



## Overview

Professor David Martin delivered a lecture on **Does the Advance of Science Mean Secularisation?** on Thursday 3rd November 2005 in the Queens Theatre, Emmanuel College, Cambridge. An audio recording of the lecture and questions along with a transcript of the lecture in pdf and HTML format is available at:

<http://www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/cis>

The lecture was subsequently followed by a dinner/discussion with the speaker at St Edmunds College, Cambridge. An edited transcript of this discussion follows. It was chaired by Dr Denis Alexander (Babraham Institute) with introductory remarks by Prof. Roger Trigg (University of Warwick). The other contributors are described at the end of the discussion.

## *Templeton Foundation Post-dinner Discussion*

### *David Martin – 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2005*

**Denis Alexander:** We'll now move on to the open discussion part of the evening. What we normally do on these occasions is have somebody begin by giving a short response to the lecture and stimulating us with a few thoughts arising out of it. Roger Trigg has kindly agreed to do that this evening, so I'll just hand over to Roger.

**Roger Trigg:** Thank you very much. First can I say how much I enjoyed the lecture. There's a lot in it, so I'm sure people will pick out lots of different points.

One of the things that I noticed in the lecture was when you talked about secularisation and linked it to the general idea of progress - movement from "a" to "b". Of course, I suppose that's very much something that comes from the Judaeo-Christian background of history going towards a conclusion, in the end, of some kind of apocalyptic moment when everything would be revealed. Marxism took that over and secularised it. But there is very much an idea that there is a purpose, a goal, that we are going somewhere – in contrast, I suppose, to the more eastern view that everything is going round and round and we just get back into the same place.

I suppose this view is being taken over in sociology and words like "secularisation" rather do imply it. It suggests that there's a process which is inevitable, and it's interesting that the word inevitable occurs in the title of the lecture; I suppose again the shadow of Marxism rather hangs over some of this, the idea that there are social processes that involve a certain inevitability to a pre-ordained conclusion which are generally true. Indeed the task of social sciences perhaps is to uncover laws to explain all of this. I think we're on the edge of finding out what kind of science social science is – or indeed is it a science? You may remember there were

big battles about this question twenty years ago when the then education secretary, Keith Joseph, wouldn't allow the social sciences to be called social sciences and the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) was renamed after previously being called the Social Science Research Council. But there is an issue about just what we mean by science, and indeed whether the social sciences come under this rubric.

With words like "secularisation" I think there is a tendency to look for these general processes, general laws, and an idea therefore that these are going to have some kind of universal application so that once you uncover these laws, it will follow that what happens in one country will be happening in another; and that perhaps there's nothing we can do to stop it anyway.

As a view of social science I am not at all enamoured of any of that. I suppose that when one comes to look at the issue of religion particularly it seems to me that the idea that one's talking about any inevitability, particularly an inevitability of secularisation, just doesn't wash when you look at the world around us. I think you could make a good case for saying that Marxism has been empirically disproved and that the whole view of inevitability from the Marxist point of view just didn't work out. But when one looks at the modern world I think one can certainly say this whole thesis of secularisation – and I guess I very much probably agree with some of this – does not actually apply generally: just because it applies here it doesn't mean it applies there. So indeed in many of the examples you have shown tonight, there's so much that's different going on in countries which nevertheless are subject to the same influences which are clear from science, so that you would expect that Britain would be affected by science in the same way as France, in the same way as the United States. Yet when you look at the place of religion in each of those three countries it's very different in each.

It seems to me what that shows is that there probably aren't any of these general laws, that the most sociologists actually can hope to do is talk about tendencies and that a sociologist is really describing, not prescribing. I really believe that sometimes people think that sociology is talking about laws like the law of gravity, and I wonder if there's a single law in social sciences one could produce. I don't think there is anything inevitable and so that means that one's got to look at what's happening in different countries. In fact, that means that even in neighbouring countries things may be happening very differently.

Just a few weeks ago I happened to be in Bratislava and I went into the cathedral and I was astonished to find that at a Wednesday midday mass, the cathedral was almost full. Now I had a vague idea in my mind that Slovakia, being an ex-communist country, would probably be therefore rather atheistic, but of course it's very different from the Czech Republic in being actually very, very much more religious and much more religious than Vienna, thirty or forty miles up the road. So you've got places that are literally neighbouring, to some extent with a shared history – though not in the last century so much – and yet their reactions are so very different. I think it's going to be very hard to say that there are the same laws from the social science point of view applying in the same way. It's just that perhaps their history is different. Austria and Slovakia have gone their separate ways particularly since the end of the First World War, and the whole business about nationality, language etc. will obviously matter, but that's something very particular.

What I'm really trying to say is that I think that in a lot of this, it isn't that one's looking for laws of secularisation or laws about this or that, or saying what science will do, it's a matter of looking in particular places at local influences. Just as with individuals, who will react differently to the same thing, you'll find that local traditions deal with perhaps the same challenges in very different ways. I think one of the most interesting things is the difference between this country and the United States in its

religious outlook. It always seems to me that in this country the framework is religious although it actually isn't a very religious country, but in the United States the national framework isn't so religious, and the Supreme Court nowadays is doing its best to try and prise religion and society apart – and yet even so it's a deeply religious country. You would have thought that its science there is going to be very effective, but in fact people take a different view to science. There's a big debate going on at the moment culminating in a lawsuit in Pennsylvania about Intelligent Design. The way that people react in the United States to that kind of thing is very different from the way people react in this country. And yet *science* is the same and in a sense the *challenges* from science are the same in each place and I would think that therefore it's a matter of historic contingency, a difference in history.

I was interested in what you said about imperialism. I'm sure that a lot of what goes on in this country is to do with a kind of post-imperialist guilt and neuroses of one kind and another and that can explain what's happening in a particular place. However it wouldn't explain what was happening in a different country because, again, you're not going to find these general rules or any inevitable progress, so just at the same time as this country and other countries in western Europe are getting less religious, as you were saying, countries in eastern Europe might be getting more religious. That's obviously to do with their own particular circumstances in recent history.

Perhaps what I'm saying is that I'm not sure how useful the subject of sociology actually is! It's very interesting as a matter of looking at different societies and, as you say, comparing them, but I think some sociologists have tried to over-reach themselves in the past and tried to explain too much and think that they can do to human society what physicists do with the physical world, and I don't think that works at all.

**Denis Alexander:** Thank you, Roger, for those comments. I think before we ask David to respond to some of those points maybe there are people who would like to pick up on some of the points that Roger is focusing around, especially involving that theme of trans-cultural differences. Does anyone want to pick up any of those points?

**Bernice Martin:** Can I just make a quick comment, as a sociologist? I think what lies behind quite a lot of what David was saying is that although the discipline came out of the Enlightenment and set itself up to be like the physical sciences, in fact it always had this other Enlightenment project which was apocalyptic, the idea that modernity had arrived today and when Comte was writing, or whoever, they were seeing the end of time, or the end of a process, as just around the corner. So as you say, you have a very confused set of secularised Judeo-Christian ideas about the movement of history and progress *and* ideas about looking for social laws. It's not until you get to Max Weber in this century that a bit of modesty starts setting in and sociologists begin to see that their grand schemes, which were based on ideas of evolution for example, really don't entirely fit the reality around them; so Weber is looking only for middle-range generalisations and looking for how you can tease out what the crucial variables might be, without being able to set up experiments.

I think I would want to make a case for sociology trying to do that in a more systematic way necessarily than historians, who sometimes have other projects on their mind. What David has been doing, for example, in his general theory of secularisation and everything since, is actually trying to isolate what the variables might be that could systematically explain these national time and place differences in the patterns of a degree of secularisation or a degree of revival of religion. I simply want to leave on the table a plea, to let sociology go on trying to see whether ransacking anthropology, history and all the rest of it, as well as straightforward

empirical studies, can plausibly isolate some of the variables which, other things being equal, seem to make the big differences. That's why I think David was pointing to this history of the relationship between the power structure and the religious system as one of the key variables in explaining why some societies get highly alienated from their established religious pattern, and others don't.

**Janet Soskice:** I was going to say that sociology might be highly useful – at least in the specific topic of science and religion – in a Popperian way, by falsifying an hypothesis accepted without warrant in many quarters that the increase of scientific knowledge in culture means the decline of religion and that there's some causal relation between these two. Everything that a clear-eyed person sees around the world about patterns of secularisation indicates that this is complete rubbish and yet it's been so dominant in the common mind: also indeed in the minds of certain parts of the academy, and even in the science and religion academy. So if sociologists can come up not with a positive chart for the mind of man but with just a few deflationary observations, they might have done a very great deal for us.

**Paul Joshua:** It was fascinating to hear of the different examples you brought up on the two countries: America and UK. This contrast that you say exists in their respective approaches to issues of church and state however led me to think about the situation in some Islamic countries, where you have not just a close relationship between State and religion but in many cases where you actually have a theocratic state. Yet it seems to me that unlike the UK, formal religion holds tremendous clout there. Why do you think it differs there? And what sort of secularisation processes do you think goes on in such contexts?

**Denis Alexander:** We have already got at least three or four points floating around and think we ought to come back to David now.

**David Martin:** Well let's start at the end, which is one of the more awkward things since I just mainly stick with about two thousand million people, that's to say Christianity, and I hadn't fully taken on board the one thousand two hundred million people that are involved in Islam. That would be half the population of the world, of course, if I were dealing with Islam plus Christianity. However, I do think there are some quite general things one may observe.

I don't want to call them general laws because that suggests that they're maintained over time and space, but they're general laws that hold "if-unless". They're very much "if-then" types. When it comes to Islam I would point to a subset of Christian cases where religion has been strengthened very much because it has been associated with a suppressed national identity. It's not difficult to work through which ones those are. They might be Ireland or Poland or Lithuania, or Slovakia (which is a very interesting case), or they might be regional sections of particular countries associated with micro-nationalisms, so that the Basque country and Galicia are much more religious than Madrid: you've got the centre of Spain with Madrid in the precise middle, and then there are different religiosities on the peripheries. The same could be true of a rather similar geographical square in France, where Brittany, Alsace, and various mountain areas are relatively religious. So there's a relationship between the dominant secular capital and the regions, and a parallel relationship between dominant nations and sub-nations. These can be arranged quite easily in patterns. Lithuania was such a sub-nation, though it's actually a nation on its own now. It has been suppressed as a nation and it has relied on its Catholicism to maintain its identity. These relationships, where you maintain your identity through religion in the absence of a national state, can be found in all kinds of areas including Islam. I'm thinking of colonial Egypt, Pakistan, Indonesia.

**Roger Trigg:** Can I ask about Wales there? I wanted to make the point that Chapel was in a sense one of the main areas of Welsh identity and yet it's on the periphery

now: chapel-going is collapsing there, religion is waning. Is it a bit like Quebec? Is something else now our national identity?

**David Martin:** I think nowadays it is partly language in both Wales and Quebec but it's very difficult to sort out all the different influences on secularisation. One major possibility may be the shift from religion to language, so that in a number of these regions where religion was the carrier of the local identity, language has semi taken over from religion. That seems to me the case in Wales but it is also in part Anglicisation. Wales had very considerably higher religious practice than England in the 1950s. It's not higher any more, and insofar as there are redoubts of religion they tend to be in the north. Language and chapel religion are in part alternatives, in part mutually reinforcing. The relationship of religion to language varies from case to case. You have to tease out the conditions under which it is one or the other, or the two combined, and that's a very complicated business.

So then there are large parts of Western Europe which have expressed their sense of identity through religion. Effectively they were colonised on a very large scale. Likewise much of Islamia has been colonised. There is also the Islamic sense of what went wrong over the last two to three hundred years, compared with the houses of Islam in earlier centuries. That creates different kinds of response. (I don't want to use the word 'reaction', by the way, because it suggests that cultures are simply reacting when they are actually making a creative response.) One response is to ask "Shall the elite adopt a western style" and leave the rest *not* adopting a western style which is quite frequent. Another response is to ask "Shall we find an Islamic path to modernity?" Yet another is to circle the wagons and maybe insist on Sharia law as the *only* way in which society should be organised and not really allow faith communities to flourish separately from the overall society.

Whether this sense of being cheated by recent history is justified is a separate question altogether. That was not how God meant things to be. So, circle the wagons, return to some form of Islam as the core of what made you great. The Polish or Irish situation has been replicated on a very large scale with several kinds of variations.

**Denis Alexander:** Before we move on can I just press you on one point that Roger raised which was that we agree, I think, that there are no such things as laws of sociology, and I think you were certainly propounding principles that are generalisations that hold true to many situations and you would defend that. That's correct isn't it?

**David Martin:** My general theory of secularisation was in fact not at all general because historical contingency is always present. At the same time, you can isolate trajectories and I had about six or seven of these. So there was a combination of generality with contingency and historical particularity. Very surprisingly this was a kind of breakthrough at the time, because nobody had really thought about showing how certain general tendencies to secularisation run very differently in France from the way they do in Spain, and in Italy. Eastern Europe is very different from western Europe, and both are very different from the United States. With respect to the general tendencies, I am impressed by the impact of different articulations of the church-state relationship. I'm not saying this is *the* explanation, I'm saying that when you look at the difference between western Europe and the United States, the separation of church from the state and the separation of any one elite religious culture from 'the' state exercises a major influence. When those two things are not operative, then people are not alienated in the same way and religion adapts all the way down the social system to this group and to that group. This means that the conflict over religion as such doesn't operate in the USA in the same way it does in western Europe. Now that is a sort of generalisation.

**Brian Heap:** Could I pick up your point about science and religion? If I understood you correctly, you seemed to suggest that the relationship was not quite as strong as I would have expected you to say, that is, science has not been responsible for downgrading religion in certain countries. I was very interested in your historical analysis but I think when one comes to the practical side I find it very difficult to subscribe to your conclusions. In my experience with young people I have the strong suspicion that science has had a negative effect in terms of their serious consideration of religious insights.

**Derek Burke:** Can I add to that? I was encouraged, David, by your complimentary comments about the higher proportion of religious believers among scientists. But my experience, working in science all my life, is of an overwhelmingly secular society and culture. Certainly as a practising Christian I have found myself under all sorts of direct and indirect pressures all my life. So I'm surprised at what you say because for me working in science, secularism is the default position and you really have to work very hard inside science to persuade people that belief in God is at all credible to a scientist working in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. So we feel we've lost the battle – but you're telling us it's even worse elsewhere.

**Jessica Martin:** It occurs to me that something doesn't have to be true to be influential. I was struck both by you saying that when you talked to the very young they didn't know what the components were that they were playing with, so you might say of course it's obvious that because of evolution we can't believe in God. But if you ask them to tease that out they wouldn't be able to explain why, so presumably your points about reception theory are saying that a truth is being propounded and sort of spread that isn't in fact true and it's to do with education.

**Denis Alexander:** Can I throw in a slightly different view into this pot as another scientist before we come back to you because my own view would be that people justify their religious or metaphysical beliefs let's call them, by appeals to what they know about. If you talk to a scientist what they know about is science, if you talk to a historian what they know about is history, in my experience if they are an atheistic historian they will justify their "ism" by appeals as to what they know about, which is the history that they know about and I think scientists do the same. So my own view that I'm going to throw slightly more strongly than I believe would be that people are already an atheist or already a Christian on other grounds, completely different from their own professions or their academic professions, on the whole, but they will then justify their position by what they happen to know about. Therefore, of course, in the scientific community if we are living in a secular country, as we are, scientists generally as well as accountants and lawyers and milkmen, and whoever else, whatever other profession people are in, will justify their belief or disbelief by their own particular context, whereas if they were living in a less secular country they would perhaps justify their greater level of belief likewise by the same science that in other countries people would use to justify their atheism. I'll throw that into the pot.

**Derek Burke:** Your move!

**David Martin:** Well, I certainly believe that most of us believe what we do by way of process of proving what we already believe on instinct, or perhaps not just instinct but by what our particular cultural situation inclines us to believe. There are subcultures where it would be very difficult to espouse Christian belief and you would have to be a rather vigorous thinker for a sort of natural dissenter from whatever's going on, to fight against it and work out a quite separate position. Most people don't work out separate positions. They take up the flotsam and jetsam that's lying around them, form it into some kind of position which they will then 'emit'. They will give forth views in the pub or in the common room, wherever it is. But they are not very closely worked out at all.

To pick up Jessica's point, most people have not the faintest idea of what we're talking about in relation to science and religion. They just have one or two tags that have floated into the public domain and it's these that they work by. The old kind of artisan atheism that was fed by The Thinkers Library or the National Secular Society in the 19th century is not very widespread now. You now have a kind of media flotsam and jetsam of opinion which has got very little relation to any kind of serious thinking at all. This is exactly what Bernice found in a small research project when she talked to young people. There was total inarticulacy about these things and I think it's important to distinguish what happens in Cambridge, which after all is one of the great Universities of the world, from what is actually going on in the world out there.

**Brian Heap:** That's true.

**David Martin:** So, as I said, the question of the argument from design or whether the anthropic principle really applies doesn't exactly impinge very strongly on most people in their view of religion. The operative elements are of that sort: that was my fundamental story and I did indicate what I thought were the operative elements. At the same time, there is a kind of narrative which John Brooke at Oxford has written about, currently focused on the Darwinian controversy and that includes Darwinian psychology. But how many people are actually affected by what Richard Dawkins says?

**Derek Burke:** I would say the great majority of working biologists –

**David Martin:** Yes, but how many working biologists are there?

**Brian Heap:** It's not just working biologists, it's much wider than that.

**David Martin:** I'm saying is it is Dawkins' *authority* as a scientist that has an impact. It's nothing to do with the arguments. I know that his books sell well because I can go down to the bookshop and see that they sell well, but in terms of the general population it doesn't much matter.

**Derek Burke:** That's certainly not my perception of people inside the church, they really feel the pressure. It's widely assumed outside the churches that science has now made belief in God obsolete and that pressure is transmitted to us all. So they say to us "How can you still believe in God after what Dawkins has said?"

**David Martin:** Really?

**Brian Heap:** Not just in the churches. There is a very broad sweep throughout society in my experience.

**Janet Soskice:** Horses from the right, cavalry from the left! You get "How can you still believe in God when there's a problem of evil?" "How can you still believe in God when you're a feminist?" "How can you still believe in God when you're a woman?" These questions will come up if you're in a secular society and surely what we have inherently to look at is instances of secularisation, for instance in Greece, or Malta. I was in Malta for the first time last year and ninety per cent of the generation in their forties attend mass daily or weekly. There are very good churches at the centre of their lives, but eighteen and nineteen-year-olds aren't going. The forty-year olds are university graduates, they're physicists, they're biologists. The difference is not what their kids know about science, the difference is that they've got night clubs, international rock culture, Sony Walkmans, a higher standard of living: the same thing I was saying to David. I remember meeting a Greek lay theologian who told me in the sixties when the Greek theologians noticed the young people in France and Britain moving away from religious observance, they went to the hierarchy in Greece and said we should do some catechesis. The hierarchy said no, to be Greek is to be Orthodox, we don't need it, it was a problem with corrupt western cultures. But as

soon as you began to get Sony Walkmans, motorinos and so on, you get people falling away because there are better things to do with your Sunday. You can go surfing, go snog with your girlfriend or something like that. And it just doesn't wash. These people don't know more about Einstein or Newton or Darwin than their parents did. You can take the spread across the middle classes or the working classes, it's not a difference in scientific culture and I am very much warm to your point that it's a difference in what people say in terms of rationalisation, or because I'm a woman, because I'm a feminist, because I believe in science, but I don't think you can apply that to the broader picture. I speak as someone who has only what I have observed with my eyes – I'm not a sociologist – but I don't see how you can look around the world at the different patterns of secularisation and see that that is a strong correlation, it's simply isn't and it seems to me an unscientific thesis that it is. So there!

**Derek Burke:** Thank you, Janet!

**Brian Heap:** That's a sociological interpretation!

**Denis Alexander:** Let's have some more comments from people who haven't spoken yet.

**Alex Weber:** Just to continue this discussion, I'd be interested to see what people think on whether or not the way that scientific ideas are communicated to the general public has changed. From my experience I would say that it's changed dramatically over the last hundred years or so, how much the man in the street knows about science or what's going on. I think maybe the media is getting that across more to the general public than in the past. That's why I would say that maybe those ideas suggest that secularisation has outdated science, maybe they have become more effectual because the media actually propagates scientific things more. Do people agree on that? The point I'm making is how science is perceived in the general public, whether it has changed a lot over the last several years and if that could bring about changes in how scientific ideas affect how people deal with secularisation.

**David Martin:** I don't think it's to do with scientific ideas very much at all. I think there is some minor effect of scientific authority, that is what the scientists say, I don't think there's much beyond that. I hardly every encounter it and nobody has ever come to me and said "What do you think of the deficiencies and the argument from design as discussed by Dawkins" – *nobody* has ever said a thing like that! Would they? It would be delightful if they did!

**Bob White:** But we discuss that a lot!

**David Martin:** *You do!*

**Bob White:** Because we're scientists and so it matters.

**David Martin:** Of course it does! Of course it *matters*. I'm not saying it doesn't matter! I'm saying there's not an argument, I'm not saying there aren't problems about the argument from design, but what I *am* saying is that in the wide, wide world out there, from Africa to Latin America, to North America, to China, these things are of the most minor significance.

**Brian Heap:** No, I totally disagree.

**Colin Humphreys:** I think there's a large element of truth in what both Janet and Brian are saying. I think there's a huge indifference in the population now, so it's not that people are agnostic, it's not that people don't care, but I think if they are asked about religious faith then Dorothy Sayers had this nice conversation in a book between an interviewer and the man in the street. The man in the street was asked "What is religious faith?" and the man in the street said "Resolutely shutting your eyes to scientific fact" and I think that most people would say that now. I think that people

don't think about it but if they are actually asked what religious faith is, they think it is shutting your eyes to scientific fact. That's almost an accepted given. I think it's then very difficult to talk to people about Christianity. So I think people are indifferent, but if they are actually asked about their religious beliefs or if they're asked about religious faith, they will say that it's against scientific belief.

**Bernice Martin:** Could I just add a sentence to that? They may be looking at their horoscopes, they may be organising their sitting rooms according to principles of feng shui, they may be going for all kinds of alternative therapies. Many of the young people I interviewed were sure that somebody called Darwin had done something that proved that the Bible was wrong, but they believed in poltergeists, they believed in alien abductions, they believed in all sorts of things, they had an endless credulity. But they had somewhere heard this narrative that said science has disproved the Bible. But they neither knew what the science was, nor what the Bible was, that was being disproved except that some of them had an idea it was about Adam and Eve. So there is this story which in some curious way goes back to the Enlightenment grand narrative popularised and then souped up by the popularisation of Dawkins' ideas, but it does not exclude all kinds of non-scientific thinking, but extreme credulity.

**Denis Alexander:** Well I think that sheds a lot of light on the two streams of the discussion so far this evening in that we're actually comparing apples and oranges, we're comparing the academic context and scientific community where you have one set of discussions and ideas going on and then you have the wider public in general; isn't that really what we are talking about?

**David Martin:** I just wanted to bring out once again that I kept on saying that very frequently!

**Brian Heap:** People these days know much more about science, engineering and technology than ever before because of the influence of television. Consequently there's a much greater knowledge in the general community. I think it's rather patronising to say that they don't know what's going on.

**David Martin:** I'm not patronising. I have to report. I can't worry if it's patronising to doubt whether there is a knowledge of science, in terms of scientific method, in terms of modes of scientific understanding, apart from bits and pieces about this, that and the other. The number of people that understand the philosophy of science is *minute*, who reads Jerry Fodor? Who reads Feierabend or Popper? These are tiny groups of people.

**Brian Heap:** You've shifted your ground!

**David Martin:** No I haven't ! The mode of understanding of science is the crucial question. I said there are all kinds of influences that derive from technology which are picked up in this way and that, but in terms of the scientific mode of understanding, the number of people that have any grasp of it is utterly minute.

**Stephen Watson:** I want to change the subject slightly and talk about the distinction between religion as a belief system and religion as a practice. It has always seemed to me that much of the explanation for religion being followed in many parts of the world is because of its aspect as a practice, rather than its aspect as a belief system. We seemed to be talking about the belief system at the time but to me one of the problems is the intellectualisation of the culture we live in. For many people intellectualisation doesn't matter, what matters is the practice. So is there an explanation of the way religion is related to secularisation which can be explained just in terms of the practice, without bringing the belief systems into it?

**David Martin:** I don't happen to think that religion is all that propositional anyway. I think it is a response to certain kinds of sign and symbol what you might call 'signals

of transcendence'. It's not to do with whether you believe in x, y or this, that and the other. This makes it all very difficult for those sociologists who go along and say not *how* do you respond to a particular sign, but what do you *believe*. That is not how it works on the ground for most people. They find ways of articulating their experience in right and symbol and in what I might call responses to particular horizons. That's how it actually works. On-the-ground reality has got so little to do with working out a position. It is to do with how you in your context understand your situation and what kinds of meaning you discover within it; how certain signs and symbols take you beyond that situation and act so as to give you some kind of both judgement and assurance. These are the ways in which religion is concretely experienced.

There's a huge variety of these kinds of ways of responding to what you might call the existential core of one's situation and that's how religion actually works. In terms of the incarnation, you're responding to a manifestation of God in a human face, that's what you're talking about. Now you can intellectualise that and you can turn it into a very careful study of the nature of the Trinity and the relationship of the Father to the Son and so on. You can do all those things that are very, very important but you/they need to clarify; what people are actually doing is saying "How do I respond to this face, this name? What does that mean to me in terms of His identification with my experience, as a child, as someone who's preaching a kingdom, as somebody that's on a cross having faced the political and religious authorities of its time? How do I respond as somebody that's poured out love? Do I respond with love"? I'm talking about Christianity mostly here, but if these are the core elements, these other things that you're talking about in terms of belief, they *are* there and they need to be articulated because they do protect a kind of existential core of what's going on in a religion. But beliefs are rather specific to Christianity. Christianity, by virtue of having gone through the Greek prism, has tended to produce a set of really quite complicated beliefs. But how it works on the ground is something quite different. So hammering away at "Does the argument from design really work, do we need the ontological argument, what about the origins of the universe?", that's irrelevant.

**Denis Alexander:** Does anyone else want to come in?

**Paul Shellard:** You said it's irrelevant to society at large but it's not irrelevant to the scientific community.

**David Martin:** No, of course not.

**Paul Shellard:** The other thought I had is that secularisation here is both in the scientific community and in society but in the US it hasn't gone into society – although it's certainly in the scientific community. I don't see them as particularly different to us, the scientific establishment. What do you make then sociologically of the evolution/creation debate because that's the conflict, that's there, isn't it?

**David Martin:** But the issues that actually make these things operate are not intellectual issues. That's what I am trying to say. In England the Darwinian controversy was relatively short. In America it's continued and it's quite a lot to do with the position of the south after reconstruction in relation to the northeast. It's these kinds of political issues and the cultural distance they express that cause people hold them that are crucial. All the data I was presenting simply showed that the correlation between scientific advance in particular nations *and* religious practice *just isn't there*. It's a scientific point. It seems to me impossible to get round the fact that that the crucial variables are not to do with the degree of apprehension of the argument from design. They are to do with people's sense of their cultural identity, people's sense of their existential position. Those are the things that really operate.

Now we in the academic community – of course I agree with you – have a particular very complicated task to cope with within sociology. I try to ask myself, for

example, if I can give accounts of the distribution of religion in terms of these variables, how do they connect with the religious understanding of how these things happened. If you think that the Holy Spirit operates here or there, according to some random wave of the spirit, it seems to me from my scientific viewpoint that I can give accounts of why Quebec went through a particular fall in religious practice or I can give an account of the why the United States is five or six times as religious as most parts of western Europe and I can describe why in Uruguay religion is definitely a very small minority and in Singapore it's quite different.

Does that scientifically create a problem for Christian understanding of how the Holy Spirit works? That's the kind of issue that interests me, but who else besides me? I can't even get theologians interested in it. I've just put these things on the table and said "Please tell me what you think about this?" If I can discuss three different social milieus in the Yucatan and suggest the conditions under which they may or may not receive Pentecostalism *vis a vis* Catholicism, or the extent to which they are likely to receive a liberation Catholicism *vis a vis* a conservative Catholicism, is that a theological problem? Most people are not interested in this problem except when it comes to observing that your religion is largely a matter of what you are born. I have got my own solutions. I have to have. I have to work very hard at thinking through these kinds of things that are put to me by my 'scientific' activity.

**Bob White:** So what is your own solution? How does the Holy Spirit work?

**David Martin:** Oh, come on! Someone asked me to talk about Revelation and now I've got to talk about the Holy Spirit!

**Bob White:** Well, you brought it up!

**David Martin:** Yes, I know I did! Well, I think that the operation of the Holy Spirit, like everything that happens in human society, is patterned. That's the fundamental proposition that sociology is. There's not randomness, there is pattern.

**Janet Soskice:** Not going where it listeth, then.

**David Martin:** Exactly the quotation that was in my head – not going where it listeth! I remember how this problem came up when I was in Romania. I was talking to young evangelicals in Oradea in Transylvania. Evangelicals have spread in Transylvania, which is pluralistic, but there are certain parts in central Romania where such a spread is not very likely because they are part of a community in which to become something else would be to abandon your identity. In those areas, to be Romanian is to be Orthodox and my hearers were less likely to be successful there than if they stayed in Transylvania, which is a multicultural society where people are conscious of different alternatives.

St Paul made a similar point when he said not many rich people will enter the kingdom of heaven. He was conscious that the reception of Christianity was patterned. So I think there is a chart of pressures within which the Holy Spirit works. Otherwise we are confronted with a randomness that would make society incomprehensible and I want comprehensibility. That is even though, as Roger quite rightly says, there aren't the general rules that there are in physical or biological sciences where you see that under these conditions, this is likely to be the case, and you can state the conditions and the rubrics that govern them.

We have to state a few broad likelihoods and put a huge rubric along the side stating all the things that are not equal in this particular case. That's how it works. I couldn't even operate without assuming there is some kind of patterning in our activities.

**Denis Alexander:** We are going to draw to a close in a few minutes, but I think Roger wanted to say something.

**Roger Trigg:** I do accept the idea of patterns in the sense that you can see that there are obstacles in some places that people would find harder to get over but it isn't just the Holy Spirit that worries me, it's also the question of human free will which again is an important theological concept. The more you up the ability of sociologists is to explain, the more you appear to make the individual just a creature of forces outside his or her control. That would worry me as well. I do wonder as well about sociology because although you can point to places, and I can quite see your argument that it would be more difficult in this place than that, nevertheless I do find sociology's ability to predict isn't very good sometimes. (**David Martin:** It's not!) Therefore these patterns aren't that great, they are not that obvious, are they? If you can't predict, then there's not really any great explanation that you're offering.

**David Martin:** No, I'm sorry – the relationship of explanation/prediction is not very close. A meteorologist knows very well how weather works. There is always an "if-then": they know that if *this* is the case then *that* is the likely outcome. Now that's a relatively easy situation because they actually can say within the specified range, that these are the likelihoods. There are a lot of patterns where one can say absolutely what's going to happen; that's to say if this happens then this is likely to happen.

What one cannot say is this is *definitely* going to happen in x place at y time. Sociologists have been appalling, as you quite rightly say, at predicting say the student revolution, predicting the revolution in eastern Europe, or in my case, the fact that there are now hundreds of millions of Pentecostals all around the world. None of these huge changes has been predicted by sociologists and that's not because patterns don't operate. It's that we have such a huge range of possible unequal conditions affecting any given set of possibilities. But the patterns are still there and we are tremendously good at retrospective patterning. Think of the *range* of variables that I tried to present – the ragbag I tipped onto the table. They are all relevant, but making a consistent coherent narrative out of them, and arranging them in different levels and different hierarchies is a very complicated task.

About human freedom, perhaps this is the point where we should definitely come to an end. It does seem to me that human beings operate in terms of cultural habit, and that without a high degree of expectation and anticipation (not determinism, but expectation and anticipation), no social life can occur at all. At the person to person level I have to be able to anticipate what you will say: we have to anticipate each other. Now on the wider scale, there are all kinds of anticipations. For example, take the situation of Tony Blair at the moment. Is he tottering or not tottering? This is a sociological question and you have to ask yourself whether the fact that people think he's tottering is going to make him totter? It's the fact that human beings have their own input into the situation that they are observing that makes it very complicated. But it is still the case that you can give an account of human freedom within this structure of pretty firm anticipation, which is the basis of all social life.

**Denis Alexander:** I think finishing on a note of human freedom is a good place to finish. We have worked David very hard indeed this evening and have given him lots of hard and difficult questions, but it's been a great discussion; I'm glad that we've had a vigorous exchange of views, which is what this is all about, and we ought to thank David again very much.

## Who's Who

**David Martin**, Honorary Professor in the Department of Religious Studies, Lancaster University and Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics.

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**Professor Roger Trigg**, Professor of Philosophy, University of Warwick, Chairman, British Philosophical Association, author of numerous books including *Philosophy Matters*, Blackwell 2001. He is currently completing a book on 'Religion in Public Life' for Oxford University Press, to be published in 2006

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