

The Composed Self of the Scientist and Christian

Paul Merchant, National Life Stories, The British Library

This paper draws on extended life story interviews with five British men – all scientists and Christians – who have advanced arguments about relations between science and religion in books, public talks, and broadcasts. Close attention to the ways in which these interviewees have moved between scientific, Christian, and special ‘science and religion’ communities suggests that oral historians should beware of assuming that ‘composure’ is achieved by coherence or integration in lives and in life stories.

Introduction: oral history theory

In her book, *Oral History Theory*, Lynn Abrams uses biological metaphors to characterise the use of theory by oral historians in their efforts to understand complex interview material. Oral history is, she writes, “an octopus” [...] constantly evolving,”¹ “a discipline with undisciplined tendencies, continually drawing upon other disciplinary approaches, and in flux as it defines acceptable practices and modes of theorising. It is at the same time profoundly interdisciplinary, a promiscuous practice that, jackdaw-like, picks up the shiny, attractive theories which have originated elsewhere and applies them to its own field of study.”² Though she values oral history’s nimble, interdisciplinary resourcefulness, a note of caution is struck: “Oral historians have been more theoretically promiscuous than most in the historical profession – terms such as ‘intersubjectivity’, ‘narrative’, ‘discourse’ and ‘self’ are now commonplace in oral history publications – but these are often applied with little sense of being informed by specific theoretical positions.”³ Might promiscuity be dangerous? What exactly is oral history taking into its nest and weaving into its thought and practice? Are ideas snatched, developed and combined with little pause for thought? In his review of *Oral History Theory*, Ron Grele seems to pick up on such questions: “the book lays the foundation for a more elaborate parsing of our theoretical understandings, often much more implicit than explicit.”⁴ This paper

¹ Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 2-3.

² Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 32.

³ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 17.

⁴ Ronald Grele, “Review Essay.” *Oral History Review* 34/2 (2011): 355.

seeks to inspect one of the outcomes – as listed by Abrams – of oral history’s theoretical borrowing and development: “composure theory.”⁵

Oral history’s use of the concept of composure seems to have developed out of the work of the Popular Memory Group of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, in the context of this group’s interest in relations between individual experience and wider public discourse in the formation of identity.⁶ In oral history, it is most closely associated with the work of Graham Dawson, Alistair Thomson, Penny Summerfield and Lynn Abrams. Dawson provides a useful summary of what is meant by composure:

[...] storytelling [...] ‘composes’ a subjective orientation of the self within the social relations of its world, enabling it to be imaginatively entered-into and inhabited. The story that is actually told is always the one preferred amongst other possible versions, and involves a striving, not only for a formally satisfying narrative or a coherent version of events, but also for a version of the self that can be lived with in relative psychic comfort – for, that is, subjective composure.⁷

In Dawson’s work, composure is understood through a “cultural reading” of Kleinian psychoanalysis so that a very particular theory of the self is at play, some of the complex psychic “geography” of which is captured here:

The self attempts to reconcile and resolve this [psychic] conflict in an endless endeavour ‘to form a whole out of these various identifications’. Psychic life is conceived of in the Kleinian account as a continual struggle, unconscious in the first instance, for a narrative phantasy capable of reconciling conflict and subsuming differences. This occurs in the face of a countervailing tendency to fragmentation, which Klein terms ‘psychic splitting’. [...] Klein’s account of efforts towards greater ‘integration’ of the imagos, and thus towards the greater coherence of the self, points to a specifically psychic dimension to the struggle for subjective composure [...] The fluid and complex geography of connected and separated psychic spaces established by splitting and integration constitutes the terrain on which the self struggles for composure in response to its own contradictory and conflictual formation.⁸

⁵ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 17.

⁶ Alistair Thomson, "Anzac memories: putting popular memory theory into practice in Australia," *Oral History* 18/2 (1990): 25-31.

⁷ Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994): 22.

⁸ Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, 34.

This or any other *specific* model of the self tends to be set aside by oral historians using the idea of composure. Composure becomes a general reference to the relatedness of narrative and identity, readily combined with the insights of Alessandro Portelli's narrative analysis⁹ and Charlotte Linde's linguistic treatment of 'coherence' in life stories.¹⁰ Oral history interviews are then understood with reference to very general senses of psychological composure as relative *comfort* in telling certain stories at certain times to certain others. Complex psychic topographies of integration and splitting, of 'projection' and 'introjection' are forgotten in a kind of slip in which composure and coherence come to be equivalent, and selves just whatever can be achieved in a more or less conscious editorial process:

A narrator who manages to align personal experience with social context, who integrates personal memories with general experiences in a sequential order, achieves *narrative coherence or composure* [my emphasis]. In other words, the production of a self via narrative is a project which requires much sifting and selection, omission as well as inclusion, in order to achieve a self with which one feels comfortable.¹¹

I am especially concerned about the extent to which coherence and composure seem interchangeable (see "coherence or composure" above) when narratives and narrators are the focus. There are two problems, both picked up in this paper. First, whatever psychological or emotional *composure* is taken to be, it should not be assumed – in advance – that for any individual this must entail some kind of simple *coherence* of the self. And secondly, it leads to a switch from the view that narratives are, in some way, bound up with self understanding and representation, to the view that textual qualities can be read as *indicators* of psychological qualities of the speaker, for example: "The account of her experiences in the Home Guard was both fragmented and deflected. In spite of her declared pleasure in reminiscence it did not offer her the equivalent satisfactions of composure as these other aspects of her life story."¹²

The extended live story interviews with British scientist-Christians considered in this paper – physicist John Polkinghorne, experimental physicist

⁹ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

¹⁰ Charlotte Linde, *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹¹ Lynn Abrams, "Liberating the female self: epiphanies, conflict and coherence in the life stories of post-war British women," *Social History* 39/1 (2014): 19.

¹² Penny Summerfield, "Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews," *Cultural and Social History* 1 (2004): 81.

Russell Stannard, psychologist Malcolm Jeeves, biologist Sam (RJ) Berry and immunologist Denis Alexander¹³ – resist a simple alignment of narrative and psychological composition and the associated assumption that *coherence* is a feature of well composed people.

Background assumption: no talk of science and religion

The scientist-Christians introduced above say that from schooldays onwards they have been aware of a general view that religion has limited, marginal interest and is unconnected to other fields, including science. Denis Alexander:

I think one's assumption at public school was, in those days anyway, that all the masters and the mistresses were not necessarily that favourable towards religion in general; I mean that was the sort of basic starting assumption. And certainly not to a kind of committed Christianity that I began to engage in from the age of thirteen. Although of course everyone went to chapel every morning and we had religious education [...] but generally speaking religion wasn't something that you would talk about in public or it wasn't something that you would probably, erm, link up very closely to your discipline.¹⁴

John Polkinghorne, too, feels that “in Western society at the moment it is just, almost it is the default position that there is no God, you don't need to think about it, that's the natural thing to do, and so you have to think very carefully if you're going to embrace some form of religious belief.”¹⁵ Similarly, Russell Stannard observes: “I am interested in these, these deep questions [of the limits to scientific understanding]. The majority of scientists aren't. Like the man in the street, they just, get on with their lives.”¹⁶ And Sam Berry recalls of his early scientific career: “I mean one knew the obvious things that all scientists are heathen and didn't believe in God. People like Julian Huxley and Bertrand Russell were fairly prominent. But for most people I think it was not a thing that

¹³ The interviews were recorded in a collaboration between National Life Stories, at the British Library (<https://www.bl.uk/projects/national-life-stories>) and the Templeton Religion Trust funded project 'Science and Religion: Exploring the Spectrum' led by Newman University, Birmingham and York University, Toronto (<http://sciencelifeandreligion.org/>).

¹⁴ Denis Alexander interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/09 Track 3 [8:24-9:05].

¹⁵ John Polkinghorne interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/04 Track 2 [1:13:12-1:13:28].

¹⁶ Russell Stannard interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/03 Track 2 [55:33-55:46].

was either thought about or discussed.”¹⁷ The interviewees say that as pupils at school, as undergraduate and postgraduate science students and as professional scientists there was little or no discussion of relations between science and religion. Sam Berry’s response here is typical:

Interviewer: During the period that we talked about last time [1960s and 1970s] to what extent did your colleagues [...] in genetics and ecology [...] know about your thinking and writing and activities on the question of science and belief?

Interviewee: I haven’t the faintest idea. I mean I never hid it, but it wasn’t a thing that I specifically talked about. I think they probably knew I went to church, but whether it went further than that, I just don’t know. I mean [...] I suppose the first major thing I wrote was *Adam and the Ape*, which was mid seventies [...] So that’s probably when, I won’t say I broke cover, but you know, when I became more obvious to other people. But how many people knew about it is another thing.¹⁸

While reading physics at University College London, Russell Stannard says that talk of relations between science and religion among undergraduates “didn’t happen at all, not at all” and nor did it as a research student: “No, it didn’t happen [...] at the graduate level, no. No, we were scientists through and through, sort of thing, you know, very serious-minded.”¹⁹ Stannard does not seem to have been disturbed by this focus on science. Similarly, Denis Alexander slots into conversational norms at the Imperial Cancer Research Laboratories in the early 1980s:

I don’t think it [religion] came up particularly actually. You know again, when you’re in a lab, you know you’ve got PhD students, you’ve got post-docs, everyone’s struggling to get their papers out. [...] Coffee time conversation might be a bit rushed. And generally people I think in that sort of British academic scientific community context, you know, you don’t talk about politics or religion; you know it’s a sort of semi-golden rule.²⁰

¹⁷ Sam Berry interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/02 Track 6 [1:54 - 2:50].

¹⁸ Sam Berry interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/02 Track 6 [0:02- 1:03].

¹⁹ Russell Stannard interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/03 Track 4 [12:36 -12:48].

²⁰ Denis Alexander interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/09 Track 7 [31:47 - 32:12].

And Malcolm Jeeves says repeatedly that, whatever his views on the relatedness of science and Christianity, he regarded their professional separation as proper:

Interviewee: I had two supervisors in the college [St John's, University of Cambridge], one for invertebrate, one vertebrate. For vertebrate was Colin Bertram [...] who was my tutor, who is an expert on polar bears. Invertebrate was a chap called Hollick, a very shy man, his specialty was insects. Interestingly enough, I noticed that he was, he regularly attended College Chapel. He was obviously a quiet but practising Christian.

Interviewer: [...] *Did he, did he talk about that?*

Interviewee: No, not at all. Never, never spoke about it. No, we never did. He was very proper, all he did was talk about his [science] as one should do. I mean, later I was a supervisor for psychology people, and, I was very proper, never to talk about my faith, unless they asked me. [...]

Interviewer: *What would have been wrong about it in particular?*

Interviewee: Because I don't think a university teacher of a particular discipline should use his position as a professor to propagate his personal beliefs, whether it's communism, socialism, you know, Buddhism, or Christianity. That's not the place for him to do that. It's the wrong place.²¹

If spaces of science were wrong places for this kind of talk, so were Christian settings. Student Christian societies, for example, had wider agendas: "I don't recall them doing that [discussing science and religion]. The Christian Union was really dominated by the exegesis of scripture and encountering scripture and Genesis 1, 2, 3 didn't play a very large part in that; it was mostly the New Testament that people were looking at."²² Churches were not necessarily interested. Malcolm Jeeves says of his local church as a student in Cambridge: "The Round Church [which] was a small church, and, it was of no great interest there"²³ and that on beach missions "it didn't come into it at all. In those days it just wasn't [...] in the public domain at all, nobody sort of thought about it."²⁴

Two of the scientist Christians in this paper, Russell Stannard and Sam Berry, trained as lay readers in the Church of England. They found that they were required to learn to give 'ordinary' sermons, leaving science aside:

²¹ Malcolm Jeeves interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/07 Track 2 [21:55 - 26:27].

²² John Polkinghorne interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/04 Track 1 [12:50 - 13:16].

²³ Malcolm Jeeves interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/07 Track 4 [36:08 - 36:15].

²⁴ Malcolm Jeeves interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/07 Track 3 [6:48 - 6:58].

When I was being trained as a reader, I had a tutor, and he [...] on one occasion, towards the end, said, ‘OK, I’ll get you to do a practice sermon.’ [...] So we went into the church, and I was up in the pulpit, and [...] I delivered my sermon to the, to the tutor. And afterwards he comes up to me and [...] says, ‘Yes, but, oh you just sound like an academic. [...] You’re always qualifying everything. You say, ‘most people would think so-and-so’ and ‘generally speaking’ and so on. You’re always qualifying, you know, you seem to have got an academic, fellow academic peering over your shoulder. You’ve got to understand that, in a church things are very different [...] people don’t take in the qualifications.’ [...] So, that, that means my preaching has to be, well, like anybody else’s preaching.²⁵

Preaching like anybody else involves simplification of the message and sticking to the day’s Gospel reading. Any discussion of science and religion is usually hived off: “Some of the sermons are about science and religion, but not many, not many, because, that’s not the way it has to be. I will then from time to time run a, like a, a lantern course on science and religion, so [...] five lectures sort of thing, and, OK, people who are interested come, and those who think, oh, he’s on about that again, you know, don’t have to be subjected to it.”²⁶ Sam Berry’s experience, he says, was similar:

Interviewer: *What’s the relationship between work done as a reader – the talks [sermons] given – having qualified [...] and the kind of talks you’re doing on relations between science and faith elsewhere?*

Interviewee: Very little. I mean in my, what we might call standard days as a reader, I would be preaching on whatever the lesson was for that particular Sunday in the lectionary. So I mean I was conditioned by that. [...]

Interviewer: *Did the congregation notice a distinctiveness in the way that you were looking at the text and talking about the text?*

Interviewee: I doubt it. I mean, ‘Oh, that was a lovely sermon. Oh so good, so nice having you’. That’s the sort of thing you get.²⁷

Having left academic physics in late 1970s and now at work as a trainee priest in a “simple working class parish” of Bristol, John Polkinghorne was more

²⁵ Russell Stannard interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/03 Track 3 [0:51-4:05].

²⁶ Russell Stannard interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/03 Track 3 [4:10-4:39].

²⁷ Sam Berry interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/02 Track 6 [8:00 - 11:18].

likely to be leading funerals (“I would speak of course about the Christian hope, but also something specific: old Bert Reed did like his parrots or whatever it might be”) than discussing relations between science and religion: “There weren’t many people there for whom science and religion was on the agenda. There were one or two in the parish and I got to know them and we would have conversations on that, but otherwise I was just trying to be just an ordinary priest for them.”²⁸

Polkinghorne gets on with being an ordinary priest. Others are ordinary members of student organisations, ordinary lay readers, ordinary science students and ordinary scientists. Being ordinary in these spaces means fitting in with a general background assumption of the separateness of science and religion. As we will see in the next section, these scientist-Christians confine their discussion of relations between science and religion to special groupings and spaces.

Special ‘science and religion’ groups and ‘complementarity’

The scientist-Christians considered here joined dedicated groups in which to talk about the relations between science and religion. In the case of Malcolm Jeeves: “There was a group in Cambridge, led by a scientist who had been in Cambridge throughout the war, whose name was Robert Clarke. [...] And [he] invited any of us he got to know to go to meetings at his flat to discuss issues at the interface of science and faith.”²⁹ During Sam Berry’s PhD, a local ‘study group’ of the Research Scientists Christian Fellowship [RSCF] presented itself:

I come to London to do my PhD. [...] I joined the local church and I mean that was, you know, my church life, as it were, as, you know, you might be anywhere. [...] Now, what happened at the same time [...] the Research Scientists Christian Fellowship had been set up, what, ten years, fifteen years previously, and the man who set it up, Oliver Barclay, had known me as an undergraduate at Cambridge and he co-opted me [...] to be a member of a study group in London preparing papers for the annual conference of the Research Scientists Christian Fellowship. His attitude was that there was a duty on [...] scientists who are Christian to learn how to write and talk and think, rather than just superficially think, you know, that’s fine. And so it was him that introduced me into reading about science and faith and so on and I became a member of this group which

²⁸ John Polkinghorne interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/04 Track 1 [40:58 - 41:12].

²⁹ Malcolm Jeeves interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/07 Track 3 [10:21 - 10:49].

each year was preparing a paper for the annual conference. And that was, if you like, in parallel with normal church life.³⁰

RSCF members (including Berry and Jeeves) met at the annual conference (presenting papers prepared in local, university groups) and wrote pamphlets and short books stressing the ‘complementarity’ of Christianity and different branches of science, including psychology and evolutionary biology.³¹ A sense of what is meant by ‘complementarity’ is given by this quote from senior member and key philosophical influence on the group, neuroscientist Donald MacKay:

Suppose [...] that we are watching a cricket match [...] We see the ball hit the wicket and the stumps go flying. The ‘cause’ of the motion of the stumps, in the ordinary sense, is the impact of the ball. [...] Given a sufficiently long and self-consistent sample, we might in fact succeed in developing a complete predictive *science* of the cricket world displayed before us [...]

Suppose, however, that someone suggests that our scientific explanation of these happenings is ‘not the only one’, and that all our experience of them owes its existence to the continuing stability of the will of the artist [God] who shapes and ‘holds in being’ the whole going concern. However odd this may sound at first, it is obvious that in fact he is not advancing a rival explanation to the one we have discovered in our ‘science’ of the cricket field; he has no need to cast doubt on ours in order to make room for his own, since the two are not explanations *in the same sense*. [...] both may, in fact, be entirely valid. [...] Explanations in terms of scientific laws and in terms of divine activity are thus not rival answers to the same question [...] They are complementary accounts of different aspects of the same happening.³²

Through attention to the Bible as a source of truth, a conception of God as holding in being all existence, and the idea of ‘complementarity’ in which different layers of explanation (scientific, religious and otherwise) are not in competition, scientist-Christians involved in RSCF achieve a community like-mindedness: “I think, because it’s an organisation that’s been going for a long time, and since its main focus is understanding the relation between science and

³⁰ Sam Berry interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/02 Track 1 [1:55:29 - 1:57:33].

³¹ Malcolm Jeeves, *Scientific Psychology and Christian Belief* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1967); Sam Berry, *Adam and the Ape* (London: Church Pastoral-Aid Society, 1975).

³² Donald MacKay, *Science and Christian Faith Today* (London: Church Pastoral-Aid Society, 1960), 9-10.

religion [pause] I think the differences tend to be outside of the membership rather than within it. [...] So, I think that there tends to be, within the Research Scientists Christian Fellowship, as a result of long argument, debate and discussion amongst ourselves, a sort of, a view that [pause] there's a proper view of the relation of science and religion [...] the pervasive theme often is complementarity."³³

This community like-mindedness or consensus is felt by the scientist-Christians considered in this paper to scale up across a wider British and international community of science and religion scholars. Berry responds to the question, "*what are the differences [in] the approach of these people who we might call science-religion scholars?*" with "I mean I think all of us would say that they, we start off from an acceptance of [...] the truth of the Bible. In other words that there is an actual revelation that one is working from. So we're starting from common ground there and, if you like, have a convergence in the way we're thinking."³⁴ John Polkinghorne answers similarly:

I would have a lot in common with the people at the Faraday Institute [for Science and Religion, St Edmund's College, Cambridge], which I admire very much [...] and Alister McGrath [current Director of the Ian Ramsay Centre, Oxford]. Yes, I think there are a lot of people in this sort of area, there's a sort of broad consensus of people who are concerned and looking at these topics of what the important topics are and the general strategy to pursue. Obviously there were differences about the detail, but that seems to be the case. [...] and places like conferences held, like this Princeton place, the Center [of Theological Inquiry] and other opportunities we get together and interact with each other, yes. There is a sort of community in that sense, people concerned with these matters.³⁵

There is a strong sense that this "community," consisting of people and organisations felt to be in alignment, provides interviewees with opportunities to think, talk and write about relations between science and religion that *continue throughout life* to be unavailable at work and at church. Towards the end of his career as Professor of Psychology at the University of St Andrews in Scotland, Malcolm Jeeves was still meeting in small groups to prepare papers for the annual conference of RSCF, by then called Christians in Science: "I think it began that I

³³ Malcolm Jeeves interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/07 Track 5 [9:25 - 11:44].

³⁴ Sam Berry interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/02 Track 7 [1:06:32 - 1:07:07].

³⁵ John Polkinghorne interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/04 Track 1 [1:05:57 - 1:06:54].

met these people at the church, and I realised that there was a nucleus of a group who had the range of scientific interests to make a group that could offer a paper. And so I just invited them to come to my office. And they used to come to my office once a week at lunchtime; I would provide the coffee, they brought their own sandwiches. [...] It was a small group.”³⁶ And Russell Stannard still tends not to find interest in science and religion at his local church: “I, I don’t see a great deal of, of discussion of these issues going on in church. [...] If I look further afield, you know, to parts which I and my colleagues in the science and religion field have not really contacted, there I, I don’t see any great, any great change.”³⁷

From the self: writing and speaking about science and religion

In dedicated science and religion communities, the scientist-Christians considered here have been able to talk and write about the ‘complementarity’ of science and religion. While their talk and writing on science and religion has ranged well beyond themselves, it is clear that it has been inspired by reflection on *their own lives*. Consider, for example, Denis Alexander who, as Director of the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion in Cambridge, has been involved in the organisation of many recent public meetings on science and religion. In his final years in a public school, in which committed faith was regarded as unusual, he organised his *first* meeting of this kind:

Interviewer: *At school within science classes, did religion feature? [...]*

Interviewee: I don’t remember it coming up actually to be honest. People were, you know, they got the curriculum, they teach the chemistry, they teach the biology [...] Now, in the Christian Union, we decided in fact [...] that we would have a panel discussion in the Great Hall [...] and that we would have four Professors, all Christians, and we would invite local schools to come along [...] and we just did it. [...] And that was all about science and faith. [...] So we did bring science and faith into that school, but it was like parachuted from outside; it was not an indigenous discussion, if you like, that normally happened you know.

Interviewer: *[...] Why did you have this meeting?*

Interviewee: I think it was probably, I think especially in the Sixth Form, you know we’d realised that most boys don’t think much of religion and [...] I think it was probably the start of the realisation that a lot of people just think religion and science are separate in some way or, you know

³⁶ Malcolm Jeeves interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/07 Track 5 [5:36 - 7:04].

³⁷ Russell Stannard interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/03 Track 10 [41:20 - 42:08].

there may be an opposition. [...] People just thought they shouldn't meet up together, you know, they should be kept in separate compartments and you have your RE, if you're doing RE A Level, you keep that separate, you know, from chemistry or- and we thought no, no we want to join this up, you know we want to have, you know, sort of show people that, that actually scientists can be people of faith and they can build their faith in a very normal and natural way into their scientific enterprise and that sort of thing. [pause] And also I guess we had a directly sort of apologetic aim of showing the bible as reliable and that Christian faith is a sensible sort of thing to believe.³⁸

He brings into school an abnormal discourse (“it was not an indigenous discussion [...] that normally happened”) in order to represent close relations between science and religion as “normal”. He confirms that the motivation was personal and probably, in fact, his own. I ask, “*When you say that we thought we want to join these things up, who's the we?*” He replies: “The *we* I think is the few people in the Christian Union; by the time I was in the Sixth Form we had a Christian Union of 10 people or something like that I think. [...] So, I guess the *we* might mean *I*, possibly [laughs] but you know we were a group who did it together.”³⁹

In a similar way, the work on relations between science and religion of other scientist-Christians begins with attention to the self. John Polkinghorne wrote his first science and religion book in response to questions raised by colleagues in physics who had heard of his decision, in the late 1970s, to retrain as a priest:

So the news spread around [...] but I had about a year and a half in which I was still in physics [...] and during that period I of course met a lot of my friends in that area and they would tend to say to me, ‘John, what are you up to?’ and when they asked me that, they were more really asking about why I had a religious faith rather than why I was going to express it by becoming an ordained person. And I had some interesting conversations over cups of coffee in laboratory canteens and that sort of thing. But it was always a little bit frustrating because of course if you wanted to explain why you embraced [...] Christian belief, it's quite a complicated story and you can't really condense it into half an hour's conversation [...] So in the course of these conversations it formed in my mind that I would like to

³⁸ Denis Alexander interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/09 Track 2 [39:29 - 43:25].

³⁹ Denis Alexander interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/09 Track 2 [43:43 - 44:20].

write a book which would say [...] what I would have said to my friends if I'd had, say, five or six hours to do so. And eventually after I left physics and I had a little bit of spare time, I wrote a book with the rather grandiose title called *The Way the World Is* [1983], which was my first attempt at that sort of thing.⁴⁰

To some extent, then, he wrote *The Way the World Is* through attention to *the way he is*. Russell Stannard, too, points out that he wrote his first book on relations between science and religion in response to questions raised about these terms in his own life:

So, I don't know whether, when I was a student, whether science and religion came up in biology lessons, but there was no need for them to come up in physics lessons, and they never, never, never did, never did, no. No, the, the whole question of science and religion in my own life [...] came up simply because after my studying I became a research assistant and then [...] a lecturer at University College London [...] lecturing in science; I was a fully qualified scientist. At the same time I had become a reader in the Church of England. And there I was on a Sunday, preaching. And, I found people [...] in normal everyday life, sometimes my friends at church [...] they would say, 'Well, how can you be both, you know, how can you wear a white lab coat Monday to Friday and a white surplice in church on a Sunday? Do you need Saturday to, to make the transition?' you know. [...] And OK, you couldn't help but think, ok, how do I marry the two, you know, is there a conflict, or are they dealing with different kinds of knowledge? Are they to be kept separate? [...] I was being forced into it, because [...] people could not understand how I could be a scientist and a religious person. So I, I had to get my ideas clear. [...] So that's how I came to write my first book, which was called *Science and the Renewal of Belief*⁴¹, which was published by SCM Press. So that's, that's sort of, how, how I got into it sort of seriously.⁴²

And Sam Berry's first book on relations between Christian belief and evolutionary biology spins out from the suggestion that the two might not hold together in an individual:

⁴⁰ John Polkinghorne interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/04 Track 2 [10:48-12:26].

⁴¹ Russell Stannard, *Science and the Renewal of Belief* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1982).

⁴² Russell Stannard interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/03 Track 2 [1:06:57 - 1:37:06].

Interviewer: *Was there [at the University of Cambridge] among the students or the staff any discussion [...] of relations between evolution and faith?*

Interviewee: I remember nothing whatsoever about it. The first time I came up against it was a friend of mine who I'd actually been at school with [...] and he said to me once, 'You know, I can never become a Christian.' So I said to him, 'Why not?' He said, 'Because I'd have to give up believing in evolution.' I said, 'Get stuffed' or whatever one said in those days, you know, 'What on Earth has belief in evolution got to do with faith in the son of God?' And I can't remember what I said, but that's what made me start thinking and realised there were quite a lot of people in the Christian world to whom evolution was anathema. And I started reading round part of the history of it, I started looking at actually what the Bible says about it [...] which is very little. [...] And that's where *Adam and the Ape* came from. So that was an attempt to focus what I'd been thinking and studying about.⁴³

He discloses elsewhere – in his book *God and the Biologist* – that his own and others arguments for the 'complementarity' of science and religion have an individual, emotional appeal: "complementarity is important, providing as it does a logically coherent and emotionally satisfying account of God and his relation to the world."⁴⁴

Conforming as scientists and as Christians

Scientist-Christians tell standard stories of gaining scientific interests and skills in childhood, involving technical toys, natural history, chemistry sets, homemade fireworks and significant books. They are 'standard' in the sense of conforming in content and form to stories that tend to be told by British scientists in general.⁴⁵ Denis Alexander's childhood, for example, contains the expected experiences of a scientist to be, including the right sort of gifts from parents welcomed early in childhood:

Interviewer: *When do you see your interest in science beginning?*

Interviewee: [pause] Well I think it started very early - I mean it's partly -

⁴³ Sam Berry interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/02 Track 1 [1:09:50 - 1:12:15].

⁴⁴ RJ Berry, *God and the Biologist: Faith at the Frontiers of Science* (Leicester: Apollon (IVP), 1996), 23.

⁴⁵ Paul Merchant, "Scientists' childhoods," *Oral History* 41/1 (2013): 63-72.

I think there were two influences probably independently. One was again of course my mother loving physiology and encouraging us always to go out and dissect earthworms and [...] also chemistry as well [...] she gave me a little [...] glass vial of carbon disulphide which smells like rotten eggs [...] and so I took it to school and scattered it on the [...] floor and so the master came in I remember and said ‘who did that?’ [...] I put up my hand and said, ‘It was me Sir. [...] I got it from my mother Sir.’ And everyone roared with laughter. [...] My father had inherited from his father an old microscope which was still [in] perfect working order and which I inherited or which was part of the family [...] it was around so I, I, that was also quite influential - just looking at stuff under the microscope and dissecting things and pulling things apart.⁴⁶

Science is pursued in later school careers as the obvious choice: “what was I going to study? Well, it had to be general science, you know, I, I wasn’t drawn particularly to anything else.”⁴⁷ In these examples (and there are many more in the full interviews), interviewees tell us that that they became scientists in the ordinary way.

Another way in which interviewees claim scientific ordinariness is by offering reassurance that they are appropriately sceptical and rational. A story of hearing astronomer and Christian Robert Boyd on the radio is significant for Malcolm Jeeves, I suggest, because it involves a scientist-Christian responding in an appropriately dismissive way about UFOs: “I can still remember him being asked a very serious question, you know, he was asked, ‘What is the significance of flying saucers?’ was the question. [...] And he thought for a bit, and he said, ‘Well, I suspect it’s a symptom of marital unhappiness.’ I mean, you know, in other words, this is a ridiculous question about a ridiculous thing.”⁴⁸ And John Polkinghorne takes a properly cautious position in talking about his interest, at one time, in Jungian psychoanalysis: “Eric [Hutchinson] was very good at making scripture come alive and he was good at relating it to life and he was a Jungian in influence, so he had this idea of the deep psychology, the significance of symbol, things of that nature, and I just found those ideas helpful. I was never sort of fully bowled over by Eric in the way that some people were, but I did find it was helpful to see that there might be inner resources.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Denis Alexander interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/09 Track 1 [53:15 - 55:40].

⁴⁷ Russell Stannard interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/03 Track 1 [1:11:58 - 1:12:09].

⁴⁸ Malcolm Jeeves interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/07 Track 3 [41:39- 42:09].

⁴⁹ John Polkinghorne interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/04 Track 3 [45:59 - 46:36].

All are careful to state expected positions on biological evolution (“the basic idea that the creation is characterised by descent with modification seems to me unquestionable”⁵⁰) and to oppose creationism. Russell Stannard refers to “these religious fanatics, these fundamentalists” and indicates that he would be react appropriately to any creationist influence on the teaching of Big Bang cosmology: “I fully, fully understand why biology lecturers, academics, people like Richard Dawkins, get very hot under the collar about it. You know, if those same fanatics were trying to make me teach six-days creation along with Big Bang, I would be furious.”⁵¹ Denis Alexander says of his childhood: “Science was always viewed very positively in the household, including, by the way, evolution. You might imagine that people from a very conservative Christian background were not very keen on Darwin – there was not a bit of it; Darwin was a hero in my household especially with my mother and I do remember at our open brethren church being given a sort of tract [...] a sort of creationist tract as I now know and my mother took a look at it [...] and she burnt it immediately. [laughs]. She wouldn’t have any creationism around in our household.”⁵² Sam Berry still possesses the book that he thinks may have first triggered his interest in evolution: Eileen Mayo’s *The Story of Living Things and their Evolution* (1944), and the notes taken at school on ‘The Coming of the Idea of Evolution’. Memories of burnt creationist leaflets and physical evidence of standard engagement with evolutionary biology underline a scientific conformity.

Concerned to be conventionally scientific, scientist-Christians are also concerned to do what is expected of them as Christians. Having trained as a priest, John Polkinghorne “was only in parish life for a few years” before returning to Cambridge as a college chaplain. This worried him:

After I’d been a vicar for two years I went to see the Bishop of Dover [...] to talk over how I was getting on in the parish and I was saying that [...] it was going well, but I felt in the long term, as far as I was concerned, I might wish to find a position in which my academic side had a bit more exercise than it was going to be in parish life. [...] Within six months of that I was offered this job back in Cambridge and I was troubled about leaving the parish so soon, I mean just regretfully really, and so I went to see him again and he said to me, ‘I think you’ve been offered the job you

⁵⁰ John Polkinghorne interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/04 Track 1 [1:13:25 - 1:13:33].

⁵¹ Russell Stannard interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/03 Track 2 [1:06:38 - 1:06:57].

⁵² Denis Alexander interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/09 Track 1 [55:42 - 56:25].

described to me when we last met.’ And that was very wise and kind of him.⁵³

A similarly wise, authoritative Christian figure reassures Malcolm Jeeves that a career in academic psychology did not take him off a Christian path:

Interviewer: *Could you just say a little bit more about how [...] you decided that psychology was what you wanted to do?*

Interviewee: [...] I was so unsure, and one of my lecturers [...] was Professor Michael Ramsey who became Archbishop of Canterbury [...] and I said to him one day, ‘I’m a bit concerned, I don’t know whether to go ahead and consider being ordained in the Anglican Church.’ [...] So I went to his house [...] and we talked about it. And after a while he said, ‘Look [...] there are just so many young men who can get ordained and become Anglican ministers, but [...] what we really need for the future is people who are familiar and knowledgeable about both science and faith, and can make a contribution to that whole debate.’ He said, ‘It’s not for me to decide, but [...] I would suggest you go ahead with your science [...] I think you’ll have a much greater contribution to make from a Christian point of view by doing that, than by becoming yet another local rector in a local church.’⁵⁴

Denis Alexander answers what he regards as a Christian calling to undertake work overseas by establishing a laboratory in the Middle East (where he also established Christian meetings) and Sam Berry and Russell Stannard both account for their decisions *not* to train for the priesthood. In the case of Stannard:

I could never have been a vicar. That’s another thing: some people say, ‘OK, you’re a reader, and you do some of the things that priests do,’ and quite a number of readers use that as a jumping-off point to becoming a fully-ordained minister, and I have often been asked, you know, have I had any thoughts about becoming a priest myself? And the answer is, well I’ve had thoughts, but, no, never, never considered that at all seriously, partly because of my bad memory, and one of the things a vicar has to do is to remember the names of the members of his congregation [...] but also I, I felt that, OK, I could become another priest, much like the other

⁵³ John Polkinghorne interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/04 Track 1 [47:22 - 48:28].

⁵⁴ Malcolm Jeeves interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/07 Track 2 [32:47 - 34:31].

priests, but by then I, I was a scientist and a, a reader, a preacher, and I, I saw that as a kind of distinctive ministry.⁵⁵

Berry says on this matter: “When I was coming towards the end of university life [...] I went on a two-week course run by the church Pastoral Aid Society really to test out how one would envisage being a clergyman, and one of the clear decisions, conclusions I came to, was that I’d be an absolutely disastrous parson. So that was, as it were, a door closed very firmly.”⁵⁶

It is clear, though, that for Berry being on the right Christian path continued to be of concern. He writes in *God and the Biologist*: “Looking back, it took me some time to accept that I was in a place that God had prepared for me. After all, making microscopical preparations of mouse embryos (which was the main practical work in my PhD studies), or catching radioactive rats in India, or melanic moths in Shetland, or limpets in the Antarctic, is not usually considered to be a spiritual activity. But I have no doubt that God has wanted me to be a scientist.”⁵⁷ And it is clear, in this book and in his life story interview, that he is reassured by work later in his career on relations between Christianity and nature conservation.

Conclusion

While Sam Berry was still a child, his father committed suicide:

I was in the sixth form, two years before leaving, and my housemaster called me out of a lesson and said my father had died, hadn’t I better go home? [...] So I went home [...] and was told that he’d committed suicide. And I remember at the time going for long walks – I was home for about a week – there was an inquest and then the funeral – just asking why, not really prayer in any sense, it was, you know, what was the meaning of all this, was there a meaning behind it? [...] Fairly soon after that [...] I went back to school to live normal life again as far as I could. [...] Because I didn’t have things to do in the holidays [...] one of the masters at school invited me to a Christian ‘house party’. [...] So I went off on that and that’s when I really committed myself as a Christian, because it all made sense, it was from my point of view a logical answer that Christ had died to provide answers to the why I’d been asking. So in no sense was this a

⁵⁵ Russell Stannard interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/03 Track 3 [10:30 - 11:42].

⁵⁶ Sam Berry interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/02 Track 1 [38:55 - 39:32].

⁵⁷ Berry, *God and the Biologist*, 5-6.

mystical experience or an emotional experience, it was straightforward, this is the answer to questions I've been asking.⁵⁸

In his own chapter in the collection of autobiographies *True Scientists, True Faith* he comments on this period of his life as follows: "We often speak of someone's world crashing in pieces or their 'life falling apart' [...] I suppose my future appeared like that to me when my father died. My testimony from that time and on many subsequent occasions has been completely different. I can testify unreservedly of the wholeness which the Lord gives."⁵⁹ We return to the problem that we started with in this paper: the common sense, even childlike (Berry subtitles the section of his chapter considered here 'Humpty Dumpty') assumption that a desirable psychological state is a wholeness, a coherence, an integration. He goes on in the same chapter to reflect on his life as an adult scientist and Christian: "If I draw one lesson from my experiences as a scientist and a Christian, it is that compartmentalization of life, thought or worship is damaging and potentially dangerous. [...] In my spiritual life, I have [...] tried to worship my God in laboratory, field and church alike."⁶⁰

But, as we have seen, he and other scientist Christians have not held science and religion together across all the spaces of life; they have tended to do this in special spaces over hot drinks in informal groups, in meetings of the RSCF, at science and religion conferences and in pages of science and religion books, usually published by Christian publishers and sold in small numbers in Christian settings. The science and religion thinking and talking all goes on in special spaces, not at work or at church:

Interviewer: *I wonder, at this time in this work, in the actual practical doing of this work, whether you thought about Christian faith while doing your science. [...] How is faith contributing to science at this time, early in your career?*

Interviewee: I don't know that it did very much. I mean there were questions, were we doing cruel things that we shouldn't be doing to the animals, you know, what is the proper way to look at animals? [pause] Probably, and I'm guessing now almost, that at that stage these were two different things; I had my faith, my faith obviously extended into science because faith and science were not distinct, but my actual practical work

⁵⁸ Sam Berry interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/02 Track 1 [41:51 - 44:20].

⁵⁹ RJ Berry, "Genes, Genesis and Greens," in *True Scientists; True Faith*, ed. RJ Berry (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2014), 221.

⁶⁰ Berry, "Genes, Genesis and Greens," 221-222.

was like washing up or going to bed. It was a different component.⁶¹

Interviewer: *I wonder whether [...] witnessing the effects of new particles created by collisions and thinking about matter at this kind of scale, and then going off to church on Sunday, does the former in your case affect the latter? So is your science affecting the way in which you think about spiritual questions?*

Interviewee: [pause] Oh I think, I have to think about that. I'm not sure that it really affected the spiritual side of things.⁶²

Interviewer: *Did you think about Christianity while you were thinking about doing physics. In other words, did you think about the things together while you were in the laboratory or in the lecture theatre?*

Interviewee: No, I don't think I did think about them very much together. No, I didn't feel I had to keep them separate, there was a danger in mixing them or anything like that, but I just, you know, I just [pause] I seem to have been fairly stupid about this if I look back on it and I think I might have been more reflective and saw issues about these things.⁶³

Interviewees have been ordinarily focused on science when scientists and ordinarily focused on Christianity at church. They have been able to conform at work and at church, because unusual thought and writing about relations between science and religion happens elsewhere, in a special science and religion community which is separate. The idea of 'complementarily' allows this all to work, because explanatory layers of 'science' and 'religion' can exist apart. When they are brought together, in the science and religion community, they are (recalling the cricket game example) distinct, 'complementary', non-competing layers of explanation, lying next to or on top of each other, but not broken up together, mixed, or in any way mutually constitutive or coherent.

What this means for oral history is that we may need to think more carefully about what we mean by composure when discussing the representation, formation, development and experience of selves. Being composed may not necessarily mean being fully integrated or coherent or 'whole.' Therefore, we should not assume that oral histories have been successful when a narrative appears to be fully integrated across itself, and across the times and spaces

⁶¹ Sam Berry interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/02 Track 3 [24:20 - 25:38].

⁶² Russell Stannard interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/03 Track 4 [1:20:47 - 1:21:43].

⁶³ John Polkinghorne interviewed by Paul Merchant, 2015, British Library ref. C1672/04 Track 1 [18:27 - 18:54].

referred to, as Abrams seems sometimes to suggest in *Oral History Theory*: “In an interview that tackles the whole life course or life history of the individual, the respondent is given the opportunity to tell a story that reveals their present sense of self. This is a view of their self as the culmination of a life. The life-story interview invites the narrator to dig deep, to reflect on the inner self, to reconcile any conflicts and then to reconstruct the self as a coherent whole in the form of a single narrative.”⁶⁴ A single narrative need not entail a singular self; it may, as in the cases of the scientist-Christians considered here, include ‘complementary’ layers, different ways of being ordinary in different places, a composite even dispersed sense of self that affords, as far as it is possible for us to tell, logical and emotional satisfaction.

⁶⁴ Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 33.