

An Undivided Mind: John Habgood on Science and Religion

On November 18, 1983, John Stapylton Habgood (1927 – 2019) was enthroned as Archbishop of York. His enthronement sermon was a remarkable piece of diplomacy, mingling subtly understated centrist political reflections with more explicit considerations of the nature and place of religious faith in personal and public life. The Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who was present at the ceremony in York Minister, pronounced it highly satisfactory, and graded it as ‘eleven out of ten.’ Yet the stand-out theme of the sermon is its emphasis on the importance of a coherent faith in public and private life.¹

For Habgood, we cannot believe only what we like – an eclectic ‘jackdaw kind of religion’, a ‘hotch-potch faith’ which merely reflects our own predilections, and ultimately represents a self-referential belief in ourselves. Rather, ‘true faith is not a mere matter of choice, but a response to the loving, demanding, disturbing reality of God.’ We are called to believe it as ‘something given, not something merely chosen or made up.’² Within a Christian perspective,

¹ ‘I see no ultimate contradiction between relying on a coherent public framework of faith, and being critically aware of its limitations. ... It is the coherence of faith which makes it powerful and effective.’ John Habgood, *Confessions of a Conservative Liberal* (London: SPCK, 1988), p. 9. For a partial biography of Habgood, see John S. Peart-Binns, *Living with Paradox: John Habgood, Archbishop of York* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987); John Munsey Turner, ‘Profile: John Habgood’, *Epworth Review* 23.1 (1996), pp. 18–27. The most comprehensive study is now David Wilbourne, *Just John: The Authorized Biography of John Habgood, Archbishop of York, 1983 – 1995* (London: SPCK, 2020).

² Habgood, *Confessions of a Conservative Liberal*, p. 9.

the fundamental interconnectedness and coherence of reality can be affirmed, and held together within a web of meaning.³

An undivided mind looks in the end for an undivided truth, a oneness at the heart of things. And this isn't just fantasy. The whole intellectual quest, despite its fragmentation, despite its limitations and uncertainties, seems to presuppose that in the end we are all encountering a single reality, and a single truth.

Habgood's emphasis on the intellectual coherence of faith is perhaps seen at its best in his discussion of the relation of science and faith, which is of critical importance in understanding Habgood's discovery and personal appropriation of Christianity while a student at Cambridge University, and his subsequent public ministry within the Church of England. We begin by considering his transition from atheism to Christianity, and the place of science within that process.

The Cambridge Scientist: From Atheism to Christianity

Habgood was born on June 23, 1927 at Stony Stratford, Buckinghamshire, where his father served as a general practitioner. He was educated at Eton College (1941–5) and then went to King's College Cambridge on a State Bursary where he read the natural sciences Tripos. In 1947, he was awarded First Class Honours in Part 1 of the Tripos, studying physics,

³ Habgood, *Confessions of a Conservative Liberal*, 95. There are important resonances here with the intellectual vision of an earlier archbishop of York, William Temple: see F. W. Dillistone, 'William Temple: A Centenary Appraisal', *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 52.2 (1983), pp. 101–112.

chemistry, physiology and mathematics. In 1948, he gained First Class Honours in Part 2, focusing on physiology.⁴

On his arrival at Cambridge, Habgood was a militant atheist, who took pleasure in making outrageous remarks about religious beliefs and the intellectual and moral qualities of those who held them.⁵ Yet his growing friendship with religious colleagues in 1946 made him increasingly aware that something significant was missing from his vision of life. Others seemed to have lives that were ‘better, fuller, and more integrated’ than his.⁶ Largely as a result of attending a student mission organized by the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (CICCU), Habgood recalls ‘giving himself to God’ in Great St Mary’s Church on November 28, 1946.⁷

Although Habgood initially associated with evangelical Christians at Cambridge, he shifted towards a more centrist and Anglican vision of Christianity, partly on account of his concerns about evangelical hostility towards evolution.⁸ He had become involved with the Research

⁴ Habgood’s full academic record can be consulted at T. S. Adkins, N. S. D. Bulmer, P. M. Jones, and H. C. Langley, *A Register of Admissions to King’s College Cambridge 1934-2010* (Cambridge: Provost and Fellows of King’s College, Cambridge, 2018), p. 42.

⁵ For Habgood’s memories and reflections on the emergence of his religious beliefs at Cambridge, see Bernard Dixon, ‘From Lab to Bishop’s Throne’, *New Scientist*, 28 April 1973, pp. 210–12.

⁶ Dixon, ‘From Lab to Bishop’s Throne’, p. 210.

⁷ Peart-Binns, *Living with Paradox*, pp. 19–21. For details of this mission, led by Donald Grey Barnhouse, minister of Philadelphia’s Tenth Presbyterian Church, see Oliver R. Barclay and Robert M. Horn, *From Cambridge to the World: 125 Years of Student Witness*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2002), pp. 136–8; David Goodhew, ‘The Rise of the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union, 1910 – 1971’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 54.1 (2003), pp. 62–88 (75–7).

⁸ For the anti-intellectualism prevalent within Cambridge evangelical student circles at this time, see Barclay and Horn, *From Cambridge to the World*, p. 127. For the general phenomenon within American evangelicalism, see Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994). Barnhouse himself

Scientists Christian Fellowship at Cambridge, a circle of evangelical scientists which then included Frank H. T. Rhodes, Donald G. MacKay, and John C. Polkinghorne.⁹ Yet Habgood felt uncomfortable with what he considered to be an uncritical biblical literalism within the group, which led him to detach himself from its discussions. For Habgood, there was an unwelcome inattentiveness to the question of biblical interpretation within the group, which was particularly evident in relation to the question of human origins. As Habgood noted some forty years later, it seemed that many scientists tended to read the Bible in somewhat simplistic ways. ‘It is a strange phenomenon that even in our own day many religiously-minded scientists are attracted to literalist forms of faith.’¹⁰

The books that Habgood recalls reading around this time of transition are indicative of his growing appreciation of the intellectual and imaginative aspects of Anglicanism, including William Temple’s three major works *Mens Creatrix*, *Christus Veritas* and *Nature, Man and God*,¹¹ as well as the poems of T. S. Eliot and some essays by Dorothy L. Sayers. All these authors have had a permanent influence on him. Yet Habgood regularly professed himself

became a significant fundamentalist voice during the 1930s and 1940s: see Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 26, 33, 91–2.

⁹ For the origins of this group in Cambridge in 1944, see Malcolm Jeeves and R. J. (Sam) Berry, ‘Christians in Science: Looking Back – and Forward’, *Science and Christian Belief* 27.2 (2015), pp. 125–52.

¹⁰ John S. Habgood, *Theology and the Sciences* (London: The Atheneum, 1998), p. 2. Habgood identifies Michael Faraday, who he describes as being a member of the ‘Sandemanian sect’, as exemplifying such an approach. This observation is justified, and might be supplemented by another concern. Faraday’s religious convictions tended to lead to a degree of compartmentalization in his intellectual life, with little interplay between his religious beliefs and scientific practice, save for a generic belief in a creator God providing order to the universe. For a sympathetic account of Faraday at this point, see Geoffrey Cantor, *Michael Faraday: Sandemanian and Scientist*, (London: Macmillan, 1993).

¹¹ Habgood’s account of his discovery of the writings of William Temple in 1949, and the impact of Temple on his own thinking, can be found in John Habgood, *Faith and Uncertainty*, (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1997), pp. 147–50.

disappointed by Temple's lack of knowledge of the natural sciences, so that he was unable to bring his 'public stature and intellect' to bear on this important theme.¹²

Like many scientists at Cambridge who were interested in the relation of science and faith, he found the writings of the leading Anglican theologian Charles Raven – then at the height of his influence – helpful and important in framing a positive relationship between evolution and religious faith. Raven was Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge from 1932–50, during which period he also served as Master of Christ's College (1939–50), and Vice-Chancellor of the University (1947–9).¹³ Yet where Raven held that science and theology use essentially the same method,¹⁴ Habgood consistently argued that science and theology used different intellectual methods, adapted to their distinct fields of research and objects of inquiry.

After completing his undergraduate studies at Cambridge by gaining a 'Double First', Habgood consolidated his growing interest in physiology by studying for a PhD, with a particular focus on hyperalgesia, an abnormally increased sensitivity to pain. In addition to

¹² Habgood, *Faith and Uncertainty*, p. 28. It is significant that Habgood cites appreciatively from Temple's father – Frederick Temple – whose 1884 Bampton Lectures at Oxford University were widely regarded as establishing a viable nexus between Christianity and Darwinian evolutionary theory. For further discussion of Temple's historical significance in shaping Victorian Anglican attitudes towards evolution, see Peter Hinchliff, *Frederick Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 166–93.

¹³ For the best account of his views on science and faith, see Ian M. Randall, 'Evangelical Spirituality, Science, and Mission: A Study of Charles Raven (1885–1964), Regius Professor of Divinity, Cambridge University', *Anglican and Episcopal History* 84.1 (2015), pp. 20–48.

¹⁴ To use Ian Barbour's four-fold taxonomy of possible relationships between science and religion, Raven is best seen as one who aimed for the 'integration' of science and faith; Habgood belongs to those who think in terms of a 'dialogue' between science and religion. For Barbour's approach and its vulnerabilities, see Geoffrey Cantor and Chris Kenny, 'Barbour's Fourfold Way: Problems with His Taxonomy of Science-Religion Relationships', *Zygon* 36.4 (2001), pp. 765–81.

winning a Research Fellowship at King's College, Cambridge, he was also appointed a University Demonstrator in Pharmacology in 1950. He published two single-author research papers in leading scientific journals,¹⁵ and gained his PhD in 1952. Given his academic record to date, Habgood could easily have gone into academia; yet in 1953, he announced he would be seeking ordination in the Church of England, and went on to enter theological training at Cuddesdon College, near Oxford. This was no precipitate decision; Habgood had begun to lay the foundations for this move in 1951, sensing that his future did not lie in either scientific research, or in academia in general.

What crystallized this decision? Habgood made it clear that a critical factor in precipitating this decision was his growing concern about the tendency of academic scientists to detach and isolate themselves from wider cultural discussion of social, moral and political issues. The brutality of the Korean War (1950–3), and the possibility of its extension into a wider war with China raised significant moral questions, which Habgood's fellow researchers in Cambridge's physiology department during this period seemed to regard as being of little importance.

Habgood came to realize that there were more important questions in life than those raised by the sciences¹⁶ – and that his scientific colleagues seemed disinclined to acknowledge or engage them. This disinterest in the world beyond science all too often arose from a belief

¹⁵ J. S. Habgood, 'Sensitization of Sensory Receptors in the Frog's Skin', *Journal of Physiology* 111, no. 1–2 (1950), pp. 195–213; idem, 'Antidromic Impulses in the Dorsal Roots', *Journal of Physiology* 121, no. 2 (1953), pp. 264–74.

¹⁶ Dixon, 'From Lab to Bishop's Throne,' pp. 210–11.

that science was intellectually and morally self-sufficient, and need not engage with others. A decade later, Habgood returned to the problem that so troubled him:¹⁷

It is the perennial temptation of science to become immersed in some tiny fraction of the whole field of knowledge, and then to derive all their criteria of judgment from this one fraction.

The problem that Habgood identified is now generally known as ‘scientism’, which is often portrayed as a form of scientific imperialism, or an attempt to colonize other intellectual disciplines – such as moral philosophy – through an assertion of the exclusive capacity of science to answer the fundamental questions of life.¹⁸ Yet at this stage, Habgood’s concern was not so much that science was expansionist and even colonialist in its moral and intellectual ambitions; his concern was it appeared to retreat from a wider discussion of ethical and political concerns into its own ‘tiny fraction of the whole field of knowledge.’ Public engagement required a commitment to recognizing the importance of such questions in the first place,¹⁹ and allowing the various ‘fractions’ of human knowledge and insight to be correlated with each other – a task which Habgood considered to be integral to the public ministry of the church.

¹⁷ John S. Habgood, ‘The Uneasy Truce between Science and Theology,’ in Alec Vidler, ed., *Soundings: Essays Concerning Christian Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), pp. 21–41.

¹⁸ For recent discussion, see Richard N. Williams and Daniel N. Robinson (eds.), *Scientism: The New Orthodoxy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Ian James Kidd, ‘Doing Science an Injustice: Midgley on Scientism,’ in Ian James Kidd and Liz McKinnell (eds.), *Science and the Self: Animals, Evolution, and Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 151–67; Jeroen de Ridder, Rik Peels, and René van Woudenberg, (eds.), *Scientism: Prospects and Problems* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁹ It is important to note the way in which William Temple used the concept of ‘natural order’ to hold together the scientific investigation of the structure of the world with human attempts to live morally and authentically within that world: see M. B. Wilkinson, ‘Value and Natural Order in the Philosophy of William Temple’, Thesis (PhD), University of Surrey, 1990.

Habgood's views on science and religion have not been the subject of detailed investigation to date.²⁰ However, they arguably provide the key to his overall vision as a leading Christian public intellectual of his day – above all, the capacity of the Christian faith to engage with the wider domain of intellectual discourse. While individual aspects of Habgood's understanding of the relation of science and faith merit careful study in their own right, it is his capacity to integrate these to provide a 'coherent public framework of faith',²¹ capable of engaging both individual intellects and the public sphere. In what follows, we shall consider some general themes of his approach, before concluding by reflecting on Habgood's overall vision of such a 'coherent public framework of faith' and its relation to his public ministry as a leading representative of the Church of England.²²

The Uneasy (and Untidy) Relationship between Science and Religion

Science and religion are both social presences, representing quite distinct communities of reflection and discourse which potentially compete for public approbation and influence.²³ As we have already seen, however, Habgood was clear that it is both proper and responsible to

²⁰ For some brief reflections, see Seybold, 'The Untidiness of Integration.'

²¹ Habgood, *Confessions of a Conservative Liberal*, p. 9.

²² There has been much scholarly interest in the importance of the Anglican context for the development of the natural sciences in early modern England. See, for example, Lotte Mulligan, 'Anglicanism, Latitudinarianism and Science in 17th Century England', *Annals of Science* 3 (1973), pp. 213–19; James R. Jacob and Margaret C. Jacob, 'The Anglican Origins of Modern Science: The Metaphysical Foundations of the Whig Constitution', *Isis* 71.2 (1980), pp. 251–67; Scott Mandelbrote, 'The Uses of Natural Theology in Seventeenth-Century England', *Science in Context*, 20 (2007), pp. 451–80; Rob Iliffe, *Priest of Nature: The Religious Worlds of Isaac Newton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 3–23.

²³ Habgood often draws on the discussion of this point by the leading American Anglican scientist William G. Pollard, *Physicist and Christian: A Dialogue between the Communities*. (New York: Seabury Press, 1961). This influential work had its origins as the 1959 Bishop Paddock Lectures at the General Theological Seminary, New York City. See, for example, John Habgood, *Religion and Science*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1964), pp. 127–35, a chapter which (as Habgood himself notes) is largely based on Pollard's work.

hold together a rich and complex view of reality, refusing to treat it as an aggregation of watertight or hermetically sealed zones, incapable of meaningful interaction. Reflecting on the notion of ‘integrity’, Habgood notes the demand for integration that it appears to enfold and entail, forbidding us to ‘split up our minds into separate compartments where incompatible ideas are not allowed to come into contact’.²⁴ This, it may easily be agreed, is a noble vision. But how is it to be achieved?

Habgood’s answer rests on the recognition of the intractable complexity of reality, which prevents us from achieving any neat conceptual resolutions of the issue. ‘We must learn to live with a certain amount of conflict and untidiness.’²⁵ For such reasons, we find ourselves unable to achieve the theoretical precision that some regard as the hallmark of the natural sciences, and rely on broader statements that help us characterise, and then to correlate, the phenomena of science and religion.²⁶

In exploring this question, Habgood makes the important point that the use of ‘science’ in the singular, or reference to ‘the scientific method,’ fails to appreciate the methodological diversity that is so clearly observed and practiced within and across the natural sciences. This habit of speaking, Habgood suggests, may be traced back to the establishment of the British

²⁴ Habgood, *Confessions of a Conservative Liberal*, p. 95.

²⁵ Habgood, *Religion and Science*, p. 10.

²⁶ See the early criticisms of over-simple demarcations – such as ‘science is concerned with empirical truth, theology with symbolic truth’ – in Habgood, ‘The Uneasy Truce between Science and Theology.’ For more recent discussions of the historical and conceptual relationships between science and religion, particularly within the Church of England, see Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Association for the Advancement of Science in 1831.²⁷ In its understandable desire to avoid the fragmentation of individual natural sciences, the founders of the British Association chose to speak simply of ‘science’ – and in doing so, created the expectation that there was a singular method and outlook that was distinctive of all such natural sciences, namely, ‘the scientific method.’ Habgood thus argues that it is necessary to recover the older idea of a ‘spectrum of sciences’, developing ‘disciplines of study appropriate to their subject matter’. The natural sciences thus do not occupy a single, narrow position on this spectrum of methodological possibilities, but extend across a range of such regions. The natural sciences are not defined by some ‘nebulous entity called the scientific method,’ but rather by ‘general criteria of attention of evidence, and critical and consistent thought.’²⁸ These epistemological virtues are not exclusive to the natural sciences, but also extend to the human sciences, even if their mode of application might be different.

Habgood often frames the relationship between science and faith in terms of distinct, yet not for that reason incompatible, domains of competence and communities of discourse which requires us to recognize and affirm both the ‘detached objectivity of those sciences which study spatio-temporal existence’ and the ‘personal involvement entailed in the study of all that gives mean meaning, value and purpose.’²⁹ Habgood is rightly critical of those who simplify the relationship of science and religion simply in terms of respectively posing ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions; nevertheless, the importance of this distinction cannot be overlooked.

²⁷ Habgood, *Theology and the Sciences*, p. 3. For the historical context, see A. D. Orange, ‘The Origins of the British Association for the Advancement of Science’, *British Journal for the History of Science* 6.3 (1972), pp. 152–76. For sociological significance of the British Association, see Louise Miskell, *Meeting Places: Scientific Congresses and Urban Identity in Victorian Britain* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013).

²⁸ Habgood, *Theology and the Sciences*, p. 4.

²⁹ Habgood, *Theology and the Sciences*, p. 13.

Habgood's broad depictions of the concerns of the sciences and religious faith includes this important distinction, but avoids an improper and somewhat simplistic restriction of their activities in terms of it.³⁰

The issues of unbelief and uncertainty recur throughout Habgood's writings. A severe critic of those who are intolerant of ambiguity and uncertainty, Habgood found the interaction of science and religion to provide a congenial framework for discussing the place of doubt and criticism in the life of faith. Habgood consistently affirmed that both 'belief and scepticism are necessary components of any serious thinking',³¹ and sees the natural sciences as exemplifying – not contradicting – this position. Habgood's target here are religious fundamentalisms and certain forms of scientific positivism, both of which regard uncertainty as compromising the quest for truth. There is no 'non-trivial knowledge independent of belief' in either science or religion.³²

In his essay 'The Scientist as Priest', Habgood set out what he considered to be the two options with which any thinking person, especially a scientist, was confronted.³³ On the one hand was the view that 'we create scientific or mathematical truth by imposing a pattern on a reality which is in essence chaotic and meaningless.' On the other is Habgood's own view,

³⁰ Habgood's discussion of these issues is clearly influenced by Michael Polanyi's influential work *Personal Knowledge* (1958). See, for example, Habgood, *Religion and Science*, pp. 136–43. For Habgood, Polanyi's notion of 'inarticulate knowledge' allows us to appreciate that there can be confused and partial knowledge of reality, which is genuine even though it cannot be brought within the bounds of science. 'To bring this kind of knowledge out into the open may be the best way of challenging the claim that science holds the monopoly of truth' (p. 136).

³¹ John Habgood, *Varieties of Unbelief* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), p. 8.

³² Habgood, *Varieties of Unbelief*, p. 14.

³³ John Habgood, 'The Scientist as Priest,' in Sir Nevill Mott, (ed.), *Can Scientists Believe? Some Examples of the Attitude of Scientists to Religion*, (London: James & James, 1991), pp. 23–33 (31).

which is that we discover ‘a truth which is in some sense “really there”, independent of us.’ Yet Habgood was clear that adopting such an epistemic realism did not lead to clarity and certainty. Why not? Because we are not simply ‘disclosing what is already there,’ but struggling to inhabit that world through developing ways of interpreting it, responding to it, and treating it as ‘having a significance beyond our own purposes and desires.’

The Possibility of Interdisciplinarity: Correlating Faith and Scientific Practice

For Habgood, it is clear that there are ‘different kinds of knowledge appropriate to different areas of human experience.’³⁴ We must thus recognize that there is a ‘spectrum of knowledge’ extending from knowledge of God to knowledge of the atom,³⁵ and avoid impoverishing our grasp of reality by limiting proper knowledge to only one region of this spectrum. Habgood is thus critical of forms of scientific reductionism, which excludes as irrelevant or improper other forms of knowledge. In making this point, Habgood recalls a comment made to him while a student at Cambridge by his physiology supervisor: ‘Some scientists think of a gramophone record as a series of bumps in a groove. They have no interest in actually playing it.’³⁶

At one end of this proposed spectrum of knowledge, Habgood places those sciences which allow an objective account of things without reference to the identity, concerns or values of the interpreter. At the other, following to some extent the German philosopher Wilhelm

³⁴ Habgood, *Theology and the Sciences*, p. 13.

³⁵ John Habgood, *Faith and Uncertainty* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997), p. 17.

³⁶ Habgood, *Faith and Uncertainty*, p. 17. For Habgood’s reflections on Niels Bohr’s concept of complementarity as a means of holding such different forms of knowledge together, see Habgood, *Faith and Uncertainty*, pp. 17–20.

Dithey,³⁷ he places those sciences which require active human interaction with the world in the construction of values and meaning. These are different, and rest on different approaches. But what is to prevent them from being woven into a greater whole?

Habgood insists that different communities of knowledge production focus on different regions of this spectrum of knowledge.³⁸ This, however, does not necessarily lead to the fragmentation or compartmentalization of knowledge, but is simply a recognition of the intense focus and specialization of such research communities. Habgood's approach to science and religion thus allows him to hold them together in meaningful dialogue, allowing for the complexity of human experience to be acknowledged and engaged. It is interesting to note that Habgood regards the great eighteenth-century Anglican moralist Joseph Butler as developing a viable approach, of continued value to the church today, not least because of his attentiveness to the 'actual complexities of human experience,'³⁹ rather than adopting a rigid theoretical approach to ethics. There is nothing to prevent someone from trying to embrace as many of the points on that spectrum as they can manage.

Perhaps most importantly for Habgood during his period as Archbishop of York, he insisted that the public witness of the Church of England ultimately depended on being able to make connections between different regions of that spectrum – not least with the realm of the moral and political. Habgood was President of the Science and Religion Forum, and in 1983 had chaired this organization's annual meeting dealing with the topic of 'The Ethical Challenge

³⁷ Habgood, *Theology and the Sciences*, pp. 6–7.

³⁸ For a more recent study exploring the importance of this issue, see Alister E. McGrath, *The Territories of Human Reason: Science and Theology in an Age of Multiple Rationalities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 75–89.

³⁹ Habgood, *Faith and Uncertainty*, p. 47.

of Contemporary Biology.’ During Habgood’s periods as Bishop of Durham and Archbishop of York, he championed public debate of the ethical problems posed by scientific advance, based on the need to engage in respectful and informed dialogue across disciplinary boundaries.

Habgood’s significance in this field is best seen by noting his contributions to public debates about bio-ethics in the 1980s. At this time, the British medical establishment was becoming increasingly receptive to involving figures from outside the world of medicine in the public discussion of medical ethics. Up to that point, medical ethics was seen as a matter for the medical profession itself, which involved the emphasis of professional expertise as a means of excluding unqualified persons from the public discussion of these issues.⁴⁰ Like many professional bodies in Britain, the medical community tended to see itself as self-regulating, and was suspicious of unqualified outsiders who disturbed this professional balance. Medical ethics was widely seen as little more than the ‘rules of etiquette for doctors.’⁴¹

By the end of the 1960s, however, a general ‘backlash against professional society’ led to increasing demands for wider accountability within the medical establishment in relation to its research methods and professional judgements.⁴² In part, this growing public mood for increased accountability of the medical profession reflected wide national anxiety about the thalidomide crisis, which came to be seen as symptomatic of failings within the

⁴⁰ For the origins and persistence of this ‘strategy of closure’, see Duncan Wilson, *The Making of British Bioethics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), pp. 24–51. For the background to this ‘strategy of closure’ within British professional communities at this time, see Harold J. Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880* (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁴¹ See the personal recollections of Gordon M. Stirrat, ‘Reflections on Learning and Teaching Medical Ethics in UK Medical Schools’, *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 41 (2015), pp. 8–11.

⁴² Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society*, pp. 472–506

establishment. By 1982, Geoffrey Robertson's suggestion that 'interdisciplinary cooperation' was essential to solving the present and future dilemmas of medical ethics – such as 'test-tube babies' – was seen as entirely credible and necessary for maintaining public confidence in the medical profession.⁴³

On February 16, 1984, the General Medical Council convened a conference in London on the theme of 'Teaching Medical Ethics', in which leading representatives of non-medical disciplines were invited to explain how those disciplines might inform and enrich the morality of medical practices. The speakers included the social scientist Margaret Stacey, who was then President of the British Sociological Association and an observer-member of the General Medical Council, and John Habgood.⁴⁴ Significantly, Habgood's contribution was framed in terms of an inter-disciplinary exploration of medical ethics. While Stacey offered the 'View of a Social Scientist,' Habgood offered the 'View of a Theologian'. He was not presenting the position of the institutional church in his capacity as Archbishop of York; he was rather offering an interdisciplinary perspective on medical ethics in his capacity as a theologian – something that his views on the relation of science and faith enabled and empowered him to do.

Bioethics became an increasingly important element of Habgood's public ministry around this time. For example, in his inaugural lecture at the Ian Ramsey Centre at Oxford

⁴³ See Geoffrey Robertson, 'The Law and Test-Tube Babies', *The Observer* (London), February 7, 1982, p. 8. The growing public consensus that 'patients' ought to be seen as 'medical consumers' helped shape this perception: see especially Stephen Little, 'Consumerism in the Doctor – Patient Relationship', *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 7 (1981), 187–90.

⁴⁴ For an edited version of Habgood's paper, originally entitled 'The View of a Theologian,' see J. S. Habgood, 'Medical Ethics – A Christian View', *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 11 (1985), pp. 12–13.

University in 1985, Habgood mapped out the relation of natural law and bioethics, making the point that the ‘complex new problems’ arising through rapid biotechnological change demanded a correlation of different aspects of this spectrum of knowledge, in the awareness that past correlations no longer seemed able to deal with these new challenges.⁴⁵ In a sermon of 22 June 1986, marking the opening of the Annual Meeting of the British Medical Association, Habgood spoke on ‘a basis for medical ethics,’ focussing on the value of human persons and human relationships.⁴⁶

Although we have noted Habgood’s contributions to discussion of medical ethics during the 1980s in which he played the role of an interdisciplinary theologian and scientist, his interest in these issues arose much earlier. In 1964, he noted that many of the questions he was asked to discuss in the field of science and religion during his visits to English schools were not about the compatibility of science and faith, but rather focussed on ‘the moral choices confronting scientists in the practical use of their discoveries.’⁴⁷ Nor did Habgood restrict his concerns to *medical* ethics. In his 2002 work *The Concept of Nature*, he considers the potential impact of technological advances on the natural world, including genetic modification of crops and the technological enhancement of humanity.⁴⁸ Throughout his career, Habgood insisted on the need for science to be brought into critical dialogue with

⁴⁵ Peart-Binns, *Living with Paradox*, pp. 61–2. Ian Ramsey, Habgood’s immediate predecessor as Bishop of Durham, was an Anglican pioneer of British bioethics: for an assessment of his significance, see Wilson, *The Making of British Bioethics*, pp. 64–104.

⁴⁶ Habgood, *Confessions of a Conservative Liberal*, pp. 143–6.

⁴⁷ Habgood, *Religion and Science*, p. 93.

⁴⁸ John Habgood, *The Concept of Nature*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002), pp. 112–39. Note also Habgood’s extensive reflections on what it means to be a person, with significant criticisms of reductionist accounts of human nature: John Habgood, *Being a Person: Where Faith and Science Meet* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998).

religious thought – and developed an intellectual framework which made this possible, overcoming any threat of intellectual or cultural isolationism, and creating space for the church to engage with such major ethical issues arising from technological advance.

The Debate with Richard Dawkins (1992)

It was perhaps inevitable that Habgood would find himself in conflict with the scientific popularizer and celebrity atheist Richard Dawkins, particularly after the publication of the latter's *Blind Watchmaker* in 1986.⁴⁹ The confrontation eventually took place at the Edinburgh science festival in 1992. On Wednesday 15 April, Habgood and Dawkins debated the relation of science and faith in the Royal College of Physicians. Journalistic coverage at the time – especially in the *Independent* – presented this as a triumph for Dawkins, who excoriated religious belief as 'blind faith.' In a series of sweeping and bold rhetorical pronouncements, Dawkins dismissed religion as infantile, divisive, and destructive.

The passing of time has seen this judgement revised, and possibly reversed.⁵⁰ Dawkins himself has now expressed regret for what he suggests may have been a bullying and bruising treatment of Habgood.⁵¹ Although Dawkins's basic ideas became a cornerstone of the 'New Atheism' following the publication of his *God Delusion* (2006), the intellectual credentials of

⁴⁹ For an assessment, see Alister E. McGrath, *Dawkins' God: From the Selfish Gene to the God Delusion* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2nd edn, 2015).

⁵⁰ For a careful study of the increasingly critical scientific attitudes to Dawkins in the 2010s, see David R. Johnson, Elaine Howard Ecklund, Di Di, and Kirstin R.W. Matthews, 'Responding to Richard: Celebrity and (Mis)Representation of Science', *Public Understanding of Science* 27.5 (2018), pp. 535–49.

⁵¹ See the account in Richard Dawkins, *Brief Candle in the Dark: My Life in Science*, (London: Black Swan, 2016), pp. 255–6.

this movement are now widely derided, particularly by atheist philosophers.⁵² Habgood's approach would now be seen as measured and informed, highlighting precisely the issues that are now recognized as undermining Dawkins's simplistic position.⁵³

While Habgood may have been perceived as rhetorically ineffective on that occasion, he was nevertheless intellectually compelling on certain key issues, setting out the severe limitations and contradictions of a scientistic worldview, such as that espoused by Dawkins.⁵⁴ Habgood pointed out that God did not appear in the scientific account of nature because the methods of science excluded anything that lay beyond the scope of scientific methods – such as the critically important concepts of purpose, feeling, and value. This is not to be seen as a criticism of science, but was simply a statement of the focus and limits of the natural sciences.⁵⁵

The obvious fallacy in a positivist approach to science is that if you search the universe for certain kinds of connections, those and only those are what you will find. Everything else slips through the net. God does not appear in the scientific account of

⁵² See especially the withering evaluation in John Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 9–23.

⁵³ Two points highlighted in recent discussions should be noted here – the fragility of Dawkins's 'scientism', and his serious misrepresentation of religion: see, for example, Massimo Pigliucci, 'New Atheism and the Scientistic Turn in the Atheism Movement', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 37.1 (2013), pp. 142–53; Ian James Kidd, 'Epistemic Vices in Public Debate: The Case of "New Atheism"', in Christopher Cotter, Philip Quadrio, and Jonathan Tuckett (eds.), *New Atheism: Critical Perspectives and Contemporary Debates* (Dordrecht: Springer Verlag, 2017), pp. 51–68.

⁵⁴ There appears to have been no recording of the debate. For Habgood's reflections, see John Habgood, *Making Sense* (London: SPCK, 1993), pp. 58–63.

⁵⁵ Habgood, *Making Sense*, p. 62, The image of the scientific method as a net which fails to capture reality in its totality is particularly associated with the neuroscientist Donald M. Mackay. Note also its slightly different use in the works of the biologist Stephen Jay Gould: 'The net of science covers the empirical universe: what is it made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The net of religion extends over questions of moral meaning and value.' Stephen Jay Gould, 'Nonoverlapping Magisteria', *Natural History* 106 (1997), pp. 16–22.

things because both the objectives and methods of science are deliberately oblivious of anything which might be a pointer to God.

Habgood, more accustomed to a discussion informed by rigorous dissection of ideas, was perhaps unprepared for the rhetorical aggressiveness of Dawkins, which some journalists appear to have considered indicative of intellectual superiority. Happily, this discussion can now be seen in a rather different perspective.

Public Stature and Public Debates: The Athenaeum Lecture on Science and Theology

Habgood was aware that a productive dialogue between science and religion – such as that which he sustained in the field of medical ethics – required more than an intellectual framework of understanding that created conceptual space within which such a dialogue could be seen as both legitimate and generative. It also required scientists and theologians to trust in each other's basic integrity and develop a willingness to work together.⁵⁶ For this reason, Habgood cultivated social connections and organizational relationships which allowed him to maintain contact with working scientists, and thus position himself as a credible professional and intellectual intermediary between the scientific and religious communities.⁵⁷

The strength of Habgood's credentials as such a cultural and professional intermediary are particularly evident in a lecture he delivered in 1998 at the Athenaeum Club in Pall Mall, London, an institution with a particular concern for the 'life of the mind', whose membership

⁵⁶ Habgood, *Faith and Uncertainty*, p. 27.

⁵⁷ The importance of this communal aspect of knowledge is clearly brought out by Pollard, *Physicist and Christian*, pp. 25–49, who highlights some specifically Anglican concerns during his analysis.

included leading scientists and medical professionals, as well as clergy.⁵⁸ Like other London clubs, the Athenaeum wielded significant political, social and cultural influence during the late Victorian and Edwardian periods.⁵⁹ Although this was in decline in the later twentieth century, the Athenaeum still exercised a degree of cultural influence, particularly in encouraging dialogue and debate across intellectual and professional boundaries.

In 1998, the Athenaeum initiated a series of lectures intended to encourage such dialogue and discussion. Habgood was invited to give the first such ‘Athenaeum Lecture’, with the title – suggested by the Athenaeum – ‘Theology and the Sciences’. Habgood’s invitation to deliver such a lecture rested on two criteria: public stature and intellectual competence. Like Frederick Temple (Archbishop of Canterbury from 1896–1902) and Ian Ramsey (Bishop of Durham from 1966–72), Habgood acted as an institutional and professional bridge between the intellectual worlds of science and theology, and the church and a scientific culture.⁶⁰ Sadly, none has arisen since Habgood’s retirement in 1995 to continue this tradition of engagement and representation.

Habgood’s lecture represents a remarkable piece of intellectual and professional diplomacy, positioning theology as a viable sphere of discourse in its own right, while at the same time

⁵⁸ The best study is still F. R. Cowell, *The Athenaeum: Club and Social Life in London, 1824–1974*, (London: Heinemann, 1975).

⁵⁹ Seth Alexander Thévoz, *Club Government: How the Early Victorian World Was Ruled from London Clubs*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018). The gendered nature of these clubs has been the subject of particular comment: see the analysis in Amy Milne-Smith, *London Clubland: A Cultural History of Gender and Class in Late Victorian Britain*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁶⁰ Ian Ramsey’s best-known work in this field, written while he was Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion at Oxford University, is *Religion and Science: Conflict and Synthesis, Some Philosophical Reflections* (London: SPCK, 1964).

countering possible misgivings and making connections with the interests and concerns of its intended audience. Noting that the Athenaeum's first secretary was none other than Michael Faraday, Habgood pointed out how the fostering of dialogue and reflection between science and religion was integral to the Athenaeum's founding vision.⁶¹

While the ideas contained in that lecture are significant, and have already been touched on earlier in this paper, its full import lies in the Athenaeum's decision to launch this flagship lecture series by explicitly engaging science and religion as both significant intellectual and cultural presences, and selecting Habgood as embodying the personal and professional virtues they regarded as integral to its purpose.

Darwinism and the Task of Christian Engagement

As noted earlier, Habgood was converted to Christianity from atheism as a student at Cambridge University in November 1946 through a mission organized by the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (CICCU). Although Habgood initially associated with evangelical student circles, he became disturbed by what he considered to be a flippant and superficial attitude towards Darwinism within Cambridge evangelical churches. Habgood's subsequent uneasy relationship with evangelicalism, which became an increasingly significant presence within the Church of England following the Billy Graham mission at Harringay Arena, in London in 1954,⁶² rested partly on his general anxieties about its simplistic view of biblical exegesis and a more specific concern about its failure to engage evolutionary theory properly.

⁶¹ Habgood, *Theology and the Sciences*, p. 1.

⁶² For a good account of this development, focussing on one of its leading representatives, see Alister Chapman, *Godly Ambition: John Stott and the Evangelical Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Habgood's early work *Religion and Science* (1964) included a chapter summarizing his understanding of the implications of Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection for Christian theology,⁶³ curiously making little reference to questions of biblical interpretation – for example, in relation to the interpretation of the opening chapters of Genesis. Habgood can be located within an Anglican tradition of theological reflection, beginning with Charles Kingsley, and continuing through Aubrey Moore, Frederick Temple and Arthur Peacocke, which saw evolution as an amplification of some legitimate theological insights, as well as a critique of a deficient static view of God (such as that expressed in William Paley's influential *Natural Theology* (1802)).⁶⁴

He developed these ideas further in an article of 1973, providing a succinct synopsis of the core themes of Darwin's theory, and noting some points at which theological issues were raised.⁶⁵ The most important of these concerns the different approaches and outcomes of scientific and theological reflection. 'We see now that there need be no contradiction between scientific and theological interpretations of the same phenomena, and that theology is concerned with different questions from science, questions of meaning and value rather than empirical inter-relationships.'⁶⁶ This point underlies Habgood's criticism of attempts to ground ethics on scientific grounds – for example, by extending Darwin's theory of natural

⁶³ Habgood, *Religion and Science*, pp. 64–71.

⁶⁴ For comment, see Alister E. McGrath, *Darwinism and the Divine: Evolutionary Thought and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), especially pp. 143–82.

⁶⁵ John Habgood, 'They Changed Our Thinking: I. Darwin (1809–82) and After', *Expository Times* 84.4 (1973), pp. 100–5. For earlier Anglican reflections on such issues, see W. Mark Richardson, 'Evolutionary-Emergent Worldview and Anglican Theological Revision: Case Studies from the 1920s', *Anglican Theological Review* 92.2 (2010), pp. 321–45.

⁶⁶ Habgood, 'They Changed Our Thinking,' p. 102.

selection to social contexts, and thus developing eugenetics as part of a programme of ‘Social Darwinism.’

There are, it has to be said, some concerns that need to be raised about this 1973 paper.

Despite the fact that this article was published in the *Expository Times*, Habgood shows little interest in hermeneutical issues, tending to assume that a modern theological consensus makes such concerns redundant. Consider this statement: ‘Genesis is no longer an issue. With Adam occupying his proper mythological status there seems no good reason to insist that humanity must have begun with a single pair, or even at a definite time.’⁶⁷ To more critical readers, this appears to be a theological foreclosure of an exegetical issue – an issue which, then and now, remains problematic for many Christians, Anglican and otherwise. Some will wonder why Habgood did not engage such questions in any detail.⁶⁸

Happily, Habgood is on much surer ground when dealing with the religious and cultural significance of Darwin in two lectures given at Oxford University in 1994.⁶⁹ These ‘Ideas of Science and Religion’ focused on two broad questions: the intellectual relationship of Darwinism and religious faith, and the ethical implications of Darwin’s evolutionary theory. Habgood’s historical analysis is surefooted, and echoes and extends the points made before him by Frederick Temple. Yet his discussion of the relation of ‘evolution

⁶⁷ Habgood, ‘They Changed Our Thinking,’ p. 102.

⁶⁸ Habgood provides an explanation of his reluctance to engage the Bible, despite the fact that it stands ‘at the centre of the tradition in which all Christians live,’ on the basis of his need to engage with a wide public audience, many of whom have no sense of connection with the Bible: Habgood, *Faith and Uncertainty*, p. 7. Yet few within this secular audience are likely to have been avid readers of the *Expository Times*, which aimed, among other things, to offer its readers guidance about biblical interpretation and exposition.

⁶⁹ For the edited text of these two lectures, see Habgood, *Faith and Uncertainty*, pp. 28–40; pp. 41–54. The original texts may be consulted in the archives of Harris Manchester College, Oxford.

and ethics' stands out primarily on account of its clarity and perceptiveness. One of its central arguments picks up some themes in Thomas H. Huxley's Romanes Lecture at Oxford University in 1893, entitled 'Evolution and Ethics.' 'Let us understand,' Huxley declared, 'once and for all, that the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in combatting it.'⁷⁰

Ethics, for Huxley, is a principled resistance to precisely those animal qualities that secured human domination of the living world, and the Darwinian processes that underlie them. Yet this demands the subjugation of animal instincts that linger within us. Our hereditary history continues to shape our present – and it must be resisted, even though it cannot be eradicated. 'The practice of that which is ethically best – what we call goodness or virtue – involves a course of conduct which, in all respects, is opposed to that which leads to success in the cosmic struggle for existence.'⁷¹ Evolution may explain the origins of ethics in encouraging prosocial behaviour within human communities; it cannot itself function as the basis of ethics, in that we are now called to leave behind those former virtues of violence and aggressiveness which are now seen as vices.⁷²

Habgood both echoes and extends these ideas, making the case that morality simply cannot be dissociated from religious faith.⁷³ Ethics may indeed be *informed* by the natural sciences; it cannot be *determined* by them. Habgood offers a sharp and incisive critique of E. O.

⁷⁰ T. H. Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays*, (London: Macmillan, 1894), p. 83. For comment on this lecture in its historical context, see James G. Paradis and George C. Williams, *Evolution & Ethics: T. H. Huxley's Evolution and Ethics with New Essays on Its Victorian and Sociobiological Context* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

⁷¹ Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics* p. 81–2.

⁷² Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, p. 81.

⁷³ Habgood, *Faith and Uncertainty*, p. 50.

Wilson's sociobiological account of the origins of altruism,⁷⁴ being careful to criticize over-ambitious interpretations of science, or metaphysically inflated accounts of the scientific project, rather than empirical science itself. Once more, such an approach can be seen to undergird Habgood's role as a public intellectual, in that it offers a critical engagement between theology and religion, carefully distinguishing between the core beliefs and practices of authentic science and their more questionable application by those with particular social and cultural agendas.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to explore Habgood's views on science and religion, locating this within a wider Anglican context, and in particular demonstrating the importance of his views for his public ministry. It is clear from the evidence presented that Habgood has grasped the importance of the quest for the 'oneness at the heart of things'. This theme underlies each of the aspects of Habgood's engagement with issues in science and religion considered in this paper. Although Habgood does not cite the Cambridge physicist Alexander Wood, he clearly echoes a central theme of Wood's best-known work: 'This is our first demand of religion – that it should illumine life and make it a whole.'⁷⁵ As this study has indicated, throughout his ministry Habgood emphasized the importance of achieving intellectual 'wholeness, oneness, the desire for single vision,' attended by a principled 'refusal to split up our minds into separate compartments where incompatible ideas are not allowed to come into contact.'⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Habgood, *Faith and Uncertainty*, pp. 49–50.

⁷⁵ Alexander Wood, *In Pursuit of Truth: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* (London: Student Christian Movement, 1927), p. 102.

⁷⁶ Habgood, *Confessions of a Conservative Liberal*, 95. For a useful exploration of this theme, see Kevin S. Seybold, 'The Untidiness of Integration: John Stapylton Habgood', *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 57. 2 (2005), pp. 114–19.

In closing, we may reflect on whether Habgood can be said to represent a distinctively Anglican way of understanding the relation of science and faith. Habgood clearly found the building blocks for his own approach within the Church of England's rich tradition of theological reflection and public engagement; nevertheless, it would be premature to suggest that his is a *typical* Anglican approach, or that it rests on *distinctively* Anglican foundations.⁷⁷ The evidence suggests that Habgood found the Anglican theological tradition to be *generative*, rather than *determinative*, of his approach to such questions.

Although Habgood engages earlier Anglican writers in developing his ideas, the evidence is not sufficient to allow us to conclude that his is a distinctively Anglican approach to framing the relation of science and religion. Rowan Williams, for example, who exercised a significant intellectual role while serving as Archbishop of Canterbury (2002–12), was much less inclined to pursue attempts to engage this relationship, or see this as integral to the public ministry of the church.⁷⁸

Habgood's intellectual vision provides important resources for those wishing to follow his lead in engaging the relation of science in faith within the academic, or in the wider culture. The increasing significance of science and technology in western culture makes it increasingly important that the churches have the intellectual and social resources to do this.

⁷⁷ A recent survey of the field of science and religion in the United Kingdom does not give any reason for supposing that there is a recognized confessional 'Anglican' approach to this question: Christopher Southgate, 'Science and Religion in the United Kingdom: A Personal View on the Contemporary Scene,' *Zygon* 51.2 (2016): 361–86.

⁷⁸ Peter N. Jordan, 'Minimalist Engagement: Rowan Williams on Christianity and Science', *Zygon* 51.2 (2016), 387–404.

While this study has engaged, even celebrated, the achievements of a former Archbishop of York, critical readers will be left wondering whether such a thorough intellectual and cultural engagement could now be mounted and sustained by any Anglican leader in the future.