



# MAKING THE CASE FOR FAITH

The story of the  
Christian Evidence Society

Simon Jenkins



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*Jesus, confirm my heart's desire  
to work, and speak, and think for thee;  
still let me guard the holy fire,  
and still stir up thy gift in me.*

*Charles Wesley*

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Published by the Christian Evidence Society, London, 2023

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Design: Simon Jenkins

Cover photograph: the Bishop of Barbados speaking on the  
Christian Evidence stand on Tower Hill, 1948.

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## PREFACE

*By the Revd Canon Edward Carter, Chair of the Trustees*

It seems to me extraordinary that the Christian Evidence Society has now been in existence for over 150 years. But on the other hand, it also seems somehow entirely ‘right’ and expected that something like the Society came into being and has developed its activities in response to the huge changes in society which have unfolded since 1870.

The Society is almost unique in having lasted the course when it comes to putting forward a confident but thoughtful argument for the Christian faith in the public square.

Like any history, this story is not just backward looking. It helps us think about today’s world, too, and how we can shape a contemporary Christian response. The original founders of the Christian Evidence Society would no doubt be somewhat perplexed by the state of the world today, but they would also recognise some deep common strands, as well as the enduring need for the Christian message to be explained and argued for.

Perhaps in the year 2170 someone will be inspired to add more to this story, and describe as yet unknown and dramatic changes in the way the Christian faith is heard, and how the Society has played its part. I do hope so.

Simon Jenkins has done a tremendous job in charting this story, and setting the life of the Society firmly in context. I thank him warmly on behalf of all who will read and enjoy it.

*September 2023*





## PROLOGUE

# The Devil's chaplain

In February 1827, the Beadle of Walbrook in the City of London went to a much talked-about public meeting at the Areopagus, a chapel in Cannon Street. After paying the shilling entry fee, he settled in his seat in the packed building and waited for the show to begin. After a few minutes, Rev Robert Taylor took to the stage and, amidst cheers and laughter, began to speak.

Taylor was the founder of the 'Christian Evidence Society', which he established in 1824. But far from being an apologist for the Christian faith, he was an enthusiastic and charismatic deist, radical and freethinker. He was a friend of Richard Carlile, the agitator for universal suffrage and freedom of the press, and he was quickly dubbed by the newspapers as 'the Devil's Chaplain'. The phrase was later picked up by Charles Darwin, who wrote in 1856 to his friend Joseph Hooker, the botanist: 'What a book a Devil's Chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low and horridly cruel works of nature.'

Taylor claimed that he wanted to defeat Christianity through rational argument, but he was actually a kind of standup comedian, staging shows where the audience got to vote on whether they found religion ridiculous or not. Taylor played up to the 'Devil' description by circulating his sermons in a publication called *The Devil's Pulpit*.

The bill posted on the door of the Areopagus promised that Taylor would stage a debate 'to disprove the authenticity of the scriptures, to prove a forgery of the Gospels, and the non-existence of the persons of whom they treat, and the events which they narrate.'

Taylor was in his element as he played to a hot and noisy audience at the show seen by the Beadle in 1827. He launched into the four Gospels, saying the pigs which stampeded into the Sea of Galilee (in an episode from the life of Jesus) were ‘the first martyrs for Christ’. Rather than worshipping the lamb, he said, Christians should worship the pigs. His outrageously funny lines were cheered by the crowd, who had never heard anything like it before. When he spotted a clergyman in the audience, and challenged him to respond to his arguments, the squirming cleric sat tight.

Other religious leaders did take the trouble to respond to Robert Taylor, but they did so through writing, rather than standing up in his meetings. John Pye-Smith, a dissenting theologian and fellow of the Royal Society, whose apologetics work included reconciling the emerging science of geology with the narratives of the Old Testament, took time out to demolish a manifesto written by Robert Taylor. His booklet charged Taylor of acting in bad faith:

‘When a man comes forward with a parade of learning and authority, and with an ostentatious reference to the titles of books, to chapters, pages, and passages marked as quotations; and when, after all, the fact is that this display is fallacious, that the books and passages referred to say no such thing as is imputed to them, but indeed the very contrary, and that the professed quotations are grossly falsified; what conclusion can the most lenient mind arrive at, but that the person so acting is a dishonest man, a false witness, a wilful deceiver?’

There was a reason why Taylor became so famous, and why his audiences were so excited. His knockabout parody of the Bible was not merely a novelty but a crime in England at the time. That’s why he was brought before the King’s Bench in June 1827 on two counts of

blasphemy, and held in prison on remand. His trial a few months later, at which the Beadle gave evidence, was a sensation, playing before a packed public gallery. It was heard by the Lord Chief Justice and prosecuted by the Solicitor General, who accused Taylor of calling Jesus ‘the Jewish Vampire’.

Taylor lost the case, and was tragically sentenced to one year’s imprisonment in Oakham Gaol, Rutland. The following year, he was free again and returned to speaking against Christianity at public meetings. His Christian Evidence Society was six years old and thriving, he said. But after a second spell in prison, this time for two years, he emigrated to Revolutionary France where he spent the rest of his life. His Society was wound up during his second imprisonment.

Robert Taylor’s Christian Evidence Society has nothing to do with the Society this booklet is about. Taylor’s Society began and ended in the 1820s and 30s, while the Society whose story is told in these pages was launched by Christians in the 1870s and is still going strong in the 2020s. So the two societies have nothing in common – and yet they have everything in common.

That’s because Taylor, just like the many people involved in the Christian Evidence Society since 1870, was passionate about the quality of evidence for the Christian faith and the message of Jesus found in the Bible. Taylor obviously came to a very different conclusion about that evidence – he thought it was laughable – but his scepticism about faith, which spread to many other people as the 19th century progressed, was the chief driver for the creation of the 1870s Society.

Those who created it did not want to sit tight and say nothing, like the squirming cleric in Taylor’s show. They wanted their voice and their evidence to be heard.



## CHAPTER 1

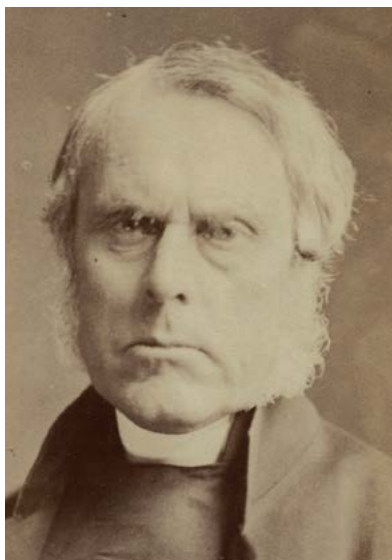
# Launching the Society

The Christian Evidence Society came into being in London on 5th March 1870. Coincidentally, it was a date keenly looked forward to in the capital, as the first-ever international football match was scheduled to be played that day at the Oval. Scotland played England at 3 o'clock in the afternoon to a packed crowd, with England equalising in the last minute of a thrilling game.

Meanwhile, across town, the Bishop of London, John Jackson, was presiding at the one-day conference which launched the Society. Jackson had been unexpectedly elevated as Bishop from Lincoln to London two years earlier by the prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli.

According to a newspaper report, the Society had come into being to combat the alarming growth of 'infidelity', which was Victorian-speak for non-belief in the Christian faith. Those who joined the conference and the Society that day wanted to give 'organised resistance to the progress of infidelity and rationalism among the lower and higher classes', and offer instead 'the external and internal evidences for the truth of the Bible and Revelation.'

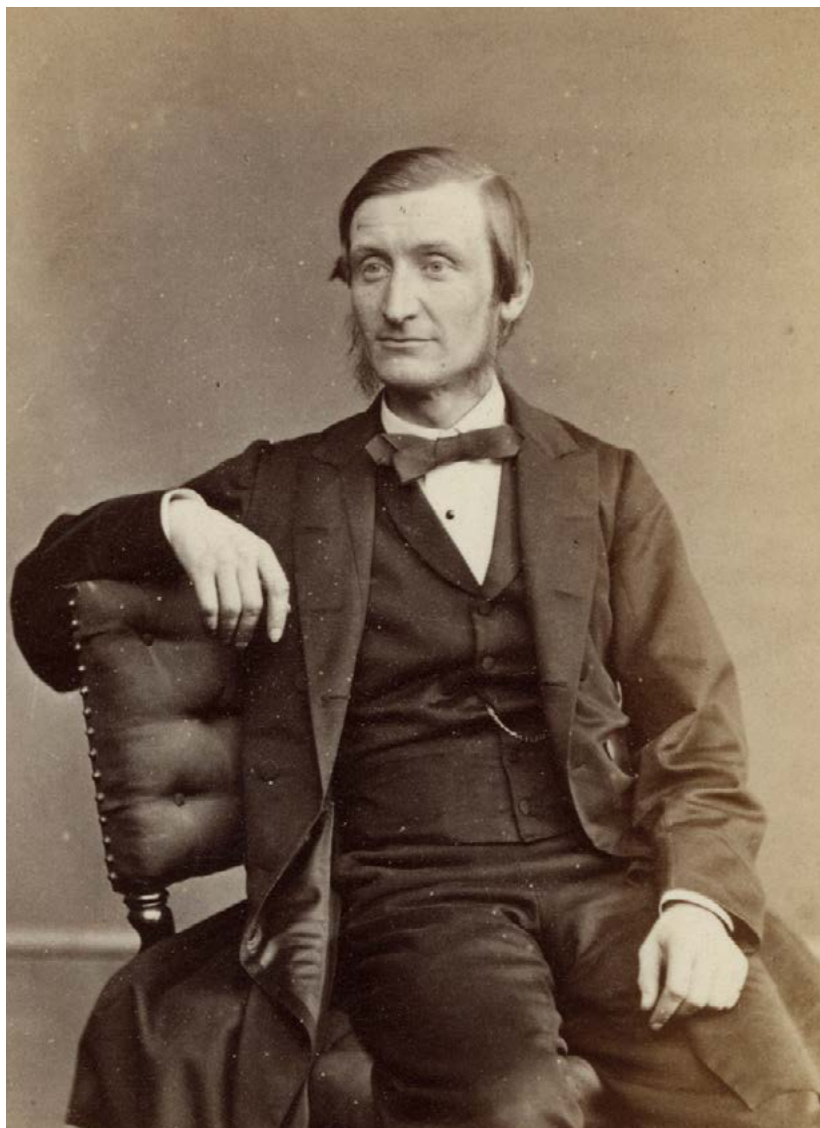
Addressing the conference, Bishop Jackson said, 'On returning to the metropolis after seventeen years absence, I have been much struck with the systematic attitude which infidelity had assumed. Sceptical opinions are making progress in the upper ranks, and as a matter of course have begun to permeate the lower grades of society. There are a large number of sceptical books and periodicals not only on the shelves of circulating libraries, but on the drawing room tables of many families.'



The Society launched with the active and involved support of a large number of influential people, including MPs and Lords, both Church of England archbishops (Canterbury and York), a large number of bishops, several earls, an army general, and most famously of all, Lord Shaftesbury, the social reformer who heroically campaigned throughout the middle of the 19th century for the prohibition of child labour in factories and mines.

Also actively involved were some prominent scientists of the time, such as John Hall Gladstone, President of the Chemical Society and Fellow of the Royal Society, as well as academic theologians such as JB Lightfoot and William Ince, and the historian George Rawlinson. The first Chairman was the Earl of Harrowby, KG, who had been a Privy Counsellor in Palmerston's administration and was a prominent defender of the Church of England.

Refreshingly, the Society's council had a good balance of Anglicans and Nonconformists, which meant that a third archbishop was



*Three of the Society's first supporters (left to right): Lord Shaftesbury, Bishop John Jackson, and John Hall Gladstone.*

added to their ranks, the Baptist evangelist and author FB Meyer, popularly known as ‘the archbishop of the free churches’. Getting Congregationalists, Baptists and Presbyterians into the same room as Anglicans was very difficult to achieve in 1870. The Elementary Education Bill, which was introduced in Parliament just three weeks before the Society’s London conference, was causing a storm of suspicion between the different churches, because the Nonconformists feared that their children would be forced to receive Anglican teaching.

The factor which enabled them to overcome their differences and work together in the cause of Christian evidence was a strong sense of urgency. The language of the London conference made that very clear. It spoke about ‘the strenuous and systematic efforts of infidelity in the metropolis and throughout the country, which are now assuming so alarming a character.’

The practical strategy which the Society adopted at the outset encompassed six areas of activity:

- Sermons, lectures, addresses and discussion on the evidence for Christianity, to be held in halls and the open air
- Classes for the study of ‘the evidences’ by adults and young people, including exams leading to prizes and certificates
- Books published to meet objections to the Christian faith, aiming at ‘educated and uneducated’ readerships
- Grants to free public libraries, young men’s associations, and missionaries
- Tracts for free distribution
- Interviews and correspondence with doubters and sceptics

Stephen Marriott, who spoke about the origins of the Society in the first Drawbridge Lecture in 1946, traced the long-term factors for this public crisis of faith to the growth of industrialism and the rise of



## OBJECTS OF THE SOCIETY.

To defend Christianity as a Divine Revelation.

To controvert the errors of Atheists, Pantheists, and other opponents of Christianity

To counteract the energetic propagandism of Infidelity, especially among the uneducated.

To meet the difficulties and strengthen the faith of the doubting and perplexed.

To instruct the young in the Evidences of Christianity.

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*Objects of the Christian Evidence Society: The Society summarised its objectives in 1870 in five ambitious and wide-ranging points.*

science. By 1870, he said, ‘opposition was becoming formidable and its appeal increasingly popular. The form which it took was threefold: Atheism, Secularism and Rationalism.’

The formation of the Society drew immediate fire from its secular critics. Charles Watts, Secretary of the newly formed National Secular Society, wrote a penny pamphlet, *Christian Evidences Criticised*, which took issue with what Bishop John Jackson and others had said at the Society’s launch. Watts wrote:

‘It was decided by this Christian assembly, that discussion with “infidels” should not be their mode of exemplifying the evidences of the Christian faith. This is discretion if not valour. Do the Bishop of London and his colleagues admit that Christianity lacks sufficient truth to sustain it in an encounter with “infidelity”? Or have they not one “champion of truth” among the committee sufficiently able to cope with a “champion of error?”’

The challenge to engage in debate, rather than dismiss secularists as mere ‘infidels’, was a wake-up call for the Church to recognise that the times were rapidly changing.

## CHAPTER 2

# National breakdown of faith

The challenge to traditional Christian beliefs had been growing steadily throughout the 19th century, but had accelerated during the decade leading up to 1870. Three developments especially contributed to the church's sense of a crisis of faith, which in turn motivated the movers and shakers behind the Christian Evidence Society, who wanted to respond with a fresh apologetic.

The first development dates to November 1859 and the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. The book, which challenged not only the Christian view of creation and human origins, but also the goodness of God, was a bombshell for religious faith. Christians were divided in their response to the book, and couldn't agree among themselves whether you could be a follower of Darwin and remain a Christian.

The author Charles Kingsley told Darwin that he had come to see natural selection as an instrument of God's design. He said that the new theory offered 'just as noble a conception of Deity' as the traditional Christian view of God as creator. Meanwhile, Samuel Wilberforce, the Bishop of Oxford, wrote a review of *The Origin of Species* and said that he regarded natural selection as 'a dishonouring view of nature'.

A few months after the publication of Darwin's book, Wilberforce debated the theory of evolution with the anthropologist Thomas Huxley at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History. In a key

*Right: Bishop Sam Wilberforce, popularly known as 'Soapy Sam', caricatured in Vanity Fair in 1869.*



No. 38.

STATESMEN, NO. 25.

Price 6d.

"Not a brawler."

*Samuel Wilberforce*

FOR EDWARD BARNES

exchange, Wilberforce jokingly asked Huxley if he was descended from an ape on his grandmother's or grandfather's side. Huxley's response is disputed, as no one was taking verbatim notes, but in one version he responded that 'he would feel no shame in having an ape as an ancestor, but that he would be ashamed of a brilliant man who plunged into scientific questions of which he knew nothing.'

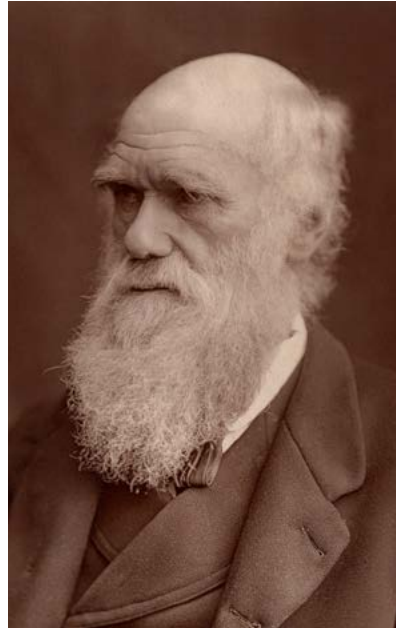
The debate was barely reported at the time, but it has become 'the most famous story in all the hagiography of evolution,' as the evolutionary biologist and author Stephen Jay Gould memorably described it. It is often now portrayed as a titanic clash between religion and science, and has the status of myth among some atheists.

A second development was the publication in 1860 of the book *Essays and Reviews*, written by six Church of England scholars and one layman. The book posed a direct challenge to the 'Christian evidence' approach to faith which had been developed by philosophers and writers such as John Locke, Joseph Butler and William Paley, and had been relied on by several generations of British Christians.

The articles in *Essays and Reviews* picked apart the prophecies of the Old Testament and the miracles of Jesus, which at that time were a mainstay in the evidence offered by Christians for their faith. It also argued against the eternal duration of Hell, and made the case that the Bible should be critiqued in the same way as any other ancient book.

*Essays and Reviews* sparked an immediate and ugly controversy which lasted for several years and ended up in the courts. The book vastly outstripped sales of *The Origin of Species* in the next few years, and triggered a blizzard of pamphlets and articles pro and anti. Two of the book's authors were charged with heresy in a church court, and 137,000 churchgoers wrote in support of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, who had taken the case to law.

A third development was the launch of the National Secular Society in 1866 by the orator, freethinker and atheist, Charles Bradlaugh.



*Two serious challenges to traditional Christian belief came from Charles Bradlaugh and Charles Darwin.*

Bradlaugh, who was the founder and editor of Britain's most significant atheist newspaper, *The National Reformer*, drew on the work of George Holyoake, who had coined the term 'secularism' 15 years earlier. But where Holyoake believed that secularism had no interest in attacking religion, Bradlaugh was an activist for atheism. His eloquent and impassioned speeches and writings gave fresh energy and direction to atheistic secularism, and an organised and powerful new challenge to the church.

One member of the audience in a meeting held by Bradlaugh was Piers Claughton, a former bishop of Ceylon, and a founding member of the Christian Evidence Society. He noticed that the audience



*Piers Claughton, Bishop  
of Ceylon.*

included ‘a few bold unbelievers who were making a great show of their unbelief,’ but also ‘a large number of persons who might be called trembling Christians – persons who were afraid that there was not as much to be said in favour of Christianity as they could wish.’

Claughton realised the urgent need to provide the ‘trembling Christians’ with resources to help them remain committed to the truth of their faith. He also took away two things from his experience of the meeting which were important for the Christian Evidence Society. First, he thought ‘it was a wise thing to meet infidels on their own ground, and confront them with evidences in support of the Christian faith.’

Secondly, he ‘deprecated the use of language in reference to infidels which was based on the assumption that they were not honest in their convictions.’ This determination to speak directly, intelligently and

respectfully to those who were arguing against the Christian faith was an important principle of the Society from its beginning.

Charles Ellicott, the theologian and Bishop of Gloucester and Bristol, saw a direct connection between the popularity of Charles Bradlaugh's secularist meetings and the beginnings of the Christian Evidence Society. He said, 'It was not started, as has been sometimes said, with a little irony, for the purpose of restoring a belief in Christianity, but for the purpose of meeting argument with argument, and of supplying the many that are now fluctuating between belief and no belief with sober answers and valid arguments drawn forth anew from the great treasury of Christian evidences.'

## CHAPTER 3

# Seizing the initiative

The first major initiative by the Society was an eye-catching series of 12 lectures at St George's Hall in London's West End, which ran over April and May 1871. Although the issues covered by the series were intellectually ambitious, the lectures were actually intended for working class people. They made up the audience entranced by the secularist lectures of Charles Bradlaugh, and the Society was very keen to reach them.

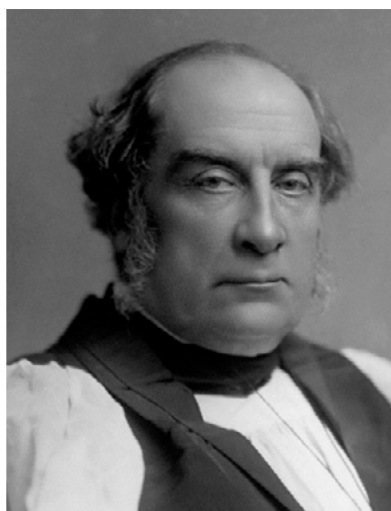
The Archbishop of York delivered the first lecture and spoke on Materialism: 'the theory of the development of the universe by the agency of purely physical laws without the intervention of an intelligent Creator'. He was followed by the Dean of Canterbury, who tackled the relationship between science and revelation. George Rawlinson, Professor of Ancient History at Oxford, spoke the following month on 'the alleged historical difficulties of the Old and New Testaments, and the light thrown on them by modern discoveries'.

The lectures were reported extensively in the London press, and introduced many of the themes which have been debated between Christians and sceptics ever since. Transcripts of the lectures were published as individual booklets, which sold an amazing 24,500 copies in a year, and a collection of all the lecture was published as a book, *Modern Scepticism*, which ran to four editions, with copies being bought in bulk by a publisher in New York, and with quantities of copies going to Canada and India. In the book, the lectures were arranged as follows:





*Above: St George's Hall in  
Langham Place, London. Right:  
William Thomson, Archbishop of  
York, who spoke in the hall at the  
opening lecture of the Society in  
April 1871.*



## **Systems in collision with Christianity**

1. Evidence of design in nature
2. Pantheism
3. Positivism

## **Supposed conflict between science and the Bible**

4. Science and revelation
5. Miracles as testimony to Christianity

## **Difficulties connected with the Bible**

6. The gradual development of revelation
7. The historical difficulties of the Old and New Testaments
8. Mythical theories of Christianity
9. The value of St Paul's letters as evidence for early Christianity

## **Closing lectures**

10. Christ's teaching and influence on the world
11. The completeness and adequacy of the evidence for Christianity

There was a twelfth lecture, 'The Fourth Gospel', which was delivered by JB Lightfoot, later Bishop of Durham, but it was not included in the book.

The following year, in the summer of 1872, the Society staged a second series of 12 lectures, again at St George's Hall, London, with tickets selling for one shilling and six pence. Each lecture was turned into a sixpenny booklet as the series progressed, and the lectures were published later in the year in the book, *Faith and Free Thought*, with a preface by Samuel Wilberforce, who was by then Bishop of Winchester.

Describing the contents of the lectures, he said: 'The supposed collision between the Scriptures and Natural Science, is examined

*JB Lightfoot, the theologian,  
delivered the final lecture in  
the 1871 series.*



with an unfaltering clearness of investigation which can hardly fail to carry conviction with it. The great sore of alleged moral difficulties in the Old Testament is probed to the very quick.’

The lecturers included Charles Brooke, the surgeon and inventor, John Hall Gladstone, who was later President of the Physical Society, and then of the Chemical Society, and Henry Bartle Frere, a colonial administrator and former Governor of Bombay, whose later high-handed policies in South Africa led directly and tragically to the Zulu War and the First Boer War. This was not the last time that the Society’s deep links with the establishment led to embarrassment.

In the following two years, the Society presented two more series of lectures at the New Hall of Science on City Road, London. The hall was familiar ground for the secularists, as their leading speakers, Charles Bradlaugh, Annie Besant and George Holyoake often presented lectures and public debates there. The 1873 lectures were delivered to audiences of working people, and the speakers were briefed to

talk about specific objections to religion, and to expect lively, critical discussion after they had finished speaking.

One speaker, wrapping up, and aware of the questions about to fly, said, ‘Gentlemen, I have done. How far I have really met your difficulties on this subject, I cannot tell. I shall be glad if anything I have said should obtain your approval. I hope I have not been betrayed into any theological bitterness. If I have been, or if you should think I have been, pray forgive me. Of course, I should like to find that my arguments are better than your arguments; but, above all things, I wish to be brotherly.’

The 1873 and 74 lecture series were also turned into books, each containing the edited lectures: *Popular Objections to Revealed Truth* (1873) and *Strivings for the Faith* (1874).

Starting with these first lecture series, the Society was able to draw on some of the best thinkers of the time in the academic, political and church worlds. Stephen Marriott, looking back in 1946 at these early initiatives, said: ‘It is very interesting to see what eminent laymen the Christian Evidence Society used to be able to call in its defence. For example, Mr. Gladstone supported the Society very strongly indeed. Lord Balfour was likewise a speaker, and not an uncommon speaker, on its behalf.. one is struck with the amount of real talent, and the number of eminent men that it had in its support.’

## CHAPTER 4

# Lectures and soap boxes

In March 1877, the Society held its annual conference in Lambeth Palace Library, and the meeting looked back on everything they had achieved in the previous seven years. Four headline statistics give a strong idea of how the Society had been occupied in these early years:

Public lectures and sermons: 530

Open air lectures: over 680

Published books of lectures: 15,000

Cheap booklets of single lectures: 75,000

Public lectures delivered indoors remained very important to the Society. There were sermons at St James's Piccadilly, addresses delivered to the Working Men's Christian Union, as well as Sunday evening lectures with questions and discussion at the Great George Street Hall off the Euston Road. A report from the 1876 conference noted that lectures had also been given in other parts of London, including Bayswater, Chelsea, Islington, Somers Town, Bethnal Green, Hackney, New Cross, Deptford, and Woolwich.

Six years later, in 1883, branches of the Society were up and running in the Church of England dioceses of Yorkshire, Manchester, and Peterborough, with extensive programmes of well attended lectures running in Hull, Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Halifax, Wigan and Stockton on Tees. A report from a Hull vicar said that 'the large room used has often been crowded, and on one occasion so packed that it was estimated to contain more than 1,000, the majority working men.'

It is clear that there was some stress involved in launching into this new area of work. Churches which had been comfortably doing one-way communication for centuries – preaching to passive congregations who were not expected to reply – were now running crowded meetings on hotly debated subjects where the audience was invited to speak up, and which might descend into chaos.

The sense of relief that this new channel of communication was working well surfaces frequently in the reports: ‘Every meeting was conducted in the most orderly and quiet manner... Only once did we have any trouble... Discussion was conducted in an admirable spirit on both sides... Very few frivolous questions were asked... The greatest order prevailed.’ One newspaper report on a lecture at Shoreditch Town Hall, where a Mr BH Cowper, a Christian Evidence Society regular, spoke on the subject of miracles, ended by saying, ‘At the conclusion of the meeting the audience dispersed as quietly and orderly as any congregation in London.’

In Northampton in 1881, St Edmund’s Church ran a series of Sunday afternoon lectures for working men during Advent, on subjects such as ‘The Existence of Evil’ and ‘The Bible and Science’. The lectures were given in the church by visiting speakers at 3.30pm, and then at 8.15pm the audience was invited to the church hall to ask questions and discuss the issues.

This proved so popular ‘that both Churchmen and Secularists pressed the vicar to renew the effort as soon as he could conveniently do so’. A few weeks later, St Edmund’s leafleted every house in its parish with details of a new series of lectures in Lent, which produced audiences of 400-700 people. At this new series, ‘the lecturers had the greatest opportunity of removing many false ideas which lingered in the minds of the audience.’

While the lectures opened up new opportunities for connecting with unchurched people, open air speaking proved to be even more



*The earliest known picture of a Christian Evidence Society meeting in a London park, dating from 1912.*

dynamic, risky and demanding. In fact, although outdoor speaking had barely been mentioned when the Society was launched, it quickly overtook the safer and more controlled environment of indoor lectures. 'During the summer, open-air work has been actively carried on in the following districts: St. Pancras' Railway Arches, Mile End, London Fields, Battersea, Chelsea, and Hyde Park', notes a report from December 1877.



The soap box speakers clearly gave their audience much more opportunity to answer back, as shown by this report from December 1876: 'Large numbers came together and listened with great attention. In Hyde Park a little difficulty was experienced at first, owing to the conduct of some roughs; but by perseverance this difficulty was overcome, and the result fully justified the proposal to give lectures in this place.'

The lively and more rowdy character of open air speaking was something the Society's speakers had to adjust to and work with, as will be seen in the next chapter.

A third strand of work, alongside lectures and open-air speaking, was an educational class scheme, where children and adults could study a curriculum of 'the evidences' for Christianity, and then take part in annual exams to win awards and prizes. The class scheme was an ambitious and quite rigorous educational project, with two age bands: a Junior Scheme and a Senior or Advanced Division. Despite – or maybe because – of this, it proved popular. A Society report in January 1879 noted that an estimated 1,000 young men and women came to the classes in Belfast. However, when the Society attempted to persuade schools to include Christian evidence classes as part of their religious instruction, the take-up was low.

But what were they learning? In the late 1870s, Juniors were studying Richard Whately's *Introductory Lessons on Christian Evidences*, a handbook for young Christians written in 1837 by the Archbishop of Dublin that had become a classic. Whately's book gave clear and short chapters on prophecies, miracles, and common objections to faith. Meanwhile, a Junior class in Bristol, led by a local vicar, was ambitiously preparing for an exam on a book by George Warrington, *When Was the Pentateuch Written?*

The areas of study in the class scheme curriculum seem to have been informed by the subjects tackled in Whately's book. They included:



- External and internal evidences of Christianity
- Miracles
- Prophecy
- Bible difficulties
- Atheistic and pantheistic objections

A report in the Church of England Year Book for 1883 gives a flavour of the expectation surrounding the class scheme: ‘When they learn, almost with surprise, that philosophy, history, and science are all handmaids to Christian belief, and that Christianity is the fulfilment of all that is best in other creeds, and answers to the cry of humanity throughout the ages, Jesus is seen to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life. The Bible also, being studied apart from conventional views, is found to be a mine of priceless treasures.’

As these different arenas of work developed, the geographical reach of the Society was expanding well beyond London. By the early 1880s, the Society’s office in London’s Strand was being run by two men, one of whom, the Organising Secretary, was travelling the country to promote the work and encourage churches to form local associations of the Christian Evidence Society.

Towns as far apart as Leeds, Northampton, Huddersfield, Belfast, Oldham, Stourbridge, Malvern, Middlesbrough, Birmingham and Cambridge had all set up their own associations, and were running lectures and classes, and selling copies of booklets and books produced by the Society.

## Crossing the Drawbridge

In the early years of the 20th century, a new Sunday afternoon entertainment came to Hampstead Heath in north London. Atheist and free-thinking speakers were standing in the open air and delivering lectures to crowds which often numbered hundreds of heckling, cheering and fascinated people. A local clergyman who saw the crowds, Rev. Cyprian Drawbridge, noticed the speakers were preaching their messages without any response by Christian speakers. It wasn't long before he ventured out of his pulpit and onto the Heath, armed with his own lecture notes.

As he later wrote, 'If the masses will not go to Church, and if every effort to persuade them to do so has more or less failed, why does not the Church try the experiment of going to the masses, where they habitually assemble in their thousands?'

Open air speaking did not feature in the original plans for the Christian Evidence Society, but in the last decade of the 19th century it started to become its main activity. It found its inspiring champion in Drawbridge, who founded the North London Christian Evidence League in 1905, for the purpose of 'fighting atheism in the parks'. The League carried out its mission through lectures, debates and publications, which included both books and cheaply produced pamphlets.

In the summer, they staged open air speaking and debate on Parliament Hill and Hampstead Heath on Sunday afternoons. One debate took place in 'a particularly high wind on Hampstead Heath', and the lecture was delivered by Drawbridge from 'the box seat of a

*Cyprian Drawbridge,  
in a photograph from  
1909.*



brake', an open, horse-drawn carriage. The journalist reporting these details observed that 'It was fine to watch the interest of the crowd, their quickness in seizing points, their eager response to any telling home-thrust.'

In the winter, the League speakers went indoors to give lectures, which the *Guardian* described as 'sound and workmanlike', in a hired hall in Tufnell Park. These were held on Sunday nights, with regular audiences of 500 people. The programme consisted of a lecture, followed by questions from the floor, and concluding with five-minute speeches by opponents, with replies from the main speaker.

The subject areas covered by Drawbridge and others in the lectures and booklets included evolution, the authority of the Bible, the religious beliefs of scientists, evidence of design, the historicity of Christ, and the resurrection. All these remained hot issues in debates between atheists and Christians over 100 years later, and they remain an important focus of the Society in the 21st century.







## CHRISTIAN EVIDENCE GROUP PORTRAIT, 1924

*A group photograph  
of Christian Evidence  
speakers gathered in  
Hyde Park, London,  
in May 1924.*

*Cyprian Drawbridge  
is on the left at the  
speaker's stand. The  
injuries of the First  
World War are visible  
in this group of  
speakers.*

## Agent training

The group photograph of Christian Evidence Society speakers taken in 1924 (previous pages) shows that most speakers were lay people. There is only a sprinkling of dog collars among the suits and ties, dresses and bonnets.

Since the majority of speakers were not theologically trained, the Society arranged a regular programme of lectures to educate them about the issues they would face on the soap box. 'All Agents of the Society should consider it an important part of their duty to attend the Lectures arranged for their help in their preparation for their difficult work,' commented an annual report.

Some of the lectures from 1907 and 1908 were:

Egypt and the Bible

The importance of 'tone' in religious discussion

The new theology

The Bible and modern science

The virgin birth

A lecture on 'The Influence exercised upon the Jews by some of the great nations of antiquity' led to a guided tour of the Assyrian and Greek galleries at the British Museum.

In 1907, the secretary of the Christian Evidence Society, Rev. Robert Venn Faithfull Davies, became too ill to carry the work on his own. The Society did not need to look far to recruit a person of experience,



*A Christian Evidence Society meeting in Hyde Park, London, on Sunday 25 May 1924.*

energy and ideas. Drawbridge, then 38 years old, agreed to act as joint secretary, which gave him the opportunity to spread his wings beyond North London.

When Faithfull Davies (see chapter 7) died in 1916, Drawbridge became the sole secretary. For the following 20 years he was the Society's dynamic driving force, and his years at the coal face of outdoor speaking made him superbly qualified for the work.

Drawbridge's insight that Church should go to the people, meeting them in the open air, was partly motivated by his belief that the Church was out of touch. By contrast, he was very much in touch, and his natural eloquence as a speaker translated very easily to the printed page. Interviewed about his open-air work on Hampstead Heath for an article in *The Sunday Strand* in 1909, he said, 'We stick to our half-empty churches whilst it is possible to get audiences numbering thousands of the very people we say we want to reach and influence. And in the parks they will listen for hours, even in the pouring rain,

## How to run an open air meeting

Drawbridge's manual for engaging the crowds, *Open Air Meetings* (1924), devotes a chapter to the procedure for running a successful meeting. Although he uses typically male language in describing the chairmen and speakers of the meetings, the group photograph of speakers from 1924 (on pages 36 and 37) includes three young women, who possibly spoke at meetings themselves.

**Raising a crowd** – The chairman, who runs the logistics of the meeting, sets up the speaking stand and starts raising a crowd, with the help of a few supporters who form a nucleus crowd.

**The address** – The speaker arrives punctually, takes over from the chairman, and addresses the crowd for about 40 mins.

**Intermission** – The chairman, 'who has to feel the pulse of the crowd', steps in at an opportune moment to give the speaker a 10 minute break. He encourages the crowd to ask questions, and then hands back to the speaker.

**Taking questions** – The speaker comes back and takes questions for a further 40 minutes. Drawbridge says: 'during this part of the meeting the crowd is apt to quadruple in size.'

**The opposition** – The speaker might introduce an opponent to the stand, inviting him to speak for 10 minutes, after which the speaker responds, and closes the meeting.



to solid reasoning upon points on which they are keen. It is a mistake to say that these men are not interested in religion. They are intensely interested.'

Under Drawbridge's leadership, the team of open air speakers learned not only how to argue a convincing case for the Christian faith, but also discovered how to engage with their audience and respond to the genuine questions people wanted to ask. Drawbridge clearly relished the 'live' nature of the work, and even wrote a manual for anyone running an open air meeting. 'The park crowds love theology by repartee,' he said. He welcomed hecklers, because they identified the questions and doubts of the audience, and put them forcefully. A good speaker would be able to channel the heckling into talking about the issues people really cared about.

Drawbridge gave a considered account of the apologetic and educational philosophy behind the open air work:

'The average duration of these meetings was at least an hour and a half. Much of this time was employed, as a rule, in answering questions... We also welcome opposition speeches at all our meetings, allowing the opponents of religion a very fair hearing. No organisation in the parks is as willing as we are to allow opponents opportunities to express their views. We feel that in Church no one has a chance to query pulpit statements, and that this fact tends to give rise to the suspicion that assertions in sermons are often loosely made, and are frequently open to dangerous criticism. This suspicion creates a keen demand for free discussion which, in our view, ought to be welcomed elsewhere. Moreover, the method of teaching by means of questions and answers is one of the best.'

## CHAPTER 6

# ‘This terrible war’

In 2018, the Society received a rather battered copy of a religious newspaper, *The Christian Age*, just over a century after it was published. The copy had languished in the loft of a house in St Kevenrne, Cornwall, until the house’s current owner, Jim Dowling, came across it while the loft was being renovated. The newspaper, which was published in December 1915, at the height of the First World War, is a time capsule of Edwardian news and comment, with one article sharing the secret of staying warm in the winter weather. ‘According to Arctic explorers, anything containing fat, such as chocolate, butter, or bacon, is a fine heat-promoter.’

The leading article was written by the Secretary of the Christian Evidence Society at the time. The reference to the Society’s name was how Jim Dowling came to check if we still existed, 100 years later, and then send the newspaper to us.

The article, ‘Prayer and the War’, was written by Rev. Robert Venn Faithfull Davies, and reveals the attitudes of the time towards faith and the conflict. Faithfull Davies writes: ‘The war has given a tremendous impetus to prayer. The testimony of those who have gone forth to fight for us is, I think, pretty unanimous. Men are praying there who have never prayed before, or who perhaps have forgotten even the very way of praying, or who have of set purpose ceased to pray. Out there, they have come face to face with realities, and there is an immense volume of prayer going up.’

Faithfull Davies had direct experience of the realities of the war. His son Gilbert (popularly known by his second name, Vere) was in

*Rev. Robert Venn Faithfull  
Davies, Secretary of the Society  
at the outbreak of the First  
World War.*



hospital as he wrote, after having his arm shattered on the Western Front near Loos, in Flanders. Vere returned to the front a year later, and was killed at the age of 29 leading an attack on the German lines at Arras in April 1917.

Questions about the credibility of prayer were prevalent during the war, and the majority of Faithfull Davies's article speaks to this issue. He says: 'Now there is a difficulty, which seems to be a very considerable one to some minds. It is this: They say, "Yes, there is an immense amount of prayer going up from England, the Allied countries and the Colonies, an immense volume of prayer asking for victory for our arms. But there are praying men and women amongst the Germans, too, and they are praying that victory may come to them!"'

He argues that one of the keys to understanding Christian prayer are the four famous words Jesus addresses to God in the Lord's Prayer: 'Your will be done.' True prayer, says Faithfull Davies, is offered in the belief that God ultimately knows what is best for us, even when our prayers don't produce the result we hoped for.



*The copy of the Christian Age, dated December 1915, discovered after a century in a Cornish attic.*

He says: ‘Supposing there are two people asking for quite opposite things – a Godly German, asking success for German arms, and a Godly Englishman asking for the success of the arms of the Allies, and they each of them have in their hearts the necessary conditions, “Thy will be done,” then there is no reason why they should not go on praying, and leave it to God to give the answer which He knows to be best.’

He concludes: ‘Let us go on praying, commending our dear ones to His care and keeping, praying that our nation may awake, that it may learn the lessons that God has to teach it in this terrible war.’

Robert Venn Faithfull Davies was Secretary of the Christian Evidence Society from 1902 to 1916. He was the great-great grandfather of Marianne Faithfull, the English singer, songwriter and actress.

## Polling the scientists

While the outdoor speaking was the public face of the Society, a small staff of office clerks, supplemented by voluntary workers, looked after the less visible work at the office, which until the end of the 1930s was located in two large flats in Craven Street, off Trafalgar Square, which the Society rented for just £156 a year.

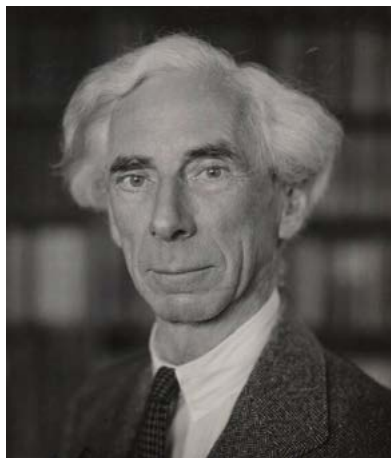
The focus of the office included raising money, organising lectures, placing advertising, replying to letters from enquirers, printing and mailing books and pamphlets, advising church leaders on how to do evangelism, and acting as a clearing house for information about questions of the day and organised campaigns against religion.

‘Our Office staff deals with an exceedingly varied correspondence on the subject of doubts, suitable evidential literature, information about atheist societies, new fancy religions and many other subjects’ commented the Annual Report of 1936.

The office was also a venue for running theological education and apologetics training for the Society’s workers, hosting meetings and committees, and counselling people with religious questions. It seems that one room contained the Society’s lending library, which was free to church ministers of whatever denomination. The overriding impression from reading the Society’s reports from these years is of a cutting edge operation specialising in culturally relevant apologetics.

During his years as Chairman of the Society, Drawbridge wrote a number of books, but the most original and remarkable was published in 1932 as *The Religion of Scientists*. The book was the result of a research project in which Drawbridge had written to all 447 fellows of

*Left to right: Bertrand Russell, Max Planck and Ivan Pavlov, who responded to the Society's survey, published as *The Religion of Scientists* in 1932.*

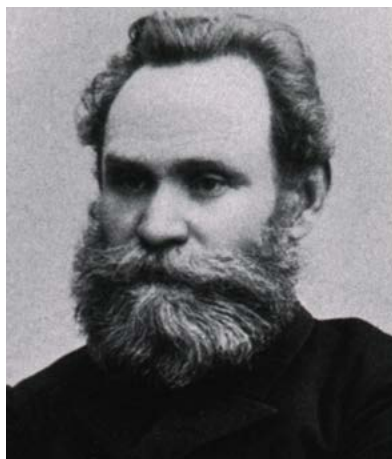


the Royal Society (the UK's national academy of sciences) to ask them six questions about religion.

Amazingly some 200 of them completed the questionnaire, making it possible to gain an impression of how scientists of the time viewed religion and the relationship of religion and science. The result was, of course, incredibly mixed and nuanced, with *The Religion of Scientists* publishing views that were positive, negative, cautious, combative, accepting, quibbling and hostile to religious faith. The book includes both the statistics of the replies, as well as extracts from the letters Drawbridge received in reply.

Drawbridge's starting point for the project was a widespread popular feeling that 'the validity of religious experience has been somewhat discredited by the discoveries of modern natural science'. Scientists were becoming increasingly influential, he said, and so it was important to find out whether or not most scientists thought their work had discredited belief in God. The atheist activists he met in debate were confident that was the case, but were they right?

Drawbridge tied the book directly to his years of experience of



debating in London's parks. 'I have done a great deal of speaking in London parks for many years past, and know that the opposition to religion is nearly all from materialists who are also determinists. They maintain that the soul is only the sum of the activities of the body, and that the former ceases to exist when death overtakes the latter. They also insist that everything in the universe is determined by irresistible laws, so that no one is responsible for his behaviour... If asked on what grounds these assertions are made, the reply is that natural science has demonstrated the proof of them. It is further contended that men of science are not religious, and that religious people are not scientific.'

The six areas Drawbridge asked about in the 447 letters he mailed covered the existence of a spiritual world; human free will; the compatibility of evolution with a creator; whether science negates the idea of a personal God; the survival of personality after death; and whether developments in scientific thought are favourable to religious belief.

Many of the scientists who responded are now less well known, but they included seven Nobel laureates, and three names which are still

famous today: Max Planck, the originator of quantum theory; Ivan Pavlov, the Russian physiologist known for his work on conditioning; and Bertrand Russell, the philosopher, mathematician and logician.

Their replies to the first question, ‘Do you credit the existence of a spiritual domain?’ gives a flavour of the book as a whole. Max Planck responded with a ‘yes’ to the question, possibly because his quantum discoveries had revealed the fundamental uncertainty of matter; Ivan Pavlov said no to there being a spiritual domain; while Bertrand Russell asked for clarification, writing: ‘What does the word “spiritual” mean?’ Other scientists responded:

‘No! The word “spiritual” has no real meaning, like dragon, fairy, or magic.’ James Swinburne

‘While I admit that there may be a spiritual domain (as distinct from a physical domain) I would want evidence that there is one. As far as I know there is nothing contradictory to the established facts of science in such a belief.’ Clinton Coleridge Farr

‘If you mean, is there a spiritual aspect of experience which is at least as valid and important as the material aspect, I say yes.’ George Barker Jeffery

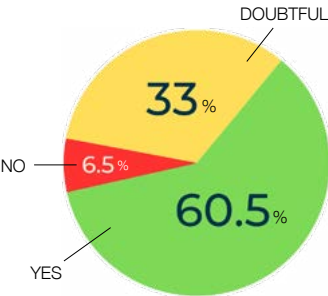
‘If this means, do I think that a mechanistic, i.e. a physico-chemical, account of the phenomena exhibited by living organisms is insufficient to explain those phenomena adequately? – the answer is yes.’ A professor of zoology

Both Pavlov and Russell answered yes to the question, ‘Is it your opinion that belief in evolution is compatible with belief in a Creator?’. All three scientists – Planck, Pavlov and Russell – agreed with the statement that science negates ‘the idea of a personal God as taught by Jesus Christ’.



# HOW THE SCIENTISTS RESPONDED

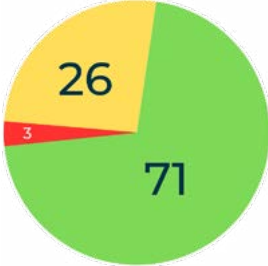
Do you credit the existence of a spiritual domain?



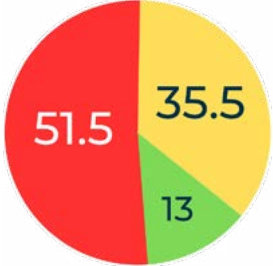
Do you consider that man is in some measure responsible for his acts of choice?



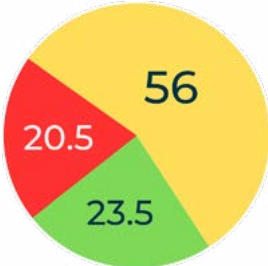
Is it your opinion that belief in evolution is compatible with belief in a Creator?



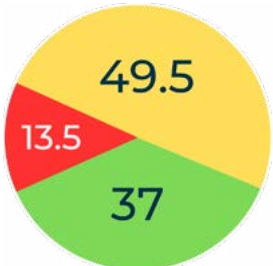
Does science negate the idea of a personal God as taught by Jesus Christ?



Do you believe that the personalities of men and women exist after the death of their bodies?



Do you think the recent remarkable developments in scientific thought are favourable to religious belief?





*Drawbridge and  
his wife on holiday  
in the 1930s.*

Alone out of the three, Pavlov sent an explanatory note to accompany his replies. He had been brought up as the son of a Russian Orthodox priest, and abandoned religious study at a seminary to pursue a life in science. He said: ‘My answers do not mean at all that my attitude toward religion is a negative one. Just the opposite. I am deeply convinced that the religious sense and disposition are a vital necessity of human existence, at least for the majority.’

In a newspaper report on the book, Drawbridge commented, ‘The general impression left is that in many respects men of science are

much more friendly towards the religious outlook on life than they used to be... an increasing number feels that reality also contains something that cannot be weighed or measured or expressed in scientific formulae.'

Cyprian Drawbridge died in January 1937. In the Society's annual report for 1936, the last complete year of Drawbridge's leadership, it was reported that an astonishing 1,256 open air meetings had been held during the year, which amounted to an average of 3.4 meetings per day throughout the whole year. The speaking team numbered 66 clergymen, laymen and one professor. The numbers alone are testament to Drawbridge's faith, energy and power to inspire others.

A decade earlier, he received a very nice compliment from the Archdeacon of Middlesex, who asked in a magazine article: 'How can you cross the gulf of ignorance that separates the desert of doubt from the castle of faith?' His answer: 'Use the Christian Evidence Society's Drawbridge.'

One of the obituary notices published in 1937 reported an observation that Drawbridge himself loved to give. It said, 'Some people feel that it is not worth while to argue with Atheists; but Mr Drawbridge always had an answer to that. The Christian Evidence Society's voluntary lecturers include some of their one-time opponents.'

## CHAPTER 8

# Second World War

One Friday in May 1939, a white Bedford van with a large flag fluttering from a pole over its roof, pulled up outside the gates of Lambeth Palace, the London residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Above the windscreen, newly painted, were the words, 'The Drawbridge Memorial Van'. Two gentlemen in dark suits emerged from its cab. One of them was Revd Frederick Harfitt, the new Secretary of the Christian Evidence Society, while the other was Herbert Pease, a Conservative politician who sat in the House of Lords as Lord Daryngton. The two of them were soon joined by Archbishop Cosmo Lang, who stood with them while press photographers snapped them in front of the van.

A brief newspaper report fills in the details: 'The Archbishop of Canterbury on Friday at Lambeth Palace dedicated the travelling mission van built in memory of the Rev. C. L. Drawbridge, who was for thirty years secretary of the Christian Evidence Society.'

Drawbridge had died just two years earlier, and now, in May 1939, four months before Britain declared war on Nazi Germany, the Society was mobilising for an intense period of activity through the war years. The van, which seems to be an adapted Bedford ambulance, must have been useful for carrying literature to the outdoor speaking events, but it also came with a secret weapon – a handy pulpit which folded out at the side. A second photo shows the pulpit in action, with the van parked on a London common, a clergyman proudly standing in the pulpit waiting for a crowd to gather to hear him preach.

The van's career only came to an end towards the end of the war. 'Our Drawbridge Van, after serving as a travelling church for several



*The dedication of the Drawbridge Memorial Van in May 1939.  
Left to right: Revd Frederick Harfitt, Archbishop Cosmo Lang,  
and Lord Daryngton.*

years, was taken over by the military authorities in 1944,' noted Harfitt, whose name as Secretary of the Society was painted on the van door. He must have preached from it many times.

The Drawbridge Van was only one of the ways the Society celebrated the work of Harfitt's predecessor. It also launched in 1946 a series of annual lectures in his honour. The lectures, which continued into the 21st century, are listed at the end of this booklet. Drawbridge himself would probably have preferred the van to the lectures as a tribute,

since his heart was clearly in open air speaking rather than academic lecturing, but as things worked out, the Drawbridge Lectures long outlived the Drawbridge Memorial Van.

Harfitt, the Vicar of St Mary-at-Hill, Eastcheap, in the City of London, provided excellent and energetic leadership of the Society for over 20 years from the late 1930s, picking up the baton from Drawbridge. He had been a protégé of Wilson Carlile, founder of the Church Army, and had run a 'dry public house' for the Church Army in a tough area of Fulham after the First World War. Like Drawbridge, he was no pushover for an excitable crowd.

Between the two of them – Drawbridge in the 1910s to 30s, and Harfitt in the 1940s and 50s – the Society saw its finest years in soap box apologetics. Harfitt, who was a gifted public communicator, continued to make outdoor speaking the main focus of the work, especially at Tower Hill, and at Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park, which the Society dubbed 'the head-quarters of Atheist open air propaganda.' Tower Hill was reckoned to be the better venue for thoughtful crowds and reasoned debate, while Hyde Park Corner had the atmosphere of the circus.

However, from 1939, the Society also turned its attention to the existential threat facing Britain during the Second World War. A new chaplain's department was set up under the leadership of Miss M. Spence, to support chaplains serving the armed forces in the theatres of conflict with the Axis Powers.

*Top right: the Drawbridge Van in action, with its fold-out pulpit (and clergyman) deployed.*

*Bottom right: James Hughes, Bishop of Barbados, speaking at Tower Hill in June 1948. A press report noted: 'A very fine meeting, with an interesting discussion on colour and racial barriers, well appreciated by the audience, several of whom expressed the hope that the Bishop would visit us again.'*





*A military wartime chapel furnished by the Society.*

The Society supplied tracts, booklets, Bibles, prayer cards, communion liturgy and hymn books, and also altar linen, sets of wooden crosses and candlesticks for chaplains who were setting up chapels from scratch in the barracks or ships where they were serving. The altar linen was produced by groups of women working across the country, and coordinated by the Society's office in St Albans. The Society supported chaplains across Europe, and also in Africa and Japan.

Towards the end of the war, Miss Spence reported: 'Since the commencement of hostilities we have had correspondence with over 1,700 chaplains to H.M. Forces. Many have been assisted in their work and quantities of necessities for their ministrations have been supplied entirely free by many of our supporters. Over 50,000 of our booklets have been distributed by chaplains serving at this time.'

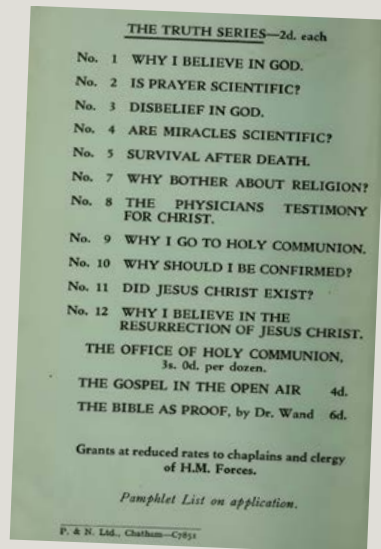


The most popular booklets dispatched to chaplains were from *The Truth* series, written by Harfitt, with titles such as *Why I Believe in God*, and *Survival After Death*; and a liturgical booklet, *The Office of Holy Communion*, which was often given to new recruits or confirmation candidates.

One chaplain, writing to ask for help with altar linen, gives a picture of what the Society helped to make possible during the war years: 'In 1943 you were kind enough to help me and you will no doubt be interested to know that the Altar and candlesticks and naturally too the Communion adjuncts have been used in France, Belgium,

## The Truth series

This booklet series, written by Frederick Harfitt, proved highly popular during the Second World War. 'I should be much obliged if you could issue me with as many as you can spare of the pamphlets in *The Truth Series*,' wrote an army chaplain with the forces liberating Europe after D-Day. The booklets were priced at twopence each, but were sent free of charge to chaplains serving in the armed forces.



## 10 crowd questions

At Christian Evidence meetings in Hyde Park in 1946, someone noted down the questions asked by the crowd. This selection of just 10 of them gives an idea of the issues on the public mind at the time, and reveals the combative side of debate in the park. A member of the speaking team once noted: 'Questioners tried to bamboozle our speaker, but failed, the speaker having experienced this before. He held his own in a grand manner.'

1. Does not Communism take the place of Christianity as a claim of man's allegiance?
2. How does the Church get its money?
3. Why, if there is a God, is the world so full of evil and suffering?
4. Why talk of God as he? Why not she?
5. Why do you Christians talk as if you alone were right, and we agnostics were all like sheep? That is what annoys me.
6. Why does the Church support the royalty, who are parasites?
7. Did not the Church persecute in its turn as soon as Constantine made it the established religion?
8. Did the Church not support slavery?
9. Why did the speaker in the meeting over there tell me I was mocking God, when I was only doubting what was said?
10. Was not Jesus a social rebel against the Romans?

Holland and Germany. I have had Communion services in all manner of places: tents, barns, open fields, schoolrooms, cellars, even using the back of the utility car.'

Other letters reveal the gratitude of chaplains who were working in such difficult conditions:

A D-Day chaplain, serving with the 'British Liberation Army' in Western Europe, wrote: 'Thank you so much for your most generous gift of Communion Linen which arrived safely to-day. What I brought over with me on D. day was getting very bedraggled and worn.'

A chaplain onboard a battleship wrote: 'It was a really excellent gift and I can assure you the things will be appreciated by the ship's company. My chapel is a small one. I hope to make it really attractive – a place where people will be drawn to say their prayers.'

Another chaplain wrote: 'I am most grateful to you for all the things you have given for the furnishing of my gun-site Chapel which is now nearly complete. I do hope that it will become a real centre of spiritual life for the men and women on the site.'

And finally, as British forces closed in on Germany at the end of the war, a chaplain wrote: 'I am sorry to relate that most of my possessions have been lost through enemy action and I am writing to ask if you could send me a Cross and Candlesticks, as I have none of these.'

In the years immediately after the war, the Society continued to work with chaplains as they set up chapels in army barracks for the British forces occupying Germany.

Meanwhile, in the London parks, which had long been an oratorical battleground for the Society, the open air work continued despite the Blitz, and despite the V-1 flying bombs which terrorised London in the summer of 1944. One Christian Evidence speaker reported: 'Notwithstanding the menace of the flying-bombs, a large number assembled around our platform at each meeting and the majority remained even when the bombs were passing overhead.'

'A couple of flying bombs came over, but no one stirred,' noted another speaker.

Harfitt reported one particularly near miss when he wrote his introduction to the Society's Annual Report in 1945: 'Some of our workers had carried on during actual enemy activities, and on one occasion our Hyde Park pitch had been entirely destroyed only an hour before our usual Sunday work was timed to commence.' He responded in the 'keep calm and carry on' spirit of the times, by setting up a few yards away from the bomb crater, and starting to speak at the scheduled time. His assistant, Mr Christopher, who had been speaking for the Society for 60 years and was popularly known as 'the Archbishop of Hyde Park', apparently looked at the crater and drily remarked that 'it might have been worse.'

The Annual Report that year is full of colourful stories of street preaching in London during the war. Crowds which had gathered to see the destruction from the previous night's bombing were often drawn to listen and respond to the Christian Evidence speakers. The report also records the questions asked by audience members (see page 58), and some of the exchanges between the speakers and listeners which reflect wartime conditions.

One speaker reported: 'An old sceptic denied that there was any God. He said, "I live in a bombed area and deny that there can be a God of Love." In my reply I said, "I live in a bombed area. In fact we all do. I hold that if men took seriously the Christian teaching of loving God and neighbour there would be no bombs." This was well received by an audience of 200 to 250.'

## CHAPTER 9

# In the wilderness

During the 1950s and into the 1960s, the Society's commitment to open air speaking was still the heart of its work. Every week, the Secretary, Frederick Harfitt, set out on a brisk five-minute walk from St Mary-at-Hill, the City of London church where he was rector, to speak to the crowds at Tower Hill.

Gordon Huelin, who wrote an historical sketch of the Society in 1983, said of Harfitt: 'A few of us still remember the faithful ministry which he carried out on a weekday in the City, and of frequently seeing him bearing the Society's stand on to Tower Hill, where he and others proclaimed the Christian message and answered questions.'

Tower Hill had become such a popular venue for speakers that it was said that dock workers on the nearby Thames would rather go without lunch than miss hearing the to-and-fro of the Tower Hill speakers and their crowds.

Others from the Society, including the legendary Methodist speaker Donald Soper, supported Harfitt in the work. Photographs of the time show Canon Tom Scrutton holding aloft a crucifix while preaching to a good crowd, right next to the church of All Hallows by the Tower. Scrutton, an army chaplain in the 1914-18 war, and chair of the Anglican Pacifist Fellowship, was the father of the philosopher Mary Midgley, and he was a regular Christian Evidence speaker. A press report from the early 1960s captures something of his style, when he joined the staff of St Bride's Church in Fleet Street:

'As newspaper people were emerging from their offices for lunch, Canon Tom Scrutton climbed on to a chair in the churchyard and



invited the passers-by to question him about religious matters. This he plans to do every Friday until further notice. The questioning had the ring of the Press conference rather than that of Hyde Park Corner.'

However, there were signs that the work of the Society was faltering. In 1955, the treasurer, Major Lisle Watson, was gloomy about the financial situation. He wrote in the annual report: 'The fact of our over-spending each year is not a good thing. We have been using money that has been left to us in the way of legacies. We want more evangelists: we want more workers. But we cannot have them unless we increase our income.'

He also wrote warmly about Harfitt's contribution as Secretary of the Society: 'The management day by day of the work of the Society is in the hands of a most efficient person – the Rev. FHE Harfitt. I have never known anybody work quite so hard, and at such long hours, and with such arduous labour. The other day I had an appointment with him. He had spent the morning on the outskirts of London preaching. He had come back here, and then gone to Tower Hill, where he had a very tiresome time from a number of difficult hecklers, whom he answered. Some would have retorted in a way which would not have been helpful to our religion. But he kept his irritation until he met me, and as I am his friend I suppose he thought, "Now I can let off steam". And I was very glad he did. But it was only for a moment.'

Sadly, Harfitt's time as Secretary was cut short in the spring of 1961 when he suffered a serious accident at home. Over the next 15 months, confined to hospital, he became progressively more ill, and finally died aged 74 in September 1962. A few days later, Cyril Easthaugh, the Bishop of Peterborough and Chairman of the Society, led the board members as they stood in silence to remember their fallen colleague.

*Left: Revd Frederick Harfitt speaking on  
Tower Hill in the mid to late 1950s.*









## The speakers

*Opposite top: Canon Tom Scrutton speaks on Tower Hill, and (above) takes questions, in 1956.*

*Opposite bottom: Rev. CR Bryan, a regular speaker, addresses the crowd at Hyde Park Corner in 1954. He also spoke at Tower Hill, and said: 'I find it a delightful campaigning ground. A little group of our own people came time after time as a support.'*

*Right: Two unknown speakers take to the Christian Evidence Society stand on Hyde Park Corner and Tower Hill, in the late 1950s.*



According to an obituary in the *Church Times*, Harfitt 'had just the right make-up for the open-air encounter. He was no "smoothy" himself, and was never at a loss for a quick riposte when tricky questions were showered upon him. Harfitt was very much the man-in-the-street's parson, able to speak the same language as those who harangued him throughout his ministry.'

His death saw an almost complete collapse of the Society's work, revealing that the huge output the Society had seen during the 1940s had gradually dwindled over the course of the 1950s. It was terrible timing, because Britain was entering the most revolutionary decade of the 20th century, with seismic changes in youth culture and attitudes towards traditional religion, and with controversies ranging from the obscenity trial of the novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the debate over Bishop John Robinson's book *Honest to God*, and the introduction of the Pill, which ushered in 'the permissive society', as it became known. In the year Harfitt died, the agenda of the trustees' meeting contained the item, 'The future of the Society', but no new initiatives emerged from it.

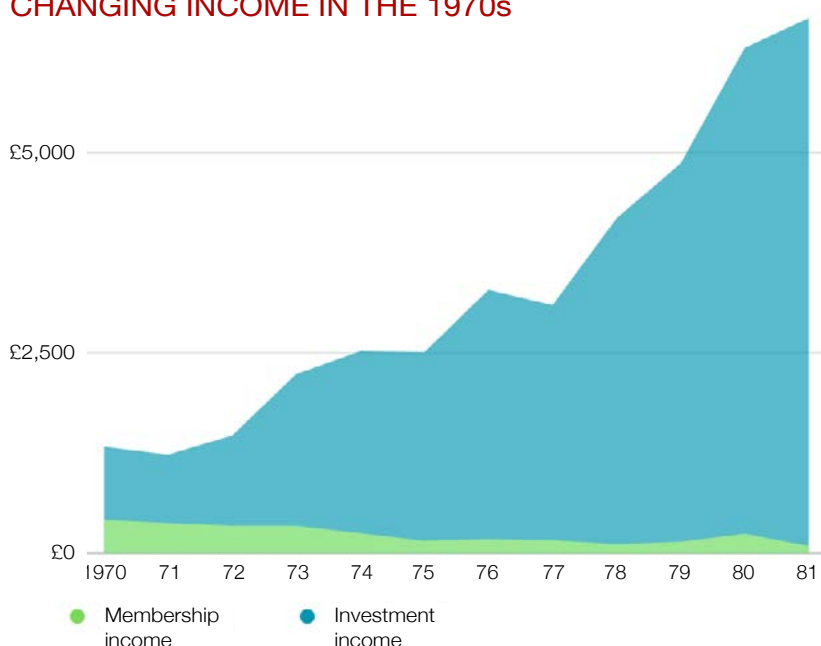
For a few years, Tom Scrutton continued Harfitt's work of addressing the crowds at Tower Hill on weekdays, and Speaker's Corner on Sunday afternoons. But in contrast to previous decades, when the Society had fielded a large team of speakers in London and further afield, Scrutton was working with just a few others.

At a Society board meeting in April 1963, Scrutton appealed for more speakers to be found. He had made this appeal for three years running, but unlike in previous years, where the speaking work was clearly identified with the Society, the minutes of the 1963 meeting characterise it as 'his ministry'. Three years later, Scrutton retired, which was briefly covered in the annual report: 'Every effort is being made to find a successor; meantime the Society's outdoor activities are curtailed.' With that short note, the Society's age of soapbox oratory, spanning at least 60 years, came to an abrupt end.

*In March 1960, the Christian Evidence Society board was photographed with some of their local chairmen, after a board meeting at St Mary at Hill, London. Seen here (right) is Cyril Easthaugh, then Bishop of Kensington, the newly-elected Society Chairman. He is sitting next to his wife, Lady Laura (below), who was also on the board. Next to her on the front row is Frederick Harfitt, the Society's Secretary.*



## CHANGING INCOME IN THE 1970s



In 1968, after several years of lethargy, the Society found a new Secretary, Sydney Alford, Vicar of Homerton, in Hackney, East London. Alston had been active in the Society for many years, and had already made a home in his vicarage for Harfitt's Christian Evidence Society office, including its library and stock of booklets. In 1970, he revived the Drawbridge Lectures, which had ceased in 1962, producing an annual lecture for every year in the 1970s, with subjects ranging across faith and science, Bible translation, and how the Christian gospel relates to the industrial world.

Alongside the annual lectures, Alford continued a series of midday lectures in a City of London church, St Margaret Pattens, Eastcheap, and he made the Society's literature available free of charge, although

most of it was now quite antique, dating from before the cultural watershed of the 1960s. In the age of Monty Python, apologetics booklets from the 1930s and 40s came from another world, and sounded old-fashioned to the point of comedy.

In 1976, David Edwards, Chaplain to the Speaker of the House of Commons, delivered the Drawbridge Lecture on 'Christianity and Evolution', and 4,000 copies of his text were distributed via Church of England networks. But it is clear that the Society's only activity was the yearly production of the Drawbridge Lecture, with no other attempt to adapt to rapidly changing times.

Even as the work stalled, the finances saw a remarkable change of gear. Up to this point, all the Society's income had been from individual membership subscriptions, which had been in decline for many years as the support base grew older. But now, during the 1970s, as the annual subscription income slumped from £410 to £88, investment income rocketed from £914 to £6,589. This came as a surprise to the next generation of Christian Evidence trustees, who realised that the resources of the Society could enable the flourishing of many different faith projects in the 1980s and 90s – and beyond.

John Gann, historian of the Society, quipped, 'The years of inertia had paid off handsomely. Interest rates had risen, little money was spent and bank balances were high.' As the 1980s dawned, the Society's 20 years in the wilderness finally came to an end.

## CHAPTER 10

# Revival

The fortunes of the Society were revived in 1981, when John Pearce succeeded Sydney Alford as Vicar of St Barnabas in Homerton, Hackney, and inherited all his Christian Evidence Society material. He found a room in the vicarage full of books, papers, framed photographs, furniture and speakers' stands – the remains of the Society's office from its heyday in Trafalgar Square. As well as inheriting all its stuff, he also became the new Secretary, and discovered that its ageing trustees were out of energy and ideas:

'When speaking to members of the board a number have doubted the continued value of the Society. Indeed two members said plainly that the Society ought to be wound up. In addition an article in the American Journal of Religious History suggested that we had outworn our usefulness at the turn of the century!'

Pearce turned to three trusted friends, who became new trustees, and he wrote them a letter which began: 'I am writing to those of us on the board of this Society who are under 65!' He invited them to meet as an unofficial think-tank to radically rethink what they were doing. Pearce, who was in his 40s, then produced a report which he took to the board meeting in June 1982.

Despite the prevailing gloom around the table, Pearce was upbeat about the Society and the work it might do to meet the needs of a new era, especially as it now had an investment income of £6,000 a year. Clearly, the days of soap box speaking were over, although he



*Revd John Pearce,  
who became secretary  
of the Society in  
1981, and revived its  
fortunes.*

commented, 'I sometimes feel like setting out for Hyde Park and "having a go"'. But he was convinced that 'the Society needs a fresh way of working if we are to keep faith with our founders' intentions.'

Pearce proposed that it should 'continue in being as primarily a grant-making body fulfilling our aims through other organisations'. The following year, the fresh energy and thinking of John Pearce and his fellow trustees was already beginning to bear fruit. The Society made grants totalling £4,000, supporting theological magazines, educational centres, youth work, lectures, and *Jesus Then and Now*, a video series on the life of Jesus.

The revitalisation of the society continued under Richard Harries, Dean of King's College London (and later Bishop of Oxford),

who followed Pearce as chairman in 1983. The following year, the Drawbridge Lecture saw its finest hour when Bishop Desmond Tutu, who had recently won the Nobel Peace Prize ‘for his role as a unifying leader figure in the non-violent campaign to resolve the problem of apartheid in South Africa’ delivered the lecture at St Paul’s Cathedral before a congregation of 2,000 people. The lecture, ‘Christian Witness in South Africa Today’, had been scheduled for the previous year, but the South African government refused to let the Bishop travel.

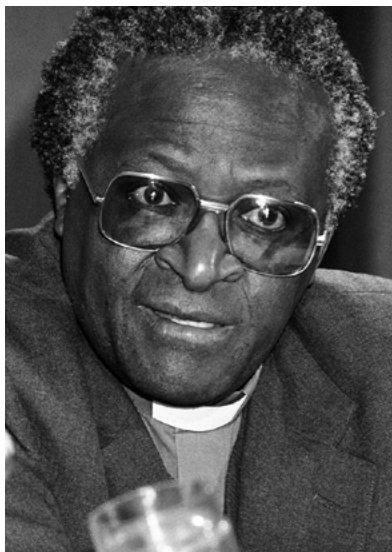
Tutu’s comments were reported widely in the media, including his response to the accusation that he was meddling in politics: ‘If I were to stand up here in St. Paul’s Cathedral and were to declare that I did not think that apartheid was too bad, I can bet my bottom dollar that none of my erstwhile critics would then accuse me of this dastardly crime of mixing religion with politics. I am just puzzled as to which Bible people are reading when they suggest that religion and politics don’t mix.’

Other lectures organised by the society in the 1980s were given by the Russian dissident poet Irina Ratushinskaya, who spent three and a half years in a Soviet prison, and Dr Sheila Cassidy, who had been tortured in Chile by the dictatorial Pinochet regime.

Richard Harries’ position as Dean of King’s College led to a creative and fruitful connection between the Society and King’s, which continued under the chairmanship of Richard Burridge, the biblical scholar and a later Dean of the College, and only came to an end after 36 years in 2019.

Harries was especially interested in the Society running its own projects, which directly promoted the cause of Christian evidence, and in this he reversed the direction John Pearce had set, in which the Society was a grant-making body, supporting the work of others. Harries’ interest lay in engaging publicly with secular culture through radio and television broadcasting, video, and advertising – one project





*Left: Revd Richard Harries, chair of the Society 1984-92.*

*Right: Bishop Desmond Tutu, at a press conference shortly before his Drawbridge Lecture in November 1984.*

mooted was for posters on the Underground. ‘Our work is to operate on the boundaries of belief and unbelief,’ he said.

In this spirit, the trustees began talking about how they could produce materials for people with no experience of faith and no belief in God. One of Pearce’s younger trustees, Julian Scharf, a priest in London’s East End, asked whether Christian apologetics could talk in the language of the Sun newspaper, which most of his parishioners read. This led to a research project, funded by the Society and carried out by a sociologist, Geoffrey Ahern, into the state of faith in the inner city as church attendance declined.

Ahern carried out his research by visiting white working class people in their flats in Tower Hamlets and talking with them at

length about their attitudes to religion. One woman's response, when asked whether she believed in Jesus – 'No, but I do believe in Christmas!' – gave Ahern's report its title. Another person was asked 'Do you believe in a God who can change the course of events here on earth?' They replied, 'No, just the ordinary one.' The research was valuable in capturing the actual views of people who had no contact with the church or the Christian faith. One of Ahern's findings was that 'those interviewed were avid TV watchers. Soap operas had apparently taken the place of a lost neighbourhood consciousness.'

When the report was presented to the trustees, several of them complained about the authentic and uninhibited East End language included in it, but agreed that it should be sent to Jim Thompson, the Bishop of Stepney, as a possible training resource for church leaders. It was also sent to BBC television's Everyman programme, which produced documentaries focused on ethical and religious issues. Sadly, both these approaches ran into the sand. The response from Jim Thompson was negative: 'The Bishop of Stepney had replied that the report seemed rather negative and he feared it may prove discouraging to clergy.'

Undaunted, Richard Harries also sent copies of the report to the Salvation Army, plus the Methodist, Baptist and United Reformed Churches, who circulated it for discussion. Although the project had a limited impact, it seems likely that it was taken to heart by Harries, especially in its observation about the place of soap operas in the life and imagination of people disconnected from faith. Eighteen months after the East End research report, he initiated an ambitious conference on the influence of popular television, which took place in March 1988 at the prestigious Cumberland Lodge in Windsor Great Park. John Gann, historian of the Society, set out the rationale for the conference:

‘No longer were crowds of people drawn to Tower Hill nor to Speaker’s Corner for debates on the evidence for God. Nor, as the CES found, did a well-known figure giving a lecture in a hall or church draw a capacity audience. To be relevant, the Society needed to develop some sort of dialogue with those who had influence in broadcasting.’

‘The Soap Opera: Mirror or Shaper of Society?’ – the eye-catching title of the conference – focused on serials such as *EastEnders*, *Coronation Street*, *Brookside* and *Neighbours*. It was intended to provoke a conversation among broadcasters about the ethical presuppositions underlying entertainment watched by millions of viewers.

Some fifty movers and shakers working in the orbit of television took part, including actors, producers, executives, researchers, scriptwriters, academics, journalists and clergy. The speakers were Dorothy Hobson (cultural writer), Piers Plowright (radio producer), Julia Smith (co-creator of *EastEnders*), Melvyn Bragg (broadcaster and TV executive), Alan Plater (TV screenwriter) and Katherine Whitehorn (newspaper columnist).

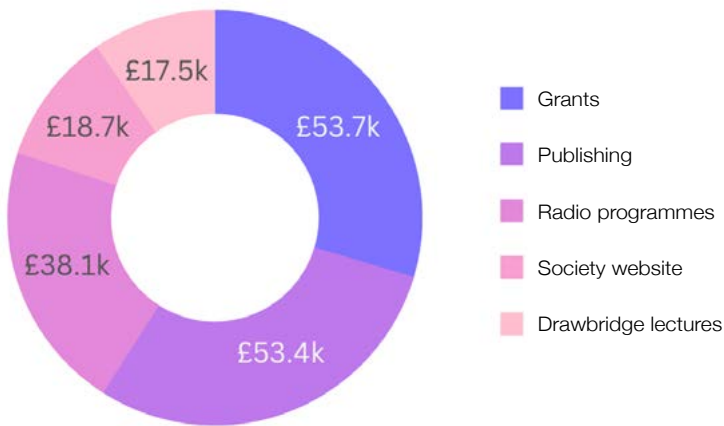
Sadly, the ethical agenda set up by Harries failed to gain traction among the participants. Years later, he reflected on the experience in a letter: ‘We got an amazingly distinguished set of speakers. However, I remember that it was not a total success because it was so difficult to get producers and others involved in television to think of morality more widely than sexual morality or swearing.’

In a lecture he gave in 2010, he explained in greater detail: ‘What I wanted people to reflect on were the fundamental assumptions and presuppositions behind the story lines. For, whether we are aware of it or not, these will carry a moral vision. In fact the moral vision expressed in some soap operas does have some strong elements, such as tolerance. It is not a question of thinking about morality in order to judge others, but in order to be clear about what we are doing.’

A second initiative launched by the Society in the 1980s saw better success. When John Pearce had become Secretary, he disposed of the Society's library, which was occupying a lot of space in his vicarage. He explained that 'the books were mainly Christian apologetics of the 1920s and 1930s, and there is no section of religious books which dates so quickly.' It must have been clear that new material would be needed to make the case for faith in the 1980s, and so the trustees formed a hard-working publishing subcommittee, and allocated

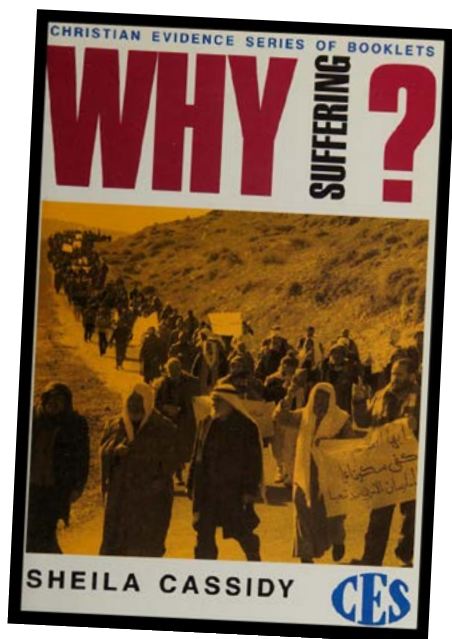
### HOW CHRISTIAN EVIDENCE FUNDED APOLOGETICS OVER 25 YEARS

In the 25 years between 1982 and 2007, the Christian Evidence Society resourced apologetics projects as follows:



Grants were made to produce video, conferences, a Christian theatre company drama, the prison and schools work of Rev Roly Bain, the gospel clown, theological training in East Africa, and other projects.

*A booklet from a series published by the Society in 1993. Sheila Cassidy was a medical doctor who had been tortured by the secret police in Chile in the 1970s.*



significant budget to develop a new series of booklets. The result was the *Evidence for...* series, which was published in 1986 and 87 and distributed through church bookstalls at 50p per booklet. This was the first new publishing venture by the Society in almost 40 years. The eight titles offered evidence for God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the resurrection, love of God, life after death, the virgin birth, and prayer.

At first, the booklets proved to be a runaway success, with 36,000 copies sold in two years. But when the publisher, Mowbrays, was bought by a larger publishing group, the favourable terms the Society had gained for the booklets was withdrawn. The series found a new home with another publisher, but the early sales success was not repeated.

Despite this setback, after the chairmanship of the Society passed from Richard Harries to Donald Gray in 1992, two further series of

*Revd Canon Donald Gray, who was chaplain to the speaker of the House of Commons, was chair of the Society from 1992 to 2001.*



booklets were published (in 1993 and 97) by Lion Publishing. The titles in these series were:

Why God?

Why Belief?

Why Suffering?

Why Pray?

Finding God in Bereavement

Finding God in Later Life

Finding God in Illness

Finding God in Marriage Breakdown

Frustratingly, sales of these booklets also proved disappointing. This must have come as a blow to the Society's trustees, because at the same time, the Drawbridge Lectures ran out of steam. The 1994 lecture,

‘The Trinity and Our Search for Intimacy’, delivered by Elaine Storkey, had been staged in three cities: Leeds, London and Bristol. But low numbers and high costs crystallised a long-running debate among the trustees about the value of the lectures. The following year, they decided to free themselves from the burden of finding a high profile speaker and an incisive subject each year, and to produce the lecture only when the stars aligned. Predictably, the Drawbridge Lecture went into 14 years of hibernation after 1995, which only ended in 2009.

As the millennium approached, the Society was perhaps left with more questions than answers, given that so many of the promising and ambitious projects of the 1980s and 90s had produced mixed results. But fresh initiatives were in sight, in the form of new creative possibilities in radio, and also in a completely new medium altogether: the internet.

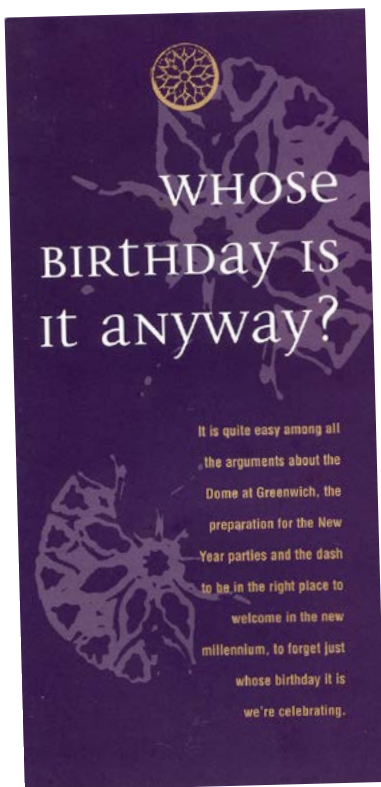
# The digital future

The year 1999 was a year lived consciously on the eve of the new millennium. Stories about the Millennium Dome in Greenwich, due to open on 1 January 2000, filled the media, as did anxiety about the Y2K Bug, which predicted that computers worldwide would fail on the stroke of midnight, 31st December, causing banks to crash and aircraft to fall out of the sky. In the midst of an often anxious year, churches in the UK attempted to ensure that the millennium celebration in Britain would not be completely detached from its Christian significance as the 2000th anniversary (approximately) of the birth of Christ.

In what will probably prove to be the most lasting initiative, some 8,000 churches across the country planted millennium yew trees, each one a cutting from churchyard yews that were more than 2,000 years old. But also, books, videos, resource packs – and even a mug bearing a Jesus 2000 logo – were all produced to help local churches keep the focus on faith as the new year approached. ‘The Millennium is Christ’s 2000th birthday. Worship him here – now’ was the rather aggressive wording of a widely distributed plaque for churches.

The Christian Evidence trustees committed themselves early in 1999 to produce two millennium leaflets, for free mass distribution to churches. The leaflets, one asking ‘Whose birthday is it anyway?’ and the other supplying the answer ‘Jesus!’, were written in engaging, non-churchy language, with the aim of reaching people with limited (or no) contact with the Christian faith. The ‘Jesus!’ leaflet began by asking: ‘So just who is this man “Jesus”? OK! I know his name is used as a swear word but what else do you know?’





*The two millennium leaflets produced by the Society in 1999.*

‘These pamphlets are the gospel in tabloid form,’ said Pauline Webb, a broadcaster and one of the trustees. ‘Just as the Victorians used the idioms of their day so we must dare to speak the gospel in the language of our own times.’

The print-run for the leaflets ran into six figures, making them a very expensive project for the Society. But the take-up by churches, cathedrals and chaplaincies was good, with ‘Whose birthday is it

anyway?’ proving so popular that an extra 10,000 copies had to be printed at short notice.

The change of millennium also saw a change of chair of the Society, as Donald Gray stepped down after 10 years, and Richard BurrIDGE, Dean of King’s College London, took over. Richard had joined the board of trustees in the 1990s, at a time when Donald Gray

## Radio, TV... and clowning

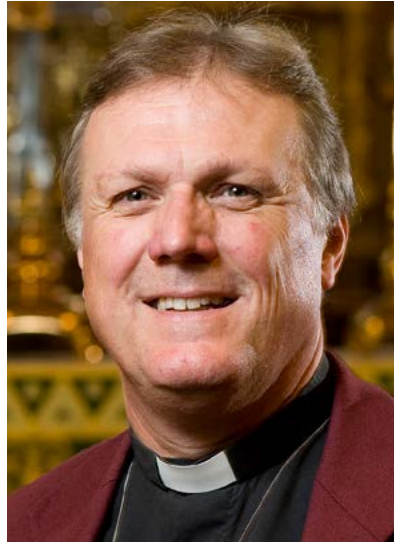
In the 2000s and 2010s, the Society was active in supporting a large number of initiatives. Here are just a few examples:

**Roly the Clown** – the Society supported the work of Revd Roly Bain, based in Bristol, for many years. Roly, ‘dressed in a multi-coloured costume, outsized dog collar and clerical cap, enormous boots and red nose and cheeks’, took his show, which presented the Christian message through holy clowning and circus skills, into schools, prisons, hospitals and churches.

**Urban Angels** – a dance company which toured schools and churches with a show, ‘Luvsik’, that encouraged young people to consider the Christian faith among the life choices they were making.

**Speaking Up for Jesus** – this apologetics series, responding to contemporary objections to faith, was produced as a series of ten 15 minute radio programmes, and also as a CD and booklet for churches. The programmes tackled questions such as Is Christianity narrow-minded... guilt-inducing... for hypocrites... all about pain and suffering?

*Revd Canon Professor Richard Burridge, New Testament scholar and Dean of King's College London, became chair of the Society in 2001.*



had assembled a very strong team of trustees with extensive media experience. They included David Winter and Stephen Oliver, two former BBC heads of religious broadcasting, the broadcaster and Methodist leader Pauline Webb, and the journalist Nigel Bovey. Gray himself was chaplain to the speaker of the House of Commons. It was a big contrast to the 1950s, when all the trustees had been clergymen or titled ladies.

Burridge quickly added another BBC executive to the trustees, the education producer Geoffrey Marshall-Taylor, as well as the broadcaster Cindy Kent, a founding presenter at Premier Radio, the commercial Christian radio station which had launched in 1995, with an audience encompassing Greater London.

The expertise of the trustees in broadcasting and publishing had served the Society well as it produced booklets during the 1990s, and it also helped fund innovative radio programmes with Premier into the 2000s and beyond. This was a significant opportunity for the Society,

as its work had not included broadcasting until this time. In the 10 years to 2005, the trustees approved regular funding for programmes on Premier Radio totalling £38,000.

*Between the Lines* was the first programme series to be sponsored, in 1996. The 30 minute programmes, which aired on Thursday evenings and included panel discussions and phone-ins, focused on Christian festivals, encounters with Jesus in the Gospels, and the significance of the major events in Jesus' life. The series won a gold award from the Christian Broadcasting Council for excellence in radio, against strong competition from BBC and other broadcasters, for tackling difficult and controversial questions of faith in an accessible manner.

The following year, the Society helped fund *Is History Bunk?* This was a series of programmes presented by the church leader and author Michael Seward, which explored the story of Christianity across its 2,000 year history. The first series of 10 programmes covered early church persecution, the gnostics, the Emperor Constantine, St Augustine, and the Desert Fathers, and were later made available as box set of cassette tapes. They aimed to help students of religious studies, and especially sixth-formers.

A third series, *Tapestry of Faith*, traced the history of Christianity in Britain from its origins through to the 21st century, in 13 parts. The series, which aired in 2001, began with Christianity in Britain under the Saxons, and concluded with the growth of Pentecostal churches in the 20th century, taking in Henry VIII, the Victorians, and churches in wartime Britain along the way. Written, produced and presented by Ged Clapson, who later became a Christian Evidence trustee, *Tapestry of Faith* won a Jerusalem Award commendation.

The funding of radio programmes is an excellent example of the Society working with others to achieve its objectives. This approach was clarified at the first meeting chaired by BurrIDGE, where the trustees agreed that the Christian Evidence Society was not a grant-

making charity, but supported projects which fulfilled its mission: 'Where grants are given, it is because recipients are fulfilling the purpose of the Society on the trustees' behalf'

But the Society was about to experience a major change, because in March 2001 it launched its first website, which immediately made the Christian Evidence story and some of its resources available to anyone, anywhere in the world. The website made a good start by making some of the booklets published in the 1990s available for online reading, but the major focus of the site was the Society itself, rather than its message. By the following year, 2002, it was being viewed by up to 800 visitors each month, and a year later by up to 1,500.

By 2004, with the figures still climbing, John Gann, a trustee of the Society since 1982, raised the issue of what the website was intended to achieve. 'Is the website about the CES as a Society? Or is it about the evidence for Christianity expressed in a way that is relevant to our world today?' After discussion, the trustees embraced the idea that the website could become 'the primary way of fulfilling the objects of our Society'.

It was a big moment, as big as the realisation back in the 1890s that open-air speaking could enable the Society to project its message directly to ordinary people. The open-air strategy had been good for the following 60 years, and the website strategy might hold a similar promise. It would enable the Society to speak directly to people in need of reasons to believe.

One project which quickly fulfilled that promise was the Student Factfile series, which provided study resources written specifically for GCSE and A level students. The series responded to the expansion in the number of students taking short courses in Religious Studies. Some 250,000 students were taking the courses, and all of them were required to explore Christian perspectives on personal, social and ethical issues.

Geoffrey Marshall-Taylor, who had extensive experience and contacts in education, worked with several authors to produce Student Factfiles on abortion, environment, euthanasia and assisted suicide, life after death, marriage and divorce, poverty, and society. The study notes were the first resource distributed exclusively by the website, and after their launch and promotion in 2007, they produced consistently good page views.

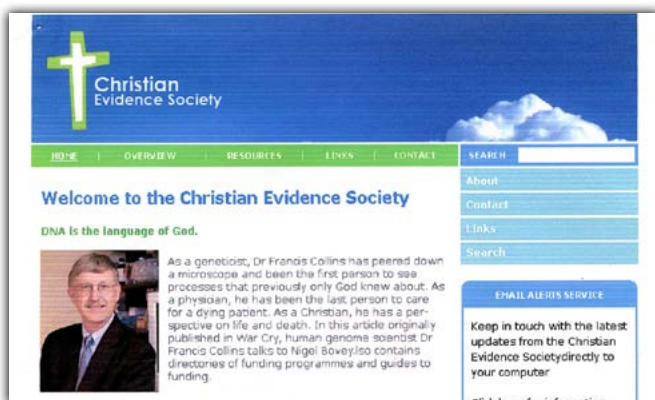
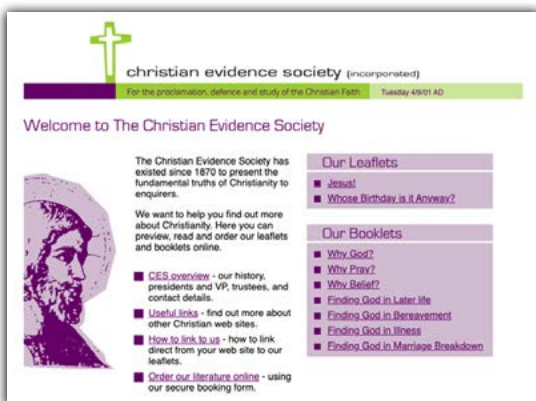
The promise of the online work was expanded in January 2012, when the Society opened a new website, complete with a blog, supported by two social media channels on Facebook and Twitter. Simon Jenkins, a trustee who stepped down to build the website and take a paid position as website editor, switched the online focus away from information about the Society and onto a presentation of Christian evidence for faith. The aim, he said, was to ‘make the website more CE than S.’ A marker of that was that the new site was simply called ‘Christian Evidence’, with a new logo carrying that stripped-down name.

The heart of the website was a blog, which featured popularly written, journalistic posts which were filtered into four categories: faith, science, ethics and history. Some of the earliest pieces included an interview with Simon Conway Morris, a professor of evolutionary palaeobiology, who talked about his life in science and faith; an archaeology story which claimed that very early evidence for belief in the resurrection of Jesus had been found in a newly-discovered tomb in Jerusalem; and a report on how *Newsweek* magazine had splashed a hipster version of Jesus on its cover with a blurb that said: ‘Christianity has been destroyed by politics, priests, and get-rich evangelists, so ignore them and embrace Him.’

An important aspect of the new online strategy developed by Jenkins was that the stream of content appearing on the website would be promoted on social media, opening up the material to a potentially large audience. The Facebook channel enjoyed several

# THE SOCIETY'S WEBSITES

*The Society's first  
three websites were  
launched in 2001,  
2008, and 2013.*



years of success in doing this, with a following of 15,000 people, and a monthly budget which was used to boost particular posts to a bigger audience.

Almost all the posts drew unfriendly fire, as Facebook users poured scorn with comments such as, ‘the Bible was the very first fake news’, or ‘Let’s all worship a bronze age invisible sky-daddy!’, or ‘this argument has more holes than a second-hand dart board’ – or simply by posting video clips of hippos defecating. The comments were similar to the heckling experienced by earlier generations of Christian Evidence speakers at Hyde Park Corner, except that the behaviour on social media was even more uninhibited and abusive, and almost never generated positive debate on the issues.

Despite the negativity of social media comments, the posts there directed good levels of traffic to the website, and to the growing number of videos on the Christian Evidence YouTube channel. The channel benefitted from Richard Burrridge’s refreshment of the

*Below: Michael Palin and Richard Burrridge on BBC Radio Four’s Today programme in 2013, reflecting on faith and comedy.*





## Online booklets

Starting in 2016, a new series of booklets was published on the website, exploring a diversity of areas in making the case for the Christian faith. The titles in the series were:

**Digging for Evidence** (2016) – Peter S Williams looks at the archaeological finds of the past 50 years which have shed fresh light on the New Testament.

**Five Arguments for God** (2016) – William Lane Craig examines five philosophical arguments for God's existence, including Richard Dawkins' criticism of them.

**Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?** (2017) – Justin Brierley looks at the arguments over whether we can trust the accounts of Jesus' life and death – and whether he lived at all.

**What Did Jesus Wear?** (2018) – Joan E Taylor looks at what the world's most famous carpenter-Messiah actually looked like, and what he wore when living in 1st century Galilee.

**Seven Atheisms** (2019) – Andrew Walker looks at philosopher John Gray's *Seven Types of Atheism*, and how theism and atheism have more to say to each other than you might think.

trustees in 2013 with several young people who had a track record of involvement in apologetics at university and elsewhere.

One of them, Peter Byrom, brought with him expertise in producing video, which led to several successful projects. These included the



*Revd Edward Carter, Canon Theologian of Chelmsford Cathedral, became chair of the Society in 2017.*

filming of a Westminster Abbey Institute symposium on the apologetics legacy of CS Lewis, which took place on the 50th anniversary of his death in 2013; and two videos in 2015 featuring the apologist William Lane Craig responding to the movie, *The Theory of Everything*, about the life and ideas of the cosmologist Stephen Hawking. These videos attracted tens of thousands of views.

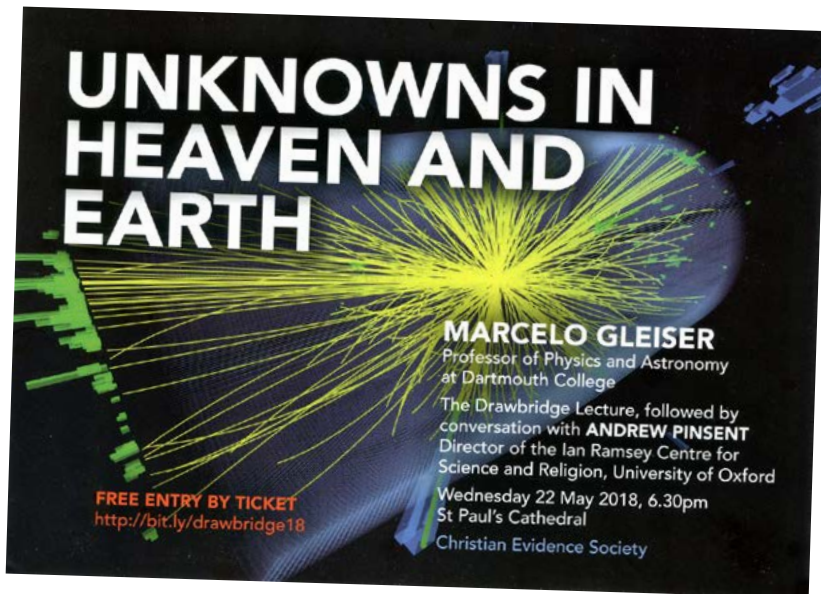
Burridge enjoyed his own video success when he appeared with Monty Python member Michael Palin on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme in 2013, reflecting on the religious controversy which surrounded the movie *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, when it was released in 1979. The video has seen almost 150,000 views on YouTube at the time of printing.

In May 2017, Richard Burridge stepped down as Chair of the Society after 15 years, and was succeeded by Edward Carter, Canon Theologian of Chelmsford Cathedral, and Chair of the ecumenical Church Investors Group, which promotes ethical investment for the public benefit.

Under both Burridge and Carter, in the decade between 2009 and 2018, the Drawbridge Lectures, suspended for 13 years, were partially revived. In the November 2009 lecture, Alister McGrath, the theologian and apologist, spoke about the atheist challenge to faith in a lecture entitled ‘The God delusion? The rationality of faith.’ The event had originally been conceived as a debate between McGrath and Richard Dawkins, but Dawkins declined the invitation, possibly because his book, *The God Delusion*, had recently received a riposte by McGrath’s *The Dawkins Delusion*, which rebutted the New Atheist arguments very effectively.

The event drew an audience of some 300 at King’s College London, many of them students, and was the most well attended Drawbridge

*Below: Publicity for the Drawbridge Lecture of 2018, which was given by the physicist and astronomer, Marcelo Gleiser.*



Lecture for many years. The flavour of what McGrath said is captured in his opening remarks: ‘Does belief in God make sense? Or is it simply a delusion, a sad example of wish-fulfilment on the part of lonely and longing human beings? As CS Lewis once commented, reflecting on his early beliefs as an atheist: “Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless.”’

The 2009 lecture was matched for intellectual energy and excitement by the Drawbridge Lecture of 2018, which was delivered by Marcelo Gleiser, Professor of Physics and Astronomy at Dartmouth College, and author of *The Island of Knowledge: The Limits of Science and the Search for Meaning*.

The lecture, ‘Unknowns in Heaven and Earth’, focused on Gleiser’s concept of science as a deeply human endeavour, exploring the unknowns of the universe. He spoke about science as a human project of exploration, rather than a method by which a grand unified theory will eventually be discovered. He told the audience that in all likelihood we will never get to the bottom of some of the mysteries of the universe, not because we don’t know enough, but because they are by definition unknowable. He argued for a positive relationship between science and the humanities, including religion, philosophy and the arts.

Quoting Einstein and Heisenberg, he said that the study of the universe should fill us with humility: ‘Heisenberg said that what we see of nature is not nature itself, but nature under our methods of questioning. We humans ask questions about nature which are very human-like, and so they are not final questions. They are imperfect questions, they are fallible questions, they are things we construct to make sense of the world in the best possible way.’

## Questions of our times

The 5th of March 2020, a Thursday, was the 150th anniversary of the Christian Evidence Society. The trustees had decided to mark the date with a service of choral evensong at Southwark Cathedral, followed by a celebratory lecture, delivered jointly by the former chair, Richard Burridge, and the Society's episcopal advisor, Richard Cheetham, Bishop of Kingston.

The event was intended as an introduction to a series of seven apologetics lectures to run throughout the anniversary year, delivered at several British cathedrals. The lectures, by nationally renowned speakers, would respond to some of the best-known public challenges to faith in modern times. The speakers would engage with quotes that had gained widespread attention, including a TV soundbite by Stephen Fry, a book title from Christopher Hitchens, and a newspaper interview with Stephen Hawking.

The first lecture, to be given by Revd Canon Mark Oakley at Ely Cathedral later in March, took its theme of 'Missing God' from a well known lament by the novelist Julian Barnes, who said in 2008, 'I don't believe in God, but I miss Him'.

But already on 5th March, the Southwark Cathedral service was overshadowed by the gathering storm clouds of the coming Coronavirus epidemic. Calls for a national lockdown were already in the air as Covid-19 cases rose, and just over two weeks later, the prime minister announced the UK's first lockdown, ordering people to stay at home. All seven lectures were cancelled and the series, which had been in detailed planning for several months, had to be abandoned.

As lockdown continued, the use of Zoom and other live video platforms rocketed, as people met for remote working, family get-togethers, pub quizzes, school lessons, church services, virtual conferences and webinars. Zoom reported a dramatic increase in the number of daily meeting participants, with 10 million in December 2019 growing to 300 million in April 2020. Video conferencing became a lifeline for people around the world.

When the Christian Evidence trustees met in July 2020 on Zoom, one challenge they faced was what to do about their abandoned lecture series. Bishop Richard Cheetham, the episcopal adviser, talked about how the world was being reshaped by the pandemic, making people think more about community, climate change, justice, equality, and mortality. He proposed that any new series should connect with the new world we were living in.

Out of the discussion, the lost lecture series transformed into a series of webinar conversations under the title, 'Questions of Our Times'. Where the lectures had taken up the challenge of the new atheists, the conversations opened up the very different concerns experienced

*Opposite: Five of the interviewees in the 2021 and 2022 editions of Questions of Our Times. Clockwise from top left: Revd Joel Edwards CBE, on 'Race: Which lives matter?' Dr Jennifer Wiseman on 'Are we alone in the universe?' Revd Dr Alister McGrath on 'Should we always follow the science?' Archbishop Rowan Williams on 'Prayer and Spirituality: Is God really listening?' Revd Dr Gillian Straine on 'Health: How can I find wholeness in a broken world?'*



by people in the pandemic. The subjects of the first webinar series, which ran on Tuesday evenings in February and March 2021, were Covid-19, fake news, race inequality, climate emergency and unanswered prayer. Major Nigel Bovey, vice-chair of the Society and former editor of Salvation Army magazine *The War Cry*, acted as host and interviewer for all the sessions. The webinars were produced with the support of the Montgomery Trust.

In the first webinar of the series, attended by almost 200 people, Jonathan Aitken, the cabinet minister who had gone to prison for perjury, discussed the question, 'In a world of fake news, who can we trust?' The series concluded five weeks later with the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, leading a webinar of more than 300 people on prayer and spirituality under the title 'Is God really listening?' This equalled the numbers of people who came to the Society's best-attended event in recent times, the Drawbridge





lecture of Alister McGrath in 2009. The whole series drew an audience of 845 attendees, and their engagement in the evenings was indicated by the 145 questions they asked, which fuelled the question and answer section at the end of each webinar.

A second series of four webinars followed a year later, in March 2022, with a focus on science and faith. The series opened up the challenges of robots and AI, the search for life in the universe, whether we are here by accident, and the place of science in human life. The webinars begin with Alister McGrath, who was now Professor of Science and Religion at Oxford University, addressing the relationship of science and faith under the title, 'Should we always follow the science?'

*Below: Questions of Our Times host Nigel Bovey talks with Joel Edwards CBE about 'Race: Which lives matter?' in March 2021.*



The Society's chair, Edward Carter, said, 'I'm so pleased that the Christian Evidence Society is able to host this new webinar series, with a strong focus on science, technology, and faith. My hope is that these conversations with people who live and breathe the issues will help all of us to gain a greater understanding of what is at stake in these questions of our times.'

The following November, 2022, a standalone webinar led by John Bell, the acclaimed hymn writer and activist, considered the question: 'The world is broken – what would Jesus do?' Almost 200 people attended the webinar.

Although the Society was not able to celebrate its 150th anniversary in the way it would have wished, the pandemic, in a similar way to previous world-changing events such as the First and Second World Wars, challenged the Society to adapt and create new ways of fulfilling its objectives.

Speaking at drawing room meetings in the 1870s, from a horse-drawn carriage in the 1910s, standing on a soap box at Speakers' Corner in the 1930s, or on the fold-out pulpit of the Drawbridge Van in the 1940s, funding radio programmes in the 1990s and 2000s, blogging in the 2010s, gathering webinar audiences in the 2020s at the height of the pandemic – in all these wildly different ways, the Christian Evidence Society has sought to remain true to its original vision of providing good reasons to embrace the way of Jesus in very different times.

## APPENDIX 1

# Chairs and secretaries

### **Chairmen (1870-1983)**

The list of Society chairmen is exclusively made up of pillars of the British establishment, with barons, privy counsellors, a lord chancellor and a bishop among their number. Their exalted social status lent the Society prestige and influence.

**Dudley Ryder**, Earl of Harrowby, 1870-83 – Ryder was MP for Liverpool, and privy counsellor in the Palmerston government in the 1850s.

**Henry Herbert**, Earl of Carnarvon, 1883-90 – Conservative politician, Colonial Secretary and Lord Lieutenant of Ireland.

**Sir George Stokes**, MP, 1890-91 – A physicist and mathematician, while chairing the Society he was also the President of the Royal Society, Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge University, and president of the Victoria Institute.

**Hardinge Giffard**, Earl of Halsbury, 1891-1900 – Lord High Chancellor of Great Britain.

**Sir George Stokes**, 1900-03 – see above.

**Hardinge Giffard**, Earl of Halsbury, 1903-21 – see above. He chaired the Society until his death in 1921, when he was 98.

**Hastings Russell**, Marquess of Tavistock, 1922-24 – a committed evangelical Christian and vegetarian, he later became controversial for his right wing views.

**Lord Hugh Cecil**, 1924-37 – a conservative politician, son of the Victorian prime minister Lord Salisbury, and best man to Winston Churchill.

**Robert Newman**, Baron Mamhead, 1937-46 – conservative and later independent MP

**Herbert Pease**, Baron Darynton, 1946-49 – conservative MP and privy councillor.

**Roundell Palmer**, Earl of Selborne, 1949-59 – conservative politician and privy councillor, from 1942-45 he was Minister of Economic Warfare and was therefore in charge of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), also known as ‘Churchill’s Secret Army’.

**Rt Revd Cyril Easthaugh**, Bishop of Kensington and (from 1961) Bishop of Peterborough, 1959-83 – see chapter 9

**Revd Richard Harries**, Dean of King’s College London and later Bishop of Oxford, 1983 – see chapter 10

### **Secretaries (1870-1983)**

The secretaries worked as executive officers of the Society, directing all the work and reporting to the board of trustees at regular meetings. They were not paid for their considerable work, relying on their living as incumbent clergymen. In one case, Frederick Harfitt was moved from Manchester to become rector of a City of London church so that he could become secretary.

Revd Peter Barker, 1870-81

Revd C. Lloyd Engström, 1881-1903

Revd Robert Venn Faithfull-Davies, 1903-16 – see chapter 6

Revd Cyprian L. Drawbridge, 1907-37 – see chapters 5 and 7.  
Drawbridge became secretary in 1907 in tandem with Faithfull  
Davies, and became sole secretary of the Society when Faithfull-  
Davies died in 1916

Revd H. Frederick E. Harfitt, 1937-62 – see chapter 8

Revd M. R. Parsons, 1963-67

Revd Sidney E. Alford, 1968-82 – see chapter 9

Preb. John Pearce, 1982-83 – see chapter 10

### **Chairs (1984 to date)**

At the end of 1983, the distinction between chairman and secretary came to an end, and the chair of trustees took on the executive role the secretary had previously fulfilled.

**Revd Richard Harries**, Dean of King's College London and later Bishop of Oxford, 1984-92 – see chapter 10

**Revd Donald Gray**, Chaplain to the Speaker of the House of Commons, 1992-2001 – see chapter 10

**Revd Canon Professor Richard BurrIDGE**, Dean of King's College London, 2001-17 – see chapter 11

Revd Canon Edward Carter, Vicar of St Peter Mancroft, Norwich, 2017 to date – see chapter 12

## APPENDIX 2

# The Drawbridge Lectures

In 1945, the Christian Evidence Society agreed to establish an annual lecture in honour of Canon Cyprian Drawbridge, who had brilliantly led the Society between the 1900s and the 1930s. The first lecture was delivered the following year in Westminster Abbey, and at the time of writing (2022) there has been a total of 42 lectures. Below is the complete list of lectures, including links to biographical information of the lecturers where available.

1946 – The Defence of the Christian Faith, [Canon Stephen Marriott](#), Archdeacon of Westminster

1948 – Why I Am a Christian, [Dr William Wand](#), Bishop of London

1949 – Conduct and Behaviour, [Dr Kenneth Kirk](#), Bishop of Oxford and former Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology, University of Oxford

1950 – Belief and Morals, [Robert Mortimer](#), Bishop of Exeter

1951 – The Nature of Christian Belief, [Dr William Wand](#), Bishop of London

1952 – A Study in Agnosticism, [Dr Spencer Leeson](#), Bishop of Peterborough

1953 – The Necessity of Faith, [Walter Matthews](#), KCVO, Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, London

- 1954 – Is the Christian Message Intelligible? **Dr Frederick Cockin**, Bishop of Bristol
- 1955 – Christian Language: Old and New – **Dr Michael Ramsey**, Bishop of Durham (later Archbishop of Canterbury)
- 1958 – The Historical Argument, **Rt Rev and Rt Hon William Wand**, KCVO, former Bishop of London
- 1959 – Anglican and Orthodox Relations, **Anthony Bloom**, Bishop of the Russian Orthodox Diocese of Servieve (later Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh)
- 1960 – The Implications of Evolution by **Dr David Lack**, Director of the Edward Grey Institute of Field Ornithology, Oxford University, and author of *Darwin's Finches*
- 1961 – Christian Apologetics in an Age of Technology, **Dr Canon Edward Carpenter** of Westminster Abbey
- 1962 – New Bearings in Christian Unity, **Gordon Phillips**, Rector of Bloomsbury
- 1970 – Some Aspects of the Liturgy in Contemporary Society, **Dr Ronald Jasper**, Lecturer at King's College London
- 1971 – Jesus in the Gospels and the Early Church, **Dr George Kilpatrick**, Dean Ireland's Professor of the Exegesis of Holy Scripture, University of Oxford
- 1972 – The Problem of God Today, **Rev. Dr John Macquarrie**, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity in the University of Oxford
- 1973 – What is Good News in the Gospel? **Anthony Bloom**, Metropolitan Anthony of the Russian Orthodox Diocese of Sourozh (later Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh)

1974 – The Faith Once for All Delivered to the Saints, Rev. John Huxtable, Former Moderator of the United Reformed Church

1975 – Modernism in Theology, **Rev. Dr Ulrich Simon**, Professor of Christian Literature, King's College London, and author of *A Theology of Auschwitz* (1967)

1976 – Christianity and Evolution, **Canon David Edwards**, Rector of St Margaret's, Westminster, and Chaplain to the Speaker of the House of Commons

1977 – God's Kingdom, Future or Present, **Christopher Butler** OSB, Auxiliary Bishop of Westminster, the first Roman Catholic lecturer

1978 – Bible Translation Today, **Rev. Neville Cryer**, General Director of The British and Foreign Bible Society

1979 – The Gospel for an Industrial World, **Canon Frank Scuffham**, founder and chair of Church Action with the Unemployed

1980 – Spiritual Direction in the Church Today, Canon Evan Pilkington, Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral, London

1981 – The Ministry of Theology, **Rev. Gerald Hudson**, Canon of Southwark Cathedral

1982 – Samuel Beckett and Christian Hope, **Rev. Richard Harries**, Dean of King's College London (later Bishop of Oxford)

1984 (February) – Izaak Walton: the Fisherman and his God, **Owen Chadwick** OM, KBE, President of the British Academy, Professor of Modern History at the University of Cambridge

1984 (November) – Christian Witness in South Africa Today, **Desmond Tutu**, Bishop of Lesotho and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate (later Archbishop of Cape Town)



- 1985 – Creation and the Structure of the Physical World, **John Polkinghorne**, FRS, theoretical physicist and Christian apologist
- 1986 – Evidence for the Resurrection, **John Austin Baker**, Bishop of Salisbury
- 1987 – God and the New Biology, **Rev. Dr Arthur Peacocke**, Director of the Ian Ramsey Centre, and Vice President of the Science and Religion Forum
- 1988 – The Interference of God in the Internal Affairs of the Soviet Union, **Irina Ratushinskaya**, Russian Soviet dissident, poet and writer, the first woman lecturer
- 1990 – The Magisterium of the Poor, **Dr Aloysius Pieris** SJ, Director of the Tulana Research Center for Encounter and Dialogue, Sri Lanka, and author of *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (1988)
- 1991 – Are All Religions Saying the Same Thing? **Keith Ward**, Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford
- 1992 – A God for a Broken World, **Dr Sheila Cassidy**, medical doctor, torture survivor, and leader in the hospice movement
- 1993 – Spirituality and Social Change: The Church's Participation in Peace-making in Mozambique, **Dinis Sengulane**, Anglican Bishop of Lebombo, Maputo, Mozambique
- 1994 – The Trinity and Our Search for Intimacy, **Elaine Storkey**, Executive Director of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity
- 1996 – Christians and the Environment: Our Opportunities and Responsibilities, **Sir John Houghton**, CBE, FRS, Chairman of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution

2009 – The God Delusion? The Rationality of Faith, **Alister McGrath**, Professor of Theology, Ministry and Education, King's College London, and author of *The Dawkins Delusion?* (2007)

2013 – Assisted Dying Debate, with Lord **Charles Falconer**, Chair of the Commission on Assisted Dying, Professor **Nigel Biggar**, Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at the University of Oxford, and Lord **Richard Harries** of Pentregarth, former Bishop of Oxford

2018 – Unknowns in Heaven and Earth, **Marcelo Gleiser**, Professor of Physics and Astronomy at Dartmouth College, and author of *The Island of Knowledge: The Limits of Science and the Search for Meaning* (2014)

# Histories of the Society

This new history of the Christian Evidence Society follows in the footsteps of two previous accounts, published in 1948 and 2005, as well as a short paper in 1983.

## **The Story of Seventy Years of Struggle with the Forces of Unbelief, by Frederick Harfitt, 1948**

The first known account of the Society was written immediately after the Second World War by Frederick Harfitt, the Society's secretary. Sadly, this brief history, published as a pamphlet or small booklet, now seems to be lost. It could not be found during a search of the Society archive in 2021.

Harfitt's history is described in the annual report for 1947/48: 'During the two years under review, the Secretary has written a History of the Society, its full title being "The Story of Seventy Years of Struggle with the Forces of Unbelief". This attractive little booklet has been sent to all our supporters.'

## **The Christian Evidence Society from 1870 to 1983, by Gordon Huelin, 1983**

In 1983, when the work of the Society was being revived (see chapter 10), Gordon Huelin wrote an historical paper to inform the trustees about the story of the Society. His account covered the beginnings and early years of the Society, the work of Cyprian Drawbridge and

Frederick Harfitt as secretaries in the 20th century, and concluded with Harfitt's death in the early 1960s.

Huelin had been a trustee since 1977, and was a fellow of King's College London, as well as being its official historian, writing a substantial history of the college which was published in 1978. He read the paper at a meeting of the trustees in November 1983, and it was eventually added to John Gann's history written in 2005.

Gann later commented that the paper 'gives an excellent summary and is particularly good in the 19th century section, explaining what the Society was all about.'

### **The Christian Evidence Society: A History, by John Gann, 2005**

In 1998, Revd John Gann, who had been a trustee since 1983, was asked to write a history which would cover the modern period since 1960. Gann explained that 'it grew out of the need for the trustees to understand how their small society had found new strength and purpose.'

Gann's account mainly focused on his own period of the 1980s and 90s, when the Society was resurgent, but he began with the 1960s and 70s in an opening chapter that was somewhat depressingly titled, 'Years of decline'. The booklet concluded with Gordon Huelin's paper, which provided a sketch of the period from 1870 to 1960.

The booklet was launched in 2005 with a reception at the Maughan Library, London. The press kit for the event included a photograph of Richard Burridge in a Victorian top hat, speaking at what was until the 1960s the Society's regular pitch on Tower Hill. It was the first time the Society had spoken there in more than 40 years.

'Preaching on street corners was very popular in Victorian Britain,' said Burridge. 'The internet is today's Speakers' Corner.'

# Notes

Where the sources are present in the Christian Evidence Society archives, the archive reference is given, e.g. CES/1/2/3.

## Prologue

Page 10 – John Pye-Smith quote: from *An Answer to a Printed Paper Entitled Manifesto of the Christian Evidence Society* (Society for Promoting Christian Instruction, 1829), p. 1.

Page 11 – Robert Taylor: An account of Taylor's trial, including his defence and the manifesto of his society, was published by him in 1827: *Trial of the Reverend Robert Taylor, upon a charge of blasphemy, with his defence as delivered by himself, before the Lord Chief Justice and a special jury, on Wednesday, October 24, 1827*, J Carlile, London, 1827).

## Chapter 1

Page 13 – Bishop Jackson quote: from a penny leaflet, written by the Secretary of the National Secular Society. Charles Watts, *Christian Evidences Criticised: Being the National Secular Society's reply to the Bishop of London and the Christian Evidence Committee*, 1870, p.1.

Page 16 – Stephen Marriott: the first Drawbridge Memorial Lecture was given by Stephen Jack Marriott, Archdeacon of Westminster, Westminster Abbey, 24 January 1946, CES/7/2/2/3.

Page 17 – Objects of the Society: Occasional Paper No. 7, May 1881, p. 7.

Page 17 – Charles Watts quote: from Charles Watts, *Christian Evidences Criticised*, p. 1.

## Chapter 2

Page 18 – Charles Kingsley: quoted in Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, John Murray, London, p. 481. Kingsley is quoted in Darwin's conclusion: 'A celebrated author and divine has written to me that "he has gradually learnt to see that it is just as noble a conception of the Deity to believe that He created a few original forms capable of self-development into other and needful forms, as to believe that He required a fresh act of creation to supply the voids caused by the action of His laws."'

Page 18 – Samuel Wilberforce: his review of Darwin is in the *Quarterly Review*, 108 (1860), p. 260.

Page 20 – Thomas Huxley: this version of events is from Ruth Moore, *Charles Darwin: A Great Life in Brief*, Alfred A Knopf, New York, 1955, p. 127.

Page 20 – Stephen Jay Gould: 'Knight Takes Bishop?' in *Bully for Brontosaurus*, Penguin, 1992, p. 385.

Pages 21-22 – Piers Claughton: Christian Evidence Society, Occasional Paper No. 2, July 1876, p. 3.

Page 23 – Charles Ellicott: 'Explanatory Paper', in *Modern Scepticism: A course of lectures delivered at the request of the Christian Evidence Society*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1871, pp. 512-13.

## Chapter 3

Page 24 – Lecture booklets and books: the sales figures are from *Bell's Weekly Messenger*, 8 June 1872.

Page 24 – *Modern Scepticism: A Course of Lectures Delivered at the Request of the Christian Evidence Society*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1871, see especially pp. 514-24.

Page 26 – The lectures of 1872: published in *Faith and Free Thought: A Second course of lectures delivered at the request of the Christian Evidence Society*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1872.

Pages 26-27 – Samuel Wilberforce quote: from *Faith and Free Thought*, 1872, Preface, p. xi.

Page 28 – ‘Gentlemen I have done’: from *Popular Objections to Revealed Truth: Considered in a series of lectures delivered in the New Hall of Science, Old Street, City Road, under the auspices of the Christian Evidence Society*, 1873, p. 318.

Page 28 – *Strivings for the Faith: A series of lectures, delivered in the New Hall of Science, Old Street, City Road, under the auspices of the Christian Evidence Society*, 1874.

Page 28 – Stephen Marriott: Drawbridge Memorial Lecture, 1946, CES/7/2/2/3.

## Chapter 4

Page 29 – Four headline statistics: Occasional Paper No. 4, April 1877, p. 1.

Page 29 – Report from the 1876 conference: Occasional Paper No 2, July 1876, p. 2.

Page 29 – Regional branches of the Society in 1883: *The Official Year-Book of the Church of England*, SPCK, London, 1883, pp. 128-37.

Page 30 – Shoreditch Town Hall meeting: *Tower Hamlets Independent and East End Local Advertiser*, 16 April 1870.

Page 30 – St Edmund's Church, Northampton: *The Official Year-Book of the Church of England*, 1883, pp. 135-36.

Page 31 – Location of open-air work in 1877: Occasional Paper No. 3, December 1876, p. 5.

Page 32 – Difficulties in Hyde Park: Occasional Paper No. 3, December 1876, p. 6.

Page 32 – Belfast classes: Occasional Paper No. 6, January 1879, p. 17.

Page 32 – Class scheme: Occasional Paper No. 2, July 1876, pp. 10-12.

Page 33 – 'When they learn': quoted in *The Official Year-Book of the Church of England*, 1883, p. 130.

## **Chapter 5**

Page 34 – 'If the masses will not go to Church': C.L. Drawbridge, *Popular Attacks on Christianity*, SPCK, London, 1913, p. 37.

Pages 34-35 – 'The box seat of a brake': 'Campaigning in the Open', in *The Christian World*, 29 July 1909.

Pages 36-37 – Group photograph, 1924: in the minutes of the ad hoc committee for open air work, 22 May 1924 (CES 2/1/1), is this note: 'It was agreed that a photograph of our chairmen and speakers



should be taken in Hyde Park on Saturday afternoon, May 31st at 5-30, and that the Secretary go and photograph the crowd on the grass at 4-30 on Sunday, May 25th.'

Page 38 – Christian Evidence meeting photograph: this picture was used in Christian Evidence printed publicity, with the caption: 'This crowd is not bored'.

Pages 38-39 – 'We stick to our half-empty churches': 'For Christ in the Open', *The Sunday Strand*, August 1909, p. 163.

Page 39 – Agent training: quotation are from the annual report, May 1908, p. 5; lecture titles are from the annual reports of May 1907, p. 8, and May 1908, p. 5.

Page 40 – How to run an open air meeting: C.L. Drawbridge, *Open Air Meetings*, Longmans, Green & Co, London, 1923, pp. 49-50.

Page 41 – 'The park crowds love theology by repartee', plus Drawbridge's comments about heckling: C.L. Drawbridge, *Open Air Meetings*, 1923, p. 22, and pp. 18-19.

Page 41 – 'The average duration of these meetings': annual report, 1936, p. 5, CES/3/1.

## **Chapter 6**

Page 42 – The Christian Age: 'Prayer and the War', *The Christian Age*, 10 December 1915, p.3, CES/10/6/12.

Pages 42-43 – Gilbert Faithfull Davies: details from a biographical note on the [Dulwich College](#) website. His death is recorded on the [Commonwealth War Graves](#) website.

## Chapter 7

Page 45 – The Craven Street office: annual report for 1936, pp. 8 and 36. The quote ‘Our Office staff’ is from the same report, p. 37, CES/3/1/.

Page 45 – *The Religion of Scientists* drew inspiration from a project of 1910, in which a colleague of Drawbridge, Arthur H. Tabrum, wrote to eminent scientists inviting their thoughts on his observation that ‘between true Science and true Religion there is no real antagonism’. The results were published in Tabrum’s book, *Religious Beliefs of Scientists*, Hunter & Longhurst, London, 1910, which was published for the North London Christian Evidence League, with an introduction by Drawbridge.

Page 47 – ‘I have done a great deal of speaking’: *Great Thoughts*, No. 2503, Smiths’ Publishing Co., Ltd., 1932.

Page 48 – Pavlov, Planck and Russell’s responses to the question of there being a spiritual domain: Cyprian Drawbridge, *The Religion of Scientists*, Ernest Benn, Lontdon, 1932, pp. 31-32.

Page 48 – Quotes of other scientists: *The Religion of Scientists*, pp. 32-35.

Page 50 – Pavlov’s explanatory note: *The Religion of Scientists*, p. 126.

Pages 50-51 – Drawbridge newspaper comment: ‘Scientists in a Census on Religion’, *Daily Herald*, 5 June 1932.

Page 51 – Archdeacon of Middlesex: the quote is from *The West London Observer*, 2 December 1927.

Page 51 – Obituary notice, ‘Some people feel that it is not worth while’: *The New Chronicle of Christian Education*, 28 January 1937.

## Chapter 8

Page 52 – Archbishop of Canterbury newspaper report: *Chatham News*, Friday 19 May 1939, p. 12.

Pages 52-53 – Harfitt quote, ‘Our Drawbridge Van’: Secretary’s foreword, annual report, 1946, p. 3, CES/3/1/2/2.

Page 54 – Biographical details of Revd H.F.E. Harfitt: obituary, *Church Times*, 21 September 1962, p. 16.

Page 54 – ‘The the head-quarters of Atheist open air propaganda’: annual report, 1936, p. 46, CES/3/1/.

Page 55 – Bishop of Barbados photograph at Tower Hill: the bishop’s visit on 1 June 1948 is reported in the annual report of 1947/48, p. 32, CES/3/1/. It includes a letter from the bishop about the experience. ‘Very many questions about India, and very interested in knowing what the Christian religion and the Christian Church are doing to face the problems. The men on Tower Hill do not generally ask the silly questions one hears in some of the Parks on matters of theology and doctrines, but they want to know the part the Christian Church plays in world affairs.’

Page 56 – Miss M. Spence’s report: annual report, 1944-45, p. 20, CES/3/1/.

Pages 57 & 59 – Chaplain’s letter, ‘Communion services in all manner of places’: annual report, 1944-45, p. 77, CES/3/1/.

Page 58 – 10 crowd questions: annual report, 1946, pp. 53-55, CES/3/1/2/2.

Page 59 – The selection of four chaplain’s letters, ‘bedraggled and worn’, ‘my chapel is a small one’, ‘my gun-site chapel’ and ‘most of my

possessions have been lost': annual report, 1944-45, pp. 26 and 27, CES/3/1/.

Pages 59-60 – Flying bomb reports: annual report, 1944-45, pp. 12 and 16, CES/3/1/.

Page 60 – 'Our Hyde Park pitch had been entirely destroyed': Secretary's foreword, annual report, 1946, p. 3, CES/3/1/2/2.

Page 60 – Anecdote about Mr Christopher: annual report, 1944-45, p. 3, CES/3/1/.

Page 60 – 'I live in a bombed area': annual report, 1944-45, p. 14, CES/3/1/.

## **Chapter 9**

Page 61 – Gordon Huelin: quoted in John Gann, *The Christian Evidence Society: A History*, Christian Evidence Society, 2005, p. 39.

Page 61 – Tom Scrutton Fleet Street report: *Birmingham Daily Post*, 8 April 1961.

Page 63 – Treasurer's remarks: annual report, 18 October 1955, CES/3/1/1 (106 and 107).

Page 63 – Cyril Easthaugh was the Bishop of Kensington when he became the Society's Chairman in March 1960, and continued when he became Bishop of Peterborough in December 1961. He chaired the Society throughout its period of inertia in the 1960s and 70s, until he stepped down due to illness in October 1982.

Pages 64-65 – Photo of Rev. C.R. Bryan: he is pictured and quoted in the annual report, 1954, pp. 15, 17 and 24, CES/3/1/. Bryan is

named as 'our Northern Representative', and so presumably was visiting London for the Society.

Page 66 – Obituary for Harfitt: *Church Times*, 21 September 1962, p. 16.

Page 66 – 'Outdoor activities curtailed': annual report, 1965-66, CES/2/1/5.

Page 67 – Photographs at St Mary at Hill: the board minutes of 24 March 1960 note that Bishop Cyril Easthaugh was elected Chairman, after serving as acting chairman the previous year. The photographs were presumably taken to mark the occasion.

Page 69 – 'Years of inertia' quote: John Gann, *The Christian Evidence Society: A History*, p. 8.

## **Chapter 10**

Pages 70-71 – John Pearce quotes: annual report, 1981, CES 2/1/6.

Page 72 – Desmond Tutu's Drawbridge Lecture: *Church Times*, 23 November 1984, p. 24.

Page 74 – 'Soap operas' quote from the Geoffrey Ahern research project: John Gann, *The Christian Evidence Society: A History*, p. 19.

Page 74 – Geoffrey Ahern report: the report is discussed in successive minutes of the Society's meetings.

Page 75 – Richard Harries letter: Letter to John Gann of 22 May 2001, CES 2/1/7.

Page 75 – Richard Harries, 'What I wanted people to reflect on': the 25th **Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Lecture**, 7 May 2010.

Page 76 – John Pearce, ‘Apologetics books of the 1920s and 1930s’: annual report, 1981, CES/2/1/6.

Page 76 – Funding apologetics over 25 years chart: based on a summary of historic funding drawn up by the Society administrator Harry Marsh in December 2004, CES/9/3/3.

Page 78 – Booklets: The Society decided to put all eight of these booklets together into one volume, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*, published by Canterbury Press in 1991.

Page 79 – Hibernation of Drawbridge Lectures: minutes of the trustees’ meeting, 9 March 1995, CES/2/1/6.

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Page 82: Description of Roly Bain: obituary, *Guardian*, 21 August 2016.

Page 84 – Premier Radio funding of £38,000: letter by Harry Marsh, Society administrator, 26 December 2004, CES/9/3/3

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Page 85 – First website launch: minutes of the trustees’ meeting, 16 May 2001, CES 2/1/7. Visitor figures: minutes of the trustees’ meeting, 25 April 2002, and 11 September 2003, CES 2/1/7.

Page 85 – John Gann comment: loose note, 1 December 2004.

Page 86 – Simon Jenkins, ‘more CE than S’: proposal to the trustees, November 2010, CES 9/2/8.

Page 90 – Handover of the chair role: minutes of the trustees’ meeting, 23 May 2017.

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## **Christian Evidence booklets**

**Digging for Evidence** Peter S Williams

**Five Arguments for God** William Lane Craig

**Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?** Justin Brierley

**Seven Atheisms** Andrew Walker

**What Did Jesus Wear?** Joan E Taylor



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