question underlying this whole lecture is why one might believe that ‘God exists’ is true or false, and the fact that it is unscientific but still might be meaningful doesn’t really help us with that.

Anyway, falsification is far from the end of the story with science. A major problem is that it just doesn’t capture how science works in practice. It was known in the nineteenth century that the orbit of the planet Uranus didn’t fit with predictions made on the basis of Newton’s theory. But that theory wasn’t abandoned. The Cambridge mathematician John Couch Adams and French mathematician Urbain Leverrier calculated that Uranus’s orbit would fit if there were another planet around, and so they predicted the existence of Neptune. On the other hand at the beginning of the twentieth century it was known that Mercury’s orbit didn’t fit Newton’s theory. Einstein proposed a completely new theory, general relativity, which got the orbit just right! So there just isn’t a general rule about when a theory is falsified.

One influential subsequent development in the philosophy of science was made by Thomas Kuhn in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. According to Kuhn, different research groups operate with different and incompatible theories (called ‘paradigms’), and researchers only switch from one to the other rarely, and then for reasons which can’t be logically justified. It’s more of a sociological move than a rational one. Moreover, different paradigms are ‘incommensurable’, and cannot be

mapped onto each other. That is not how most scientists see it! They do see changes in paradigm as a result of empirical anomalies and newer paradigms as providing more accurate descriptions of reality. And older paradigms can usually be regarded as approximations to the newer ones, e.g. special relativity reduces to Newtonian mechanics when speeds are small compared with that of light.

A much more promising approach is offered by Imre Lakatos who saw theories held within much broader 'scientific research programmes' which either grow or shrink depending on whether they can easily accommodate new data or have to make ad hoc changes. Such research programmes have a core of well-established theories and an outer periphery of less secure hypotheses. Research programmes are then progressive if they successfully predict novel facts, or degenerating if they keep having to undergo ad hoc modifications to accommodate the facts.

I think we may begin to see something more closely resembling how science actually proceeds here, and a methodology which sounds rational. The Ptolemaic model of the universe had to be saved by introducing ever more complex patterns of epicycles to accommodate the facts. The new cosmology developed by Copernicus, Galileo and Newton explained the facts beautifully and simply and predicted new ones, like the existence of Neptune. But I think we are also beginning to see that the whole scientific enterprise is much messier and harder to pin down in terms of rationality than we might otherwise have thought. Even the simple example I've just described is not as clear cut as one may think. After all, the Copernican theory had to accommodate the apparently obvious contradiction that we don't fall over as the earth moves; and Copernicus himself still had lots of epicycles. And Einstein's general theory of relativity explained the existing anomaly of the shift in Mercury's orbit, and was accepted a long time before definitive novel facts came along. Eddington's eclipse observations in 1919 left room for doubt since Newton's theory also made a prediction of the bending of light.

The scientist and philosopher Michael Polanyi wrote a very influential book called *Personal Knowledge* in which he argued that personal and intangible features entered into scientific research. Polanyi has been extremely influential on theology. For example John Polkinghorne, Thomas Torrance and Alister McGrath are all influenced by him. He describes, for example, how Einstein stuck to his special theory of relativity even when ether drift seemed to be demonstrated after all, so *against* the empirical facts. 'Subtle is the Lord, but malicious he is not. The theory is right', was his famous quotation at this point. Paul Dirac, one of the pioneers of quantum theory, famously said how it was more important to have beauty in one's equations than to have them fit experiment! Experiments are fallible, which is a problem with a naïve falsificationist account. That doesn't mean that ultimately a theory shouldn't be held to account at the bar of observational or experimental evidence, but that one needs to be cautious until the experimental evidence is well-established. And even then we can never be sure. Polanyi says modestly, 'The principal purpose of this book is to achieve a frame of mind in which I may hold firmly to what I believe to be true, even though I know that it may conceivably be false.' John Polkinghorne sees science as gaining 'an ever-tightening grip on an actual reality'. That is, science gives an approximation to the truth but never gets us to finality.

Another promising approach sees scientific theories as explanations and choosing between theories as ‘inference to the best explanation’. This is due to the philosopher Gilbert Harman, though it is similar to Charles Sanders Peirce’s notion of ‘abduction’. The Cambridge philosopher of science Peter Lipton advocated it and wrote a book with *Inference to the Best Explanation* as its title. The ‘best’ explanation will be the one which explains most and is the simplest and most elegant among competitors.

In some versions of this, evidence will count in favour of a theory in the sense of making it more probably true – this is called ‘confirmation’. The term takes us right back to the Vienna Circle and comes from its pioneer Rudolf Carnap. It differs from ‘verification’, however, because it is not claimed that this is proof; indeed it never can be. It is probabilistic and, in its recent form, utilises Bayes’ theorem in probability theory. It has been developed in the philosophy of science in recent years by such figures as John Earman, Colin Howson and Peter Urbach.

The various problems I have described with the philosophy of science ought to make us wary of putting science on too high a pedestal when it comes to what we can and can’t believe. Science isn’t totally secure in its claims: nothing can be known for certain. So it shouldn’t be too surprising if religion has its competitors and can’t be totally certain of what it claims either.

Of course there is some truth in what most of the philosophers are saying, even if they go much too far. So, logical positivism is wrong, but the idea that you should have some way of testing what you believe to be true sounds right. At least, you should have good reasons for believing it. And, despite Popper, scientists do look for positive evidence in favour of their hypotheses rather than just seek to falsify them, though that too is important.

While Lakatos’s methodology has its merits, it is in the realm of explanation, which I referred to above, that we might see science and theology (the study of God) as most closely doing something similar. This is because ‘God’ is invoked by religious believers to explain things – why we are here and so on – just as a scientific theory is invoked to explain things in the natural world. But that is leading me into the second major section of my talk ...

### **The Justification of Religious Belief**

When it comes to knowledge of God, it has traditionally been thought that there are two kinds of such knowledge: natural knowledge which is what we know about God purely by being human; and the knowledge of God which is given through God’s special revelation.

St Thomas Aquinas, for example, thought we could know *that* God exists from human reason alone:

‘The truths about God which St Paul says we can know by our natural powers of reasoning – that God exists, for example – are not numbered among the articles of faith, but are presupposed to them.’

‘God’s effects, therefore, can serve to demonstrate that God exists, even though they cannot help us to know him comprehensively for what he is.’

Hence, for Aquinas, we can know God exists but we cannot know God in himself unless he reveals himself to us. And in the Christian revelation he has done so as Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

At the time of the reformation John Calvin made a similar distinction. Each human being possesses what he calls a ‘sensus divinitatis’, a sense of the divine. And the heavens are the theatre of God’s glory. As Psalm 19 says, ‘The heavens declare the glory of God’.

However, for Calvin as for Aquinas the far more important knowledge of God, simply than knowing that there is a Creator, is that which is specially revealed in Scripture for it is the knowledge of God as Redeemer, in Christ, which secures our salvation.

At the time of the scientific revolution the philosopher Francis Bacon spoke about these two kinds of knowledge given in two kinds of book, the book of God’s works in nature and the book of God’s word in Holy Scripture. Science, known at the time as natural philosophy, is the study of the former and theology the study of the latter, and as he says here one cannot go too far in the study of either.

Natural knowledge of God has been the subject of natural theology and it brings me back to John Locke whom I quoted at the beginning. For in practice natural theology has been about providing reasons and arguments as to why anybody might believe in God. The classical cosmological and design arguments are examples. The cosmological argument says that everything which exists has a cause for its existence. Therefore there is a cause for the universe’s existence. The design argument appeals the structure of the universe as requiring explanation. I shall talk more about these in my next two lectures.

From Aquinas to William Paley in the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a subtle shift in natural theology. Aquinas gave general arguments whereas the scientific revolution brought in arguments based on the particular. In his famous book, *Natural Theology, or Evidence of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (1802), Paley gave the famous example of a watch found on a heath. The watch, which possessed great intricacy, was obviously designed. How much more so the eye observing it? This form of the argument was undermined by Darwin, but not the form Aquinas deployed.

For Aquinas and others, natural theology has been a preliminary for revealed theology. In my own work, I see the task of natural theology as removing barriers to belief and providing good reasons for belief in God. It provides the groundwork for the more specific and important belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. As I shall explain, however, I believe that the division between natural and revealed theology is a somewhat artificial one, especially because I think we need to justify accepting what is purported to be revelation, ‘to give a reason for the hope that is within us’ as Peter puts it.

## **The rejection of natural theology**

Natural theology has had a chequered history as I have begun to indicate. But in the early twentieth century it came under swingeing attack from an unexpected quarter, namely Protestant theology.

As I've indicated, I believe the traditional arguments from natural theology are still of value, even if they should be considered as pointers to God's existence, rather than proofs, as they were in the past.

Karl Barth, however, will have none of this. Barth is one of the greatest theologians of the Christian Church and his objection to natural theology is theological:

'... even if we only lend our little finger to natural theology, there necessarily follows the denial of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ', he says.

Barth saw natural theology as man striving for God, wanting God on his own terms and not on God's. It was human beings in their pride thinking they could reach up to God through their own effort, and not relying on God's coming down to them in sheer grace. It was failing to see God as 'the wholly other' and the huge gulf there is between us and God which has to be bridged by God taking the initiative.

One thing that's important to realise is the context in which Barth's theology was forged. He felt that liberal theology was bankrupt when all his teachers signed a document supporting the war aims of the Kaiser in World War I. This led him back to the Bible as foundational. Then there was the further context of Nazism.

Barth was responsible for drafting the Barmen declaration of the Confessing Church:

"I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (Jn. 14:6).

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. ... I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved" (Jn. 10:1,9).

Jesus Christ, as He is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God, whom we have to hear and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

We condemn the false doctrine that the Church can and must recognise as God's revelation other events and powers, forms and truths, apart from and alongside this one Word of God.

Barth saw the Nazis as doing a kind of natural theology, corrupting the traditional Lutheran doctrine of 'orders of nature' to include not only such things as marriage and family, but race, with the German race superior to and substituting for the Jews. He writes of the transformation of the Christian church into the temple of the German nature- and history-myth.

Now I think this is all over-done. It isn't hubris to see God as revealed in nature if God has allowed himself to be revealed there. If God created the universe, one would expect the universe to have some features which it otherwise wouldn't, some signs of its author, just as Shakespeare's plays bear the indelible stamp of their authorship.

And if human beings were made in the image of God, you would expect human beings to have some kind of knowledge of him just from that fact.

And then, the very severe problem with Barth is that we are not allowed to give reasons for our belief or to base them on evidence and rational arguments. We have to accept the Christian revelation lock, stock and barrel without question – to swallow it whole, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said. Barth isolates theology from all other areas of enquiry and makes one wonder whether and how it can be a rational pursuit at all. As Bonhoeffer said, again, Barth is fine for the Church, the community of existing believers, but no good for those outside, who need reasons to step inside.

### **Reformed epistemology and other approaches which reject the need to justify religious belief**

Reformed epistemology rejects the need to justify religious belief for different reasons from Barth. According to the Reformed epistemology of Alvin Plantinga religious belief is more like a belief you start from, such as that you have memories, or that there exist other people than oneself, which we don't question. In other words it's not a belief we derive from an evidence-based argument, as in science, say a belief that a certain hypothesis best explains certain data, but it's a starting point for all other beliefs and arguments. Plantinga calls belief in God properly basic.

The problem with this is that it sidesteps the issue. Belief in God might be properly basic for me, a belief I can't dispense with because it's built into me just like my belief that  $2 + 2 = 4$ . But that's not how it is for multitudes of other people. Many people need to be persuaded, by argument and evidence, that God exists because it is far from obvious to them that he does.

There are other approaches which reject the need for religious belief to justify itself, but I do not think it worth dwelling on them because they are not views which bear much resemblance to what people in the pews believe or what religion, especially Christianity, has claimed. Views such as expressivism see theology as not making statements about facts in the real world at all, but much more about values. Religion expresses an attitude towards the world rather than a belief in a supernatural deity. For example if we pray for something, we are not really asking a real God to do something for us, merely expressing our desires for what might happen. The main problem with this is that I do not know any Christian believer who thinks this way!

### **Approaches which do accept the need to justify religious belief**

So let us return to the question of justification. It seems to me that it is unavoidable. We have to 'give a reason for the hope that is within us'. And that makes theology much more like science after all.

Various of the models I described above for obtaining scientific knowledge have been utilised in the theological sphere. For example Nancey Murphy believes that theology can offer scientific research programmes just as Lakatos described them.

But the need to predict novel facts is a major stumbling block here. Murphy's examples rather vague at best and a hostage to fortune. For example, she says, one

might have some core Christian beliefs and an auxiliary hypothesis that the assured results of science will never contradict Biblical history. There may well be some two-way traffic here, with theologians having to reinterpret Biblical passages, but in any case it's not exactly a prediction of something new that will be discovered.

From what I said above science doesn't necessarily work this way in any case. There is also the fact that it doesn't actually matter when the evidence is obtained, i.e. before the hypothesis is framed or afterwards. This is the admittedly controversial issue of predictivism in science.

Basil Mitchell in his book *The Justification of Religious Belief* commends a cumulative case style of argument for religious belief; he effectively proposes the use of 'inference to the best explanation' in this statement:

'the theist is urging that traditional Christian theism *makes better sense* of all the evidence available than does any alternative on offer'.

### **God as Explanation: Confirmation Theory again**

Traditionally it has certainly been thought that God is an explanation, for the universe and all sorts of things in it. That may not be the primary role of religion, but it is *a* role.

The philosopher today who most exemplifies arguments for God as best explanation is Richard Swinburne. He has utilised confirmation theory, which I mentioned earlier, to produce probabilistic arguments for the existence of God and the truths of Christianity. The probability framework he has used is Bayes's theorem, a standard result in probability, which was originally formulated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the non-conformist minister, the Revd Thomas Bayes. It has many applications in all sorts of fields today. I will not dwell on the technicalities, only say that, although there are problems with the approach, it basically represents a rigorous formulation of 'inference to the best explanation' type arguments.

### **What kind of explanation does God provide?**

What we have to ask, however, is what kind of explanation God provides. Explanations are of different kinds. And they don't necessarily exclude each other. God provides a personal explanation, e.g. for the existence of the universe. Science provides an explanation in terms of scientific laws and initial conditions, e.g. for how the universe evolved from the Big Bang. To give an example often used by John Polkinghorne, if I go and put the kettle on, there will be a scientific explanation of why the water boils in terms of bubbles forming and growing as the temperature rises and percolating upwards. But there is also the explanation that I want a cup of tea!

Now let's think about an explanation for why we are here in the first place. Why am I here? Scientifically there is a story about a particular sperm hitting a particular egg and making me. There's also a personal story about my parents loving each other and wanting to share that love with a third person who reflects something of each of them. But we can take it back much further. Scientifically we are here because we are descended from our ancient ancestors and their predecessors. We are descended from

simpler animals and ultimately from bacteria floating around in the primordial soup. The earth is here because matter collapsed due to gravity to form the sun and solar system. They are here because the universe started with a Big Bang and as the universe expanded galaxies and stars began to form.

We can see that scientific explanations are beginning to run out at this point. Indeed the whole story is open to a personal explanation as well as a scientific one. In fact the scientific explanation isn't really answering the 'why' question at all. It is only answering the question 'How?', e.g. 'How did we come to be here?' So God and the Big Bang are not rival explanations. Rival scientific explanations would be the Big Bang theory and the steady state theory for the origin and evolution of the universe, a live issue in cosmology until the clinching evidence for the Big Bang – the cosmic background radiation – was discovered in 1965. But what might be called rival metaphysical explanations for why there is a universe at all would be 'God made it' or 'It just is and wasn't created by anybody' or 'It's some kind of gigantic accident'. The first of these is a personal explanation; the other two aren't personal explanations, but neither are they scientific ones! They could be described as 'atheistic' as opposed to 'theistic' explanations. So the rivals now are theism ('God exists') and atheism ('There is no God') and not 'God or the Big Bang'.

The explanation that God provides to all these questions goes like this. I'm thinking of the Christian God, but most of what I say for the time being applies equally to the God of Judaism and of Islam. Indeed most members of these religions would believe that they are worshipping the same God, even if they say some different things about him (which I shall come to in a moment). Having said that, let's proceed.

God as understood by Christians created the universe with intentions and purposes. He is eternal, all-powerful, all-good, all-knowing. Out of his overflowing love and creativity he made the universe. He intended it to produce creatures like us within it who would be able to contemplate his handiwork and who would be able to have a personal relationship with him. His purpose was that those creatures would love him and their neighbours and would take care of the world he had made. They might not have done that very well, but that was God's intention.

This idea of God explains why the universe is here and it explains why the universe produces human beings after its 13.7 billion year evolution from the Big Bang. Indeed the more we go into particulars about what is required in the way the universe is set up to produce humans, the more it seems that God explains and the harder a struggle atheism seems to have.

One could list a whole lot of features of the universe we inhabit which God explains and atheism either has to say are 'just there' (or maybe aren't, we've invented them!) or are the result of some cosmic accident. Examples include why we are in a universe in which consciousness arises; why there are moral values (why good and evil, right and wrong mean something), and people's religious experience of God or some divine presence. It even explains why we can do science in the first place!

From what I have said so far, it looks as though theism – the existence of God – can provide explanations for why things exist and why they are as they are. That's clearly different from a scientific explanation. And we can certainly argue that God provides

a better explanation than atheism. But can this idea of God be tested in any more tangible way? That would make God more like a scientific hypothesis.

One problem is that, if one reads the Bible, it tells us that we shouldn't put God to the test! And of course, God is not amenable to testing in the way a rat in a laboratory is. Even humans aren't testable in that sense of course. Sometimes it's said that faith is belief without evidence. As Dawkins says, that faith glories in its lack of evidence. That isn't true. Faith in God is much more like the faith I have in my wife. I believe she loves me (in fact I have good evidence for that!). But if I were to keep laying traps to see if she really does – trying to falsify the hypothesis that she does! – that wouldn't make for a happy marriage! Faith is much more like marriage than it is about believing without evidence.

Having said that, one of the questions one needs to ask about God is whether he actually does anything in the world as opposed to just setting it up. If he does maybe one can know about it? This is where one of the major differences between the religions comes in, namely their historical origins. The Christian faith is centred round the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When people ask a Christian what God is like, he or she could give the kind of abstract answer we've been talking about: the eternal, omnipotent and omniscient creator of the universe. That would be true, but a much more genuinely Christian answer would be 'Look at Jesus Christ. That is what God is like.' Karl Barth is absolutely right about that, though wrong to neglect the intimations of God in creation.

And so this is where it would be good to look for evidence. However, that evidence is not scientific but historical. It needs the methods of historical research to investigate it. Science can't exclude an event like the resurrection of Jesus from the dead because science just describes the normal regularities of the world. But it still needs some evidence to back up the claim that someone rose from the dead! As it happens that evidence is very powerful: the empty tomb; the many appearances of Jesus alive after his death; the spread of Christianity started by a handful of disciples who fled from the crucifixion scared to death themselves and completely disillusioned. That just begins what needs to be a much fuller analysis but it shows that in principle historical claims can be 'confirmed' in a similar way to scientific ones – or falsified if, for example, someone were to come up with compelling evidence that they had discovered Jesus' bones or that the disciples were involved in some kind of deception.

This is where theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg's concept of faith comes in:

'a person does not come to faith blindly, but by means of an event that can be appropriated as something that can be considered reliable. True faith is not a state of blissful gullibility.'

Pannenberg is thinking particularly of the resurrection of Jesus as an event which can be believed in reliably on the basis of publicly checkable evidence.

To sum up, then. I have said that scientific explanation and theistic explanation are different kinds of explanation, but there are some similarities; theistic explanation is personal. I have said that evidence cannot prove or verify a scientific theory but it can confirm it in the sense of make it more probably true. The same is true of evidence for

theistic belief. Some of the evidence for the latter comes from the very existence of the universe and the way it is set up – as described by science. Other kinds of evidence also exist: from the existence of morality, of religious experience, and, most of all perhaps, from history. At the very least science and religion can live quite happily together because they are not competitors!

And finally, the most important point of all. We can know that God exists, from nature and the exercise of our natural reason. But we can only know God in himself, we can only know God as our Redeemer and Saviour, through his gracious revelation of himself in Jesus Christ. And in coming to faith in him, putting our trust in him, we are appropriating for ourselves the reliable event of Christ's life, death, and resurrection.