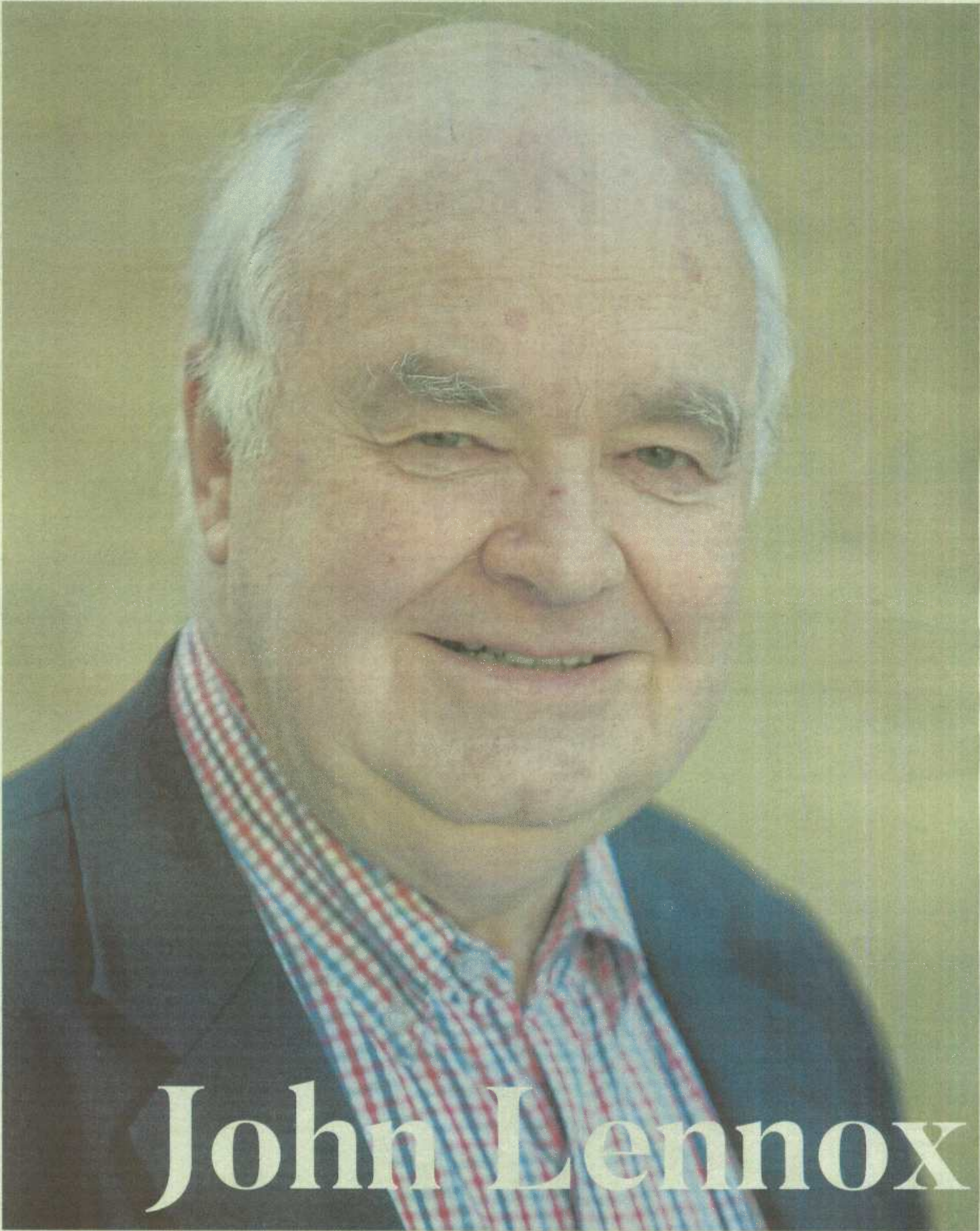


Profiles

Professor
John Lennox
is Emeritus
Professor of
Mathematics
at the Univer-
sity of Oxford



John Lennox

ON THE COMPATIBILITY OF SCIENCE AND THEISM

BY JOANNA LONERGAN

Profiles

Professor John Lennox is one of the world's top mathematicians. He is also a committed Christian.

If these two things sound incompatible to you, you're not alone. Science and religion are often cast as fundamentally opposed, a battle between the heart and the mind. It seems that every man, woman, and passing cat in the worlds of science and religion has thrown their opinion into the raging debate, and as of yet there is no end in sight. But for Professor Lennox the debate is hardly worth having - the answer seems so obvious.

"What we've got to look at is the nature of explanation. There's more than one kind of explanation, and the simple illustration I usually give is 'Why is the water boiling?'. It's boiling because heat from a flame is being conducted through the base of a kettle and is agitating the molecules of the water. That's the scientific explanation. But it's also boiling because I would like a cup of tea - that's the 'agent explanation'.

"The point is that in most areas, there are multiple explanations only one of which is scientific. But these explanations do not contradict each other, they complement each other."

Professor Lennox speaks to me in his light Irish accent from his home just outside Oxford, on the eve of the launch of his most recent book, *Can Science Explain Everything?*

He is sympathetic to my very basic understanding of

"AS EINSTEIN POINTED OUT, EVERY SINGLE SCIENTIST IS A BELIEVER"

science and my lack of religiosity, tailoring his explanations with references to my history degree to help me understand.

In the 21st century, when science seems to have come so far and explained so much, Professor Lennox and other staunch defenders of religion's place in modern society certainly have their work cut out for them. It is almost taken for granted that we are less religious now than we perhaps have ever been. A recent report from St Mary's University in London found that 70% of young people in the UK identify with no religion whatsoever. Furthermore, the emergence of so-called 'New Atheism' hints at the desire to counter and criticise religious belief and perceived 'irrationalism' wherever the opportunity should present itself.

It was the desire to help others to see that science and religion weren't natural enemies that prompted Professor Lennox to write his most recent book. He fears that many people don't appreciate the power of religion when it comes to explanation, defaulting to science in search of answers. "It was to produce something shorter, that's more accessible, that gets to the point and deals with one of the major problems I find, particularly among students and people in schools, where they feel, and have in fact been taught, that science is the only way to truth."

"Of course, as a historian, you will know that's nonsense. That would stop your subject dead. It's just absurd. Science is wonderful but it can't answer every question, and in particular science doesn't annihilate God. The 'God answer' is perfectly valid within its own space."

When I ask Lennox about his time at Cambridge he laughs and tells me I'd better not mention that he attended the so-called 'other place'. It was at Cambridge that he experienced first-hand the ingrained supposition that science must be completely incompatible and at odds with religion, and he tells me about an incident where a Nobel Prize Winner directly challenged his faith.

"I was in my, same as you, second year - I was probably 19 or 20 - and I sat beside [a Nobel Prize Winner] at one of these scholars dinners. I just chatted to him about the big questions, and he didn't like it very much so I switched off.

"After the meal he invited me and a number of other senior people - there were no students - into his study, and he simply sat me down and said 'Do you want to make a career in science?'. I said 'Yes'. He said 'If you do, give up this childish faith in God. You will never make it because you will suffer by comparison with your peers'. It was unbelievable.

"If he'd been a Christian and I'd been an atheist, and he tried to push his Christianity onto me, he'd have lost his job the next day!"

But instead of following the 'advice' of the Nobel laureate, Lennox remained convinced that his religious beliefs were in no way detrimental to his scientific ambitions. In-

stead, the incident brought him face to face with the harsh reality that many in the scientific field viewed religion with suspicion.

"It helped me to realise that there are forces at work in academia of people who are so blinded to the nature of their subject even though they're utterly brilliant in it. What the [Nobel Prize Winner] represented was the view of 'scientism' - the idea that science is the only way to truth."

In the end, the Nobel laureate turned out to be wrong, as Lennox has enjoyed an incredibly successful scientific career, lecturing extensively in North America, Europe and the former Soviet Union, and releasing a number of books dedicated to the interface between science, philosophy and theology.

Luckily, since his experience at Cambridge he has found others to be more accommodating of his religious faith. "I've been at Oxford over twenty years, and I can honestly say that I have many colleagues that disagree with me, but it's always friendly.

"I find that you get more out of it if there's a friendly discussion. There can be pretty hard-headed disagreement, but if the arguments are not ad hominem but talking about the actual issues, then I think you can get a long way."

Professor Lennox mentions his debates with various prominent scientists. Lennox has gone head to head with the likes of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Peter Singer on topics ranging from 'Has Science buried God?' to 'Is there a God?', preferring always to have an open and amicable debate over any heated arguments.

"Confrontational debates, nobody likes them anymore - not even the atheists - because they bring out the worst in people. A lot of what I try to do is to help people understand and to develop new analogies for all this kind of thing."

To this end, Lennox does not intend to push his views on anyone. Unlike the reputation, justly or unjustly, given to many religious speakers, Lennox is not militant about what he thinks people ought to believe, setting out only to provide people with all the facts.

"I find that what I've tried to do all my life is to befriend people that don't share my worldview. I resolved at Cambridge that if I ever got into the position where I could be involved in discussions on the topic, I'd want it to be even-handed and open, letting people make up their own minds. I believe people are capable of making up their own minds, it's just that I don't like it when they only hear one side of the story."

About halfway through our conversation, I inadvertently make the error that so many before me have apparently made: I referred to 'faith' exclusively in the context of religion, assuming it had no relevance to science.

It's an easy mistake to make, especially since many of us certainly assume science to be solely based on cold, hard, unmistakable fact and not on something as unprovable as 'belief'. That's what science is right?

Wrong. Or at least it is according to Professor Lennox, whose argument is unsurprisingly clearly and logically set out. "Science depends on faith. Due to the 'New Atheism', there's a very common view, and I see it among Oxford Professors, that 'faith' is a religious word that means believing where there's no evidence.

"But 'faith' is an ordinary word that comes from the Latin 'fides', meaning 'trust'. In most of our everyday experience we have to trust all kinds of things based on the evidence we have.

"Every single scientist, as Einstein pointed out, is a believer. In order to do any science at all you must believe that the universe is rationally intelligible. That's the basic credo of a scientist."

So it seems faith is a fundamental requirement in both science and religion. Galileo had to have some faith in his studies of the solar system, and Newton had to have some faith in developing his laws of motion.

Therefore, for Lennox, a foundation in theology might even be beneficial for the scientist.

"It seems to be that the theistic world view gives you a much better basis for believing you can do science than the atheistic one.

"I am a scientist, but I don't want to give in to the common view that science equals rationality. History is a rational discipline - it involves detailed investigation of evidence and coming to logical conclusions based on that evidence.



Lennox has worked in the Soviet Union, Europe, and North America

To say that the natural sciences have an exclusive right to that kind of thinking is very dangerous."

I think it wise to avoid a complicated and convoluted conversation regarding what evidence there is for a belief in God, or any other deity. Besides, I'm beginning to see what Professor Lennox means when he says science and theism aren't so different after all.

CV BORN

Armagh, Northern Ireland

STUDIED

Royal School, Armagh
Emmanuel College, Cambridge

ACADEMIC WORK

70 peer-reviewed articles on Mathematics, and the co-author of two Oxford Mathematical monographs

LATEST WORKS

Authored the books *Being Truly Human* and *Determined to Believe?*

SPECIALISM

Group theory and the philosophy of science

SKILLS

Speaks English, Russian, German, French

INTERESTING FACT

He was lectured by C.S. Lewis on the poet John Donne

HOBBIES

Amateur astronomy, bird-watching, and walking.

But it's still hard to entirely let go of my perception of science as being completely rational and set apart from the intangible realm of religious belief, so I ask Lennox how it is that he can reconcile religious and scientific explanations. I put to him the classic (and perhaps a little clichéd) example of Genesis versus Evolution. His response makes it somewhat obvious he's heard this one before.

"You're starting too far in. Even among religious believers in God and Christians there are various understandings of things like Genesis, and there are different views on evolution, but that is not the place to start. If there is a God he can do it any way he likes, and it would be up to science to investigate how it's done.

"I regard it as very foolish, but people ask 'Do you believe in the Big Bang or the Bible?'. I tell them that the 'Big Bang' is simply a label over a mystery - it says there is a beginning. The Bible says 'In the beginning God created...'. There's no conflict between the two, it's just describing it from different directions.

"If you start getting tied up in evolution and all this kind of thing, it's almost useless until you clear up the initial row. My main reason for being a theist as a scientist is because I can do science, not particular interpretations of the Bible."

Before we hang up, Lennox asks me about my experience of studying history. "I'm a mathematician who loves history, in fact if I'd been taught it properly I might even have done it."

In our relatively brief conversation I do feel I have learned something. Although I would not consider myself a complete 'convert' so to speak, Professor Lennox has

a unique method of explanation that does make science and theism accessible to all.

He puts forward his views in a way that is logical and well thought-out. Even if it is not a definitive answer to the ongoing debate, his argument certainly provides a challenge for the atheist to unpick.