

To:  
The Rev Dr N T Wright  
Bishop of Durham

From:  
Geoff Heath FRSA  
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26 May 2007.

Dear Dr Wright,

**Open letter.**

I have decided to make this an ‘open letter’ to Anglican and other interested parties such as the British Humanist Association because of what I see as increasing tensions between the beliefs, roles and activities of religions and secular ways of thinking and acting in contemporary secular UK democratic society. The pastoral intention of your book (2003), from my point of view, exposes the vulnerability of ‘pastoral’ and apparently official Anglican Christian beliefs which are overtly intended to comfort Christian believers but which not only exclude other believing positions but actually ‘demonise’ and intentionally dehumanise some of these different believers and their belief systems. In addition I take exception to your collusion in excluding Anglican believers from equality of (Anglican) occupational opportunities, consigning people whose beliefs you denigrate to your version of Hell and claiming exemption from aspects of UK democratic law. I also have serious problems with your epistemology. Hence the length of this ‘open letter’. \* I have tried to ensure that the style of this letter is challenging but not aggressive. I write in the hope of encouraging careful conceptual, epistemological and ethical exploration. I take our equal humanity as a given and I take it seriously.

I am therefore writing to you for two main reasons:

- 1 In your book: ‘For All The Saints ?’ (2003) you attribute the state of being ‘ex-human’ to me and to untold millions of people like me. I am not only amazed at this completely negative attribution but puzzled by its epistemological validation. Pathologising other people on the basis of prejudice masquerading as revealed knowledge is, I suggest, very dangerous. Its consequences, historically and currently, are very oppressive. It’s not an encouraging concept for a multicultural society.
- 2 You are a Bishop in the Established Church of England with a privileged seat in the House of Lords which gives you ex-officio, un-elected and unaccountable power over people’s lives in terms of legislation and, to an extent, the

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implementation of your particular Christian version of existential, spiritual and social norms. You are involved in legislation for those whom you consider to be 'ex-human'.

This letter comments on what I see as the peculiar notion and consequences of your view of 'ex-human' people who I see *inclusively* and *equally valued* as my fellow human beings. I also challenge the epistemological assumptions of your confidence in revealed Scriptural authority.

### **A brief background.**

I am an ex-Methodist Minister. (I hesitate to use the term *ex* in this context in case I condemn myself !) I am now a humanist and a member of the British Humanist Association. I too have been on a 'pilgrimage' and I read the version of your own pilgrimage, copied from your website, with interest. Clearly my existential journey had a somewhat different outcome but, I suggest, existential differences cannot be invalidated by mere theological fiat. \* It was not an easy journey but then such journeys, as you well know, are typically challenging. I knew that my own journey had caused some problems for those who were my friends and some of my family.

I also recognised that various religions would now condemn me to their versions of spiritual malaise which includes their preferences for Hell. In general Christian and religious terms I am an apostate. For some Muslims I was, and am now even more so, an infidel. I could never be a member of the Orthodox Jewish 'Chosen People of God' but I took some encouragement from the rather more gentle and inclusive approach of the Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (2002) in his book: *The Dignity of Difference*. I actually wrote to thank him for his validation of difference. However, some of his fellow Jews castigated him in vitriolic language for daring to suggest that the Jewish faith does not have all the Truth. Some suggested that his book should be destroyed and that he should be removed from office. Such was the pressure that he made changes to the second edition. These, along with other religions, and many of their sub-versions, adopt extremely negative attitudes to my sense of my being and indeed the sense of being of anyone who believes differently. To all these other offensive religious attributions I now add that from your point of view I am irretrievably 'ex-human'.

### **On being a thoughtful 'ex-human'**

You might not realise how surprised I was that I am consigned by your particular, and somewhat idiosyncratic, belief system to such a state of existential deficit that I am only worthy of what I perceive as the abusive term 'ex-human' with no possibility of becoming human ever again. This amazing, arrogant and offensive assertion is made, not by some obscure cultic fundamentalist but by a leading figure in a conflicted Anglican Communion. I remind you of the exact quotation from your book (2003):

\* My existential journey is available on the British Humanist Association website and is titled: *Giving up God: Losses and gains. An existential audit*. Also on [www.bowlandpress.com](http://www.bowlandpress.com) 'Seminar papers'.

*The central fact about humans in the Bible is that they bear the image of God (Genesis 1:26-28 etc). I understand this as a vocation as much as an innate character. Humans are summoned to worship and love their creator, and to reflect his image into the world – a human being who continually and with settled intent worships that which is not God can ultimately cease completely to bear God’s image. Such a creature would become, in other words, ex-human: a creature that once bore the image of God but does so no longer and can never do so again. (p 44). (You) set out to clarify our thinking about what happens to people after they die. (Cover of the book).*

*The (after death) picture is further confirmed by the language of Revelation. There we find the souls of the martyrs waiting, under the altar, for the final redemption to take place. They are at rest; they are conscious; they are able to ask how long it will take until justice is done (6: 9-11) but they are not yet enjoying the final bliss which is to come in the New Jerusalem. (p 22ff).*

At this juncture I pose three epistemological questions which, in various ways, will permeate the rest of this letter. Epistemological issues are also inevitably ethical.

- 1 How do you *know* that I am ‘ex-human’ and that I will remain so for ever?
- 2 How do you *know* what being ‘ex-human’ is like and how does it differ from being ‘human’ ?
- 3 How can you *know* that you are right as distinct from merely expressing a belief and perhaps a prejudice ?

Before I move on to a more considered critique of your epistemological position I shall just note a few problems of logic which I have with some of the ideas in that quotation.

It seems that you confuse your use of the terms ‘innate’ and ‘vocation’. I do not think that the notion of ‘vocation’ is actually present in the Genesis quotations to which you refer. It is a significant, and dubious, gloss. If a particular characteristic is innate *as well as* a vocation how can a human being (innately designed as such) come to lose that innate attribute and become something entirely different – in your terms ‘ex-human’ ? I have normally assumed that I can refuse a vocation, but I cannot refuse that which is innate. Your exegesis results in a damaging and prejudiced perspective which you elevate into an epistemological and exclusionary ‘Truth’ position - one in which your version of God agrees with you that those who are ‘the others’ are denatured and condemned to dehumanisation. Initially you appear to distinguish between ‘innate’ and ‘vocation’ but then you misleadingly conflate them to suit your own purposes. I also suggest that this dichotomous way of thinking is inappropriate when considering the enormous complexity and variety of *homo sapiens*. (See, for example, Rose 2005). Your exclusionary ‘Truth’ position does not bode well for a multicultural society. Nor, indeed, for any other kind of philosophically literate and critical society. (See Rorty and Engel 2007: ‘What’s the Use of Truth?’).

I note with astonishment that you say with confidence: *'can ultimately cease completely'*. Is this 'ultimately' an existential as well as a chronological time scale? I am a bit puzzled as to when this dramatic change occurred for me. Is this a fundamental change which I missed until you pointed it out? I read quite extensively in the complex and developing areas of consciousness and neurobiology. You, on the other hand, seem to know that consciousness not only survives death but also has *post-mortem* attributes such as thinking and speaking. You also quote the book of 'Revelation' as if it were simply a matter of reading off factual information relating to the future for Christian souls. I'm puzzled as to how you know all these things. (For a contemporary discussion on consciousness see Strawson et al 2006).

I was Principal Lecturer at the University of Derby in Counselling and Human Relations. I mention that for two reasons: I am not without some academic background in studying the human condition. Secondly from my studies, and indeed from my reflection on being human, I cannot see how people can be 'summoned to love' without violating their choice in the matter. I have no idea how love – of all things – can be 'summoned' with its authoritarian and potentially judicial implications. On reflection perhaps you actually concur with these judicial implications because the outcome of refusing 'the summons' is condemnation to a life (and after-life) sentence which is immutable and eternal - *'and can never do so again'*.

Let's suppose that you have children who in later life decide *'with settled intent'* to deny your God and become humanists. Would you banish them from your family? Would you inform them that according to your version of your God you now consider them to be 'ex-human'? I feel strangely uncertain as to how you would answer those questions. How might one exercise pastoral care for the 'ex-human'? In relation to my previous work in counselling - it's difficult to contemplate how one might counsel an 'ex-human'. Even the numerous counselling theories do not cover this eventuality.

I would think that I hardly have to mention, but I will, the kinds of cruelty which have been and continue to be perpetrated by those who define 'others' as sub-human in various respects. Holocaust, slavery, the oppression of women and gays to name but some. You are presumably aware of ways in which misogyny and homophobia are given succour and support when people in your position actually use terms like 'ex-human'. One consequence in this life is that they are excluded by 'their nature'. Terms such as *untermenschen* have horrendous connotations. I notice that in 'The Guardian' (13 April 2007) Mark Curtis criticises the term 'unpeople'. Thus designated 'they' can be abused, marginalized, ignored and/or obliterated.

### **On Anglican inhumanity**

Mention of this issue of less than fully human people reminds me that I deplore the current official Anglican position which oppresses women and gays by exclusion and discrimination. From my humanist and humane point of view Bishop Kathryn Jefferts Schori was treated shamefully at your recent Anglican conference in Dar es Salaam.

Some bishops refused to take communion with her. In the public arena in British society that is blatant sexism and is illegal. In New Hampshire, USA, Bishop Gene Robinson has been treated in ways which, if they occurred in the secular university context in which I used to work, would result in claims of discrimination, harassment and bullying. I note that in 2008 Gene Robinson intends to commit in a civil partnership. I wish him well. I wonder what your attitude will be ? The Rev Dr Jeffery John was prevented from becoming Bishop of Reading. That contravenes UK legislation on equality of opportunity.

I also note that the Archbishop of Nigeria, the Rev. Peter Akinola, using the same scriptural authority as yourself states: *Homosexuality is a flagrant disobedience to God and an acquired aberration.* (Akinola's website). He quotes supportive verses from the Bible which you have in common. Those who differ from his view are accused of '*walking in the counsel of the ungodly*'. Akinola's homophobia is not as bad as the horrendous injunctions found on Ayatollah Sistani's website but it also arises from what I call later 'revelatory epistemology'.

Your colleague, the Bishop of Hereford, caused extreme distress to the gay man John Reaney by refusing to validate the panel's decision to appoint him as a diocesan youth worker. Reaney is reported to have said ('The Guardian' 6 April 2007): *I was sad that . . . he can deny me the right to love and be loved.* The resulting tribunal was told that John Reaney had cried when the Bishop of Hereford explained why he had overruled the panel's recommendation to appoint him to the post. The Bishop's bigoted veto was based on the possibility that he might have homosexual relationships in the future. By what bizarre 'divine right' does that bishop cause such pain, rejection and humiliation ? The bishop's action would be illegal in normal British society outside the exempt enclave of the Anglican church. I have not read of any formal Anglican condemnation of this immoral and illegal (UK) action, for instance by yourself or the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The Bishop of Hereford's homophobic discriminatory action and the discriminatory actions of your church also contravene the Human Rights Act Article 14 (1998) which states:

*The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Convention shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other social status* (See Klug 2000 p 223).

And from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 23:

*Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work . . .* (See Klug 2000 p 232).

It is also immoral and inhumane from my 'ex-human' point of view. And I had thought that a central attribute of your God was that of love.

I am no New Testament scholar but I can't help wondering what some of the reported attitudes of Jesus might have been to that version of legalistic, oppressive and humiliating religiosity. I seem to recall that (at least the Synoptic) Jesus actually became angry when marginalized people were demeaned and condemned by religious leaders. I have no need to quote: Mark Ch. 3 where the Greek word 'angry' is used.

It seems clear to me that your own use of terms such as 'ex-human' is likely to result, in wider society, in very painful consequences by supporting oppressive attitudes and behaviours. That's why I wish to challenge your epistemology which explicitly invokes such exclusionary oppression. It's why I have decided to make this an open letter.

So, I wish to emphasise that Anglican discriminatory and oppressive beliefs and practices give support to those in the wider society who are homophobic and misogynistic. Anglican (Established) oppressions have broader social implications. It's not just a matter of private religious beliefs. Ethics are not merely private. It would have been encouraging to have read an official statement from the Established church supporting the recent legal extensions relating to gay couples. But no. Again you claim exemption from legislation which empowers people, values them and validates their diversity. That's why I referred to 'tensions' in my opening paragraph. I therefore pose the following direct question:

Why do you support the exemption of the Anglican church from legislation on equal opportunities ?

It seems obvious to me that you claim exemption based on ancient and anachronistic texts and traditions which perpetuate priestly male (heterosexual) dominance – in spite of Protestant beliefs which, at least in rhetoric, assert the priesthood of all believers. Some are obviously 'lesser' believers and therefore excluded from some 'higher' forms of priesthood and even lay positions in the male heterosexual hierarchy. I can imagine that you might reply: 'The Anglican church's primary obligation is to obey God's revealed injunctions and only then is it committed to secular democratic values and laws'. I also imagine that you exercise your right to vote in the House of Lords for laws from which you might exempt the Anglican church, and that you invoke democratic law if you are attacked or robbed. I also assume that you accept the services of women and gays in the secular professions and in the provision of goods and services without intrusive interrogation as to their sexuality.

It would be no bad thing if the Established Church of England got round to stating that it is an equal opportunities employer thus giving a lead to other religious belief systems. But, again, no. The oppression and hurtful discrimination continues. Some Anglican priests actually refuse to work with their female, ordained 'colleagues' and want to establish a parallel heterosexual male-only diocese. Does it not seem strange to you that a secular democracy is way ahead of your church in terms of the ways in which it values people in employment law ?

In this context I note the following extracted from the communiqué of the recent Anglican conference held at Dar es Salaam:

*The Episcopal ministry of a person living in a same sex relationship is not acceptable to the majority of the Communion.*

*16 (1) The Episcopal Church (USA) be invited to express its regret that the proper constraints of the bonds of affection were breached in the events surrounding the election and consecration of the bishop for the See of New Hampshire, and for the consequences which followed, and that such an expression of regret would represent the decision of the Episcopal Church.*

I've taken the trouble to quote from this communiqué because you are a bishop in what is still, regrettably, the Established Church of England. I make this point because as 'established' you give official succour to those in society who are misogynistic and homophobic. They are encouraged by your own 'official' prejudice and bigotry evidenced by the content of this communiqué. The 'ex' of your 'ex-human' carries a range of other more quotidian exclusionary consequences.

I was moved by the report of the brutal murder of the gay man Jody Dobrowski in the UK. It is a recent example of what I mean. I was deeply impressed with the dignified and humane speech by his mother after the conviction of his murderers.

*In a free and democratic society, Jody's murder was an outrage. It was a political act. It was an act of terrorism. Jody was not the first man to be killed, or terrorised, or beaten or humiliated for being homosexual. Tragically he will not be the last man to suffer the consequences of homophobia which is endemic in this society. This is unacceptable. We cannot accept this. No intelligent, healthy or reasonable society could.*

*. . . the homophobia which is endemic in this society.*

Endemic homophobia which is, tragically, supported by the Established Church.

I note, again with dismay, your own explicit standpoint on this issue. In your interview with John L Allen Jr on 28 May 2004 (website) you said in response to his question:

JLA *So a Christian morality faithful to Scripture cannot approve of homosexual conduct ?*

TW *Correct. That is consonant with what I have said and written elsewhere.*

I suppose that's why you would not criticise the Bishop of Hereford. I've never heard any major religious leader speak out to condemn homophobic attitudes in their religions. I have never heard any major religious leaders espouse equality of opportunity as a policy for their organisations' procedures for appointments and promotions. As a humanist I actually find it offensive that religions are allowed to be exempt from the law on equality of opportunity in employment appointments, promotions and practices. Freedom of speech is one thing. Freedom to actively oppress people is another.\*

It would not be hyperbolic to say that the Anglican Church is institutionally homophobic. Discrimination, exclusion and humiliation constitute deeply unethical practice from my humanistic value system.

A famous recent exception to this is Archbishop Desmond Tutu who described homophobia as a form of apartheid. He's in a good position to use the term.

My serious concern can be summarised as follows. I can begin to see why you might continue to discriminate against some people given your prejudiced view of what might be the majority of the human species as 'ex-human'. They are simply not fit to be given equal treatment or equal opportunity except on the immoral and dehumanising terms of your God. I can also see that your homophobia, like that of Archbishop Akinola, derives from your respective needs to believe that scriptures are the source of ultimate Truth.

As I mentioned above the fact that you are in the House of Lords gives you a platform from which to propagate, covertly or otherwise, what I consider as your potentially dangerous views about humanity commonly known as *homo sapiens*. My own assumption, contrary to yours, is that being gay is innate and not a 'vocation' – to pick up your own terminology. Being gay is not a life-style option. On the other hand, your view of me as 'ex-human' is your conscious and prejudiced choice masquerading as God's view of humanity and of my 'ex-humanity'. I think that the term is unethical.

### **On being an 'ex-human' or a 'non-being' person in Hell.**

One more point on the topic of Hell before I move on to epistemology. Even when I was a Christian I did not take Hell seriously. I imagine that you may think this to be perverse ('cherry picking') but I could not square the various versions of hell with the God of love in whom I believed. Actually I suspect that all religious traditions engage in their own 'cherry picking' - covert or otherwise. It's called exegesis, hermeneutics, schism.

You know better than I the vast array of hells which are on offer to the non-believers in various religions and willed by their various gods. You also know the numerous versions of hell which are on offer even in the Anglican church. At this juncture I merely mention the official version of hell which the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England arrived at in 1996.

Channel 4 News at 7.20 pm on 11 January 1996:

Newscaster:                    *The Church of England's Doctrine Commission has stated in its report that Hell exists as a state of total non-being.*

\*See my paper: '*Freedom of speech in a multicultural society*' on the British Humanist Association website and on [www.bowlandpress.com](http://www.bowlandpress.com) 'Seminar papers'.

Rev. Dr. John Polkinghorne, Scientist, Theologian and President of Queens' College Cambridge:

*Hell is a state of non-being indicating the very worst condition that a person could be in.*

Bishop Taylor: *People should know that it is not all right to believe what they want to believe.*

I assume that your own version of Hell does not square with this 'official' Anglican version. I imagine that you agree with Bishop Taylor – although ironically both you and he 'believe what you want to believe'. Either way I deplore the officially promulgated notion by the Established Church of England that people will be in a posthumous bad way for ever. Being 'ex-human' with no way back (*and can never do so again*) is no better than being in a state of 'non-being' which is *the very worst condition that a person could be in*. My problem with your version is that being 'ex-human' (a negative entity) is still a state of being but without any way out of it. The strange notion of a state of 'non-being' being the very worst position *a person could be in* is, I suggest, an oxymoron. It simply boggles my logical, psychological, existential and human mind. How can 'non-being' be the state of a *person* ?

It looks suspiciously as if even the official Doctrine Commission of the Church of England merely believes what it wants to believe. Talk about dodgy doctrine and elusive epistemology. Surely they just make it up ! And furthermore, I have not noticed it having a high profile in subsequent Anglican thought. I don't think that you mention it. Perhaps Hell as 'non-being' has simply faded into . . . . non-being. Dawkins' (2006) term 'delusion' seems apposite.

I also assume that you would deplore the Buddhist view that a state of non-being is what they seek in their Nirvana. It begins to look as if your version of Hell not only does not conform to that of the Doctrine Commission of your own church (*ex- human* versus *non-being*) but that it directly contradicts the 'heaven' of the Buddhists. You may see why I consider your views bizarre. I have espoused Ockham's razor for many years: *entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity*. Thus, when I am dead, that's the end. I recommend it as an existential guide.

I will not bother to elucidate any further existential and philosophical non-sense of these positions on Hell except to say that they indicate appalling and immoral versions of whatever God the different factions of the Anglican church currently choose to believe in. I'm relieved that I no longer have to grapple with such problems of posthumous sadism. Living life is confusing enough.

### **On epistemological issues.**

I provide a number of quotations in order to locate my problems with your position in current thought. I use these quotations to indicate my personal commitment to contemporary thought rather than ancient texts.

*How have we come to be able to appreciate the fact that our beliefs may be false, that there is a basic difference between what we believe and what is the case ? (Davidson 2004 p 4).*

*The most common of all follies is to believe passionately in the palpably untrue. (H L Mencken quoted in Ashman and Baringer (eds) 2001 p 140).*

*Intuition and authority have no standing in science. The only criterion for judgment in science is experimental demonstration. (Rosenblum and Kuttner 2007 p 27).*

*Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities. (Voltaire quoted in Dawkins 2006 p 306).*

*Meaning is no longer a spiritual essence buried beneath the surface of things. But it still needs to be dug out, since the world does not spontaneously disclose it. One name for this excavatory enterprise is science, which on a certain view of it seeks to reveal the invisible laws and mechanisms by which things operate. There are still depths, but what is at work in them is Nature rather than divinity. (Eagleton 2007 p 30).*

*When we reflect that truth is the favorite word of religious sects and fundamentalists of every kind, we can only concur with Rorty on the need to be wary of it. (Engel in Rorty and Engel 2007 p 12).*

*We do not have any way to establish the truth of a belief or the rightness of an action except by reference to the justifications we offer for thinking what we think or doing what we do. (Rorty in Rorty and Engel 2007 p 44).*

*Another way in which religion betrays itself, and attempts to escape mere reliance on faith and instead offer 'evidence' in the sense normally understood, is by the argument from 'revelation'. On certain very special occasions, it is asserted, the divine will was made known by direct contact with randomly selected human beings, who were supposedly vouchsafed unalterable laws that could then be passed on to those less favored. (Hitchens 2007 p 97).*

I now focus on my final point, that of epistemology.

It seems to me that your assumed, but only implicit and not carefully argued, epistemological position contains assumptions which allow you:

- 1 to be certain of your version of God, his attributes, actions, instructions, moral stances and the consequences of all these for human beings on this particular and insignificant planet. This seems to be based on your 'realist' view of the Genesis story. This is a form of creationism which ignores an overwhelming amount of scientific evidence. (For carefully considered views on evolution and human nature see Radcliffe Richards 2000, Rose and Rose (eds) 2004, Dennett 2006, Wolpert 2006).

- 2 to know what you and your fellow believers are, and what ‘the others’ are not, in ways which affect your lives and their lives in essentialist, polarised and eternal ways.

Presumably you hold what I would term a *revelatory Biblical epistemology* - a realist approach to the Bible generally. By that I mean that presumably you believe (know) that the Bible is revealed Truth. Perhaps you nuance this by your particular selection of revealed Truths although I do not know by what epistemological or hermeneutic criteria you might select or reject. I hope that you reject the instructions in Leviticus that a man who curses his parents should be killed, and that adulterers should likewise be killed. Durham would be a much reduced population if these injunctions were implemented by the cathedral. I assume that you also reject the food laws in Leviticus. Obviously you choose to accept the injunctions against homosexuality in Leviticus 18 v 22 and 20 v 13. Is this mere religious prejudice at work ? I would imagine that you agree with the fundamentalist Truth views expressed by Archbishop Akinola on his website: *If they were to walk closely with the Lord and accept the authority of his Word as revealed in Scriptures they would not need to be persuaded about what is at stake.* He clearly quotes the homophobic injunctions in Leviticus and elsewhere on the assumption that they are True for all people for all time. I am genuinely puzzled as to why religious people seem to be fascinated to the point of idolatrous obsession with ancient scriptures. A form of religious nostalgia. Perhaps they use them as sources of individual and group identity and meaning, choosing to believe that being ancient and ‘supernatural’ gives some form of immutable validity and continuity. Perhaps that’s why some religious people become so angry about criticism and satire – it’s their sense of identity which is at stake.

Do you make a more nuanced distinction than Akinola between the divine inspiration of ‘scripture’ and the human processes of ‘tradition’ by which scriptures are interpreted ? I would have thought that the Bible is actually nothing but historical cultural traditions in a form which has been subject to a complex process of selection and rejection. But then I would think that. I defer to your knowledge about these processes of scriptural construction and the conflicts within which these constructions took place.

This raises for me very complex issues about authority, not only in terms of Biblical exegesis and religious beliefs but also more generally. How can we know what we purport to know ? How can biological brains ‘know’ metaphysical ‘truths’ ? What forms of evidence do we evince in order to support our beliefs ? Does authority reside in long dead people; in ancient, pre-modern, pre-scientific texts and creeds; in ritualistic re-affirmations; in a person’s religious or other status ? Are these sources of authority immutable ? What is the role of science in the provision of evidence for our beliefs about the world and ourselves ? What role does philosophical analysis play ? And so on and on.

It seems clear to me that you assume that there is divine authority for your beliefs in the God of the Bible. Further, that the author of this authority is the God in whom you personally happen to believe. I sense a circularity of argument here.

In other words you seem to be of the view that the ontic (reality as it is in itself) is directly accessible via revelation. Indeed, that the Bible contains the ontic and is therefore a source of 'facts'. Those who, like me, assume that the ontic is inaccessible – which is why I am a critical believer in the beliefs which I hold as a human being – would go along in part with your criticism of crude positivism (that too purports to be able to access the ontic). I sympathise with your position as a 'critical realist'. For me the ontic (your God) is only constructed via a range of variously evidenced ontologies, none of which is capable of direct correspondence with the ontic and all of which need to be critically adopted. Human knowledge cannot have direct access to that which is. Or so I believe. Kant, if not God, is on my side.

You will sense, correctly, that I am confused about your epistemological position. However, I think that when it comes to your belief in your (realist) God and the Truth revelations which you deem 'him' (is God/onticity gendered ?) to have vouchsafed in particular scriptures, you lapse into an implicit revelatory correspondence model of epistemology - as does Akinola and all other versions of fundamentalism. That is, for both of you a realist epistemology seems to assume that God is the author of reality, that God has definitively revealed his authorship via scriptures, and therefore revealed his authority in those same scriptures, so that only that which he 'summons' people to be is that which makes them authentically human. He then appears to provide people who manage to believe in him with direct access to his 'revealed reality'. Thus their humanity and knowledge base are contingent upon their response to God's summons and are dependent upon God's fiat. *The central fact about humans in the Bible is that they bear the image of God (Genesis 1:26-28 etc)*. Hence I use the term 'revelatory correspondent epistemology'.

I wonder why your position in the church requires you to believe and propagate these strange views, prejudices and epistemological assumptions ? Perhaps it relates to the seductions of power and status. Perhaps you need to elevate mystery into a source of personal authority. I suggest that your ideas might be subject to more rigorous, overt and contemporary philosophical scrutiny and justification. I merely mention Foucault's work on power and knowledge.

You will be familiar with Wittgenstein (of 'Philosophical Investigations' rather than that of 'Tractatus' - he famously changed his mind) and his notions of 'language games' and 'forms of life'. You are clearly of the view that your beliefs in your God transcend Wittgenstein's more modest 'forms of life' and his trenchant critique of the uses and abuses of language. That's why I say that presumably your epistemology is a revelatory correspondent model. When your God speaks through selected prophets and selected saints you can 'know' that it is God's speech and that it is the 'Truth' of God's nature and demands. I mention Wittgenstein because of his deep impact on epistemological issues and meaning-making which seriously challenges any form of simplistic 'realism'. Language cannot totally correspond to 'reality'. The two are intrinsically different in spite of our energetic attempts to make them totally correspondent. You might note the comment made by Rowan Williams (2000): *The myth that language is something*

*revealed by the divine solves nothing, but it should be possible to see why it is attractive when the alternative seems to chase its tail so frustratingly.* (p 59).

I imagine that you would not even entertain the efforts of Richard Rorty (numerous publications including Rorty and Engel 2007), Bernard Williams (2000), Janet Radcliffe Richards (2000), Donald Davidson (2004), Dan Dennett (2003, 2005, 2006), Richard Dawkins (2006), Amartya Sen (2006), Steven Rose (2005), Colin McGinn (2004), Wolpert (2006) etc etc all of whom you have peremptorily assigned to your permanently 'ex-human' status by their '*settled intent*'.

I deem them to have important, considered and contemporary approaches and perspectives on the human condition. They certainly do not rely on atavistic 'revealed' scriptures.

In fairness, I have to say that I have some difficulty with Dawkins' (2006) epistemological position which is also a symbol/reality correspondent and realist epistemological model but in his case seemingly based on an implicit collapse of a rather un-thought out Cartesian epistemology. However, Dawkins' use of the term 'delusion' has persuasive validity as do his general arguments when applied to what I have called your strange beliefs.

Another way of stating the basic philosophical problem which I have with your revelatory Biblical epistemology is that you use the term 'God' in a substantival sense – that's in part what I was getting at with my use of the term 'ontic'. Once you have fallen into the trap of assuming the term 'God' to be substantival you can then assume that you can 'read off' attributes from this substantival entity and develop, along with other religionists who believe in a range of substantival gods, a bewildering array of attributes.

These 'read-offs' reflect, I suggest, not the attributes of a pseudo-substantival God, but the projections of various human fantasies, prejudices and aspirations. Some of these projections have obviously been beneficial for others (caring, comforting, educating, valuing) but some have been horrendous in terms of their affects on others - and the horror continues. I have no need to spell all this out except to refer again to deep currents of Anglican misogyny and homophobia which latter, for some Anglicans, results in calls for the psychological treatment of homosexuals at best and the death of practising homosexuals at worst.

I note the recent Anglican apology for its earlier belief in and practice of slavery. Those historical Anglicans, like you, adopted a revelatory Biblical epistemology and acted with divine authority. They 'knew' that savage Africans were 'sub-human' and that Christian white people were 'superior'. Such an epistemology is *necessarily* excluding of those whose 'being' is defined as deficiently different. 'Ex-human' is disturbingly similar to 'sub-human'. Epistemology is not merely theoretical in its implications. It is inevitably ethical.

So, when can we expect an Anglican apology for misogyny and homophobia ?

I note in 'The Guardian' (25 April 2007) that a Church of Scotland working party has said that *its clergy and congregations have been 'sinfully' intolerant of gays and lesbians in its ranks* and that *the Church of Scotland has been institutionally homophobic for much of its history*. Even the working party enters a caveat, namely that such people have a right to serve in the Church as long as they are celibate. This resulted in the comment from Callum Phillips, (gay rights pressure group Stonewall Scotland): *Theological debates may be very interesting, but same sex relationships are a fact of life, and I would expect all organisations, whatever their basis, to recognise that lesbians and gays have exactly the same rights to full relationships under the law.*

Has this Church of Scotland working party stimulated a process by which even the Church of England might produce a complete apology whilst giving full weight to Callum Phillips' point ?

Again I assert that these oppressive attitudes and beliefs, adopted by yourself as a leading Christian, derive from your revelatory Biblical epistemology which is not subject to the criticism which you aim at other people's carefully thought out positions. Indeed, revelatory epistemologies are typically comfortably removed from such scrutiny by those who adopt them. Religions' gods are by definition beyond criticism, beyond deconstruction. Ineffable. Even so such believers in various gods pretend that they can know the mind of 'god' via revelations. They can access the ontic – reality as it is in itself. This kind of epistemology is neither philosophically sound nor a good basis for either ethics or a multicultural society. But perhaps you do not accept the validity of the latter. You seem to prefer a 'Christian only' society which conforms to your God's requirements – a society fit for 'all the saints'.

On the other hand people like me are very concerned about any epistemological pretension to knowing the ontic. All knowing is partial, perspectival, mutable. I call myself, among consenting adults, a multi-perspectival realist with constructivist tendencies. That is, it seems likely to me that reality is multiple and not singular and that our ways of perceiving this multiple reality reflect our own multiple ways of trying to make sense of reality. All this does not prevent people like me from living lives in the world. I live with a believable but changing ontology as do all believers – religious and others. I do not adopt a substantival metanarrative. This does, however, have the considerable benefit of preventing people like me from coming to views which deliberately exclude my fellow human beings from being human. I include you as a full human being. No caveat. Sadly you do not seem to confer the same unqualified equality of human value and status on me.

In addition to espousing a substantival view of God you also seem to hold a singular and substantival view of 'human'. I suggest that human identity is multiple not singular and there is plenty of recent and current research which supports this multiple, fluid identity view. \*

\* See my paper: 'Beliefs and Identity' on the British Humanist Association website and also on [www.bowlandpress.com](http://www.bowlandpress.com) 'Seminar papers'.

For example, Amartya Sen's (2006) book is an exploration of the dangers of espousing a singular notion of identity. This, argues Sen, tends to lead to violence. I would think that he too would be surprised/dismayed/bemused to find that you consider him 'ex-human'.

Four other books which I have recently read have considerably enhanced my thinking on these matters of multiple reality, multiple meanings and epistemology:

Rosenblum and Kuttner (2007) *Quantum Enigma: Physics encounters consciousness*.

Stenger (2007) *God: The Failed Hypothesis. How science shows that God does not exist*

Eagleton: (2007) *The Meaning of Life*.

Rorty and Engel (2007) *What's the Use of Truth?*

Each of them in very different ways has confirmed what I have believed for many years, namely the impossibility of certainty. I live with uncertainty and the benefits for me are that I can change my mind when I am confronted with persuasive evidence and changing circumstances. Indeed, there are benefits for others in that I can take them seriously in their own belief systems with my covert or overt proviso that they may be wrong, as I may be. Believing – not certain knowing – is the inevitable consequence of being psychosomatic bodies in the world. No knowledge can transcend that body-world interaction. We cannot avoid our biological multi-modal sources of experience. Our certainties are our deceivers. Epistemological problems, constantly addressed by historical and contemporary philosophers, are also interestingly addressed by the biologist Steven Rose (2005) *'The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Brain'*. He puts it well:

*If, as I have argued, the brain cannot be understood except in a historical context, how much more so is it the case that our understanding of the brain cannot itself be understood except in its historical context. Our knowledges are contexted and constrained, so that the questions and the answers that seem self-evident to us today were not so in the past and will not be in the future. Nor would we see things as we do had the sciences themselves developed in a different socio-cultural framework. The search for 'truth' about the material world cannot be separated from the social context in which it is conducted. (Chapter titled: 'What we know, what we might know and what we can't know'. (pp 189-190).*

Well, I have taken some time and trouble to respond to your beliefs about me and your rather idiosyncratic version of my 'ex-human' present and posthumous future which initially triggered of quite a surprised reaction – the discovery that I am an 'ex-human'. It was quite a revelation ! You ended your recent Easter piece in 'The Guardian' by referring to the surprises which your version of the resurrection holds in store.

You can therefore believe with complete confidence that I was surprised to be called an 'ex-human' for the first time in my life ! Not, I suspect, due to any resurrection myths. It

was a relief to read the more sober writing of your Anglican colleague the Rev Dr Giles Fraser in the same 'Guardian'.

However I am content to believe that I, like you, am merely and equally human - and none the worse for that ! I would be interested to know what you think about these 'ex-human' views.

Best wishes,

Geoff Heath FRSA.

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