

Institution: Heythrop College, University of London

Unit of Assessment: Theology and Religious Studies

Title of case study: The Rationality of Religious And Other Belief Systems

1. Summary of the impact

Stephen Law's research since 2004 focuses on the structure and rationality of Christian theism, atheism/naturalism, supernaturalism and other related belief systems. His findings have been disseminated very widely. It is no exaggeration to say that Law's work in this area is among the most frequently discussed and cited – in both electronic and print media – in the world. His work has led to a deeper and more widespread public understanding of the arguments for and against the existence of God and the historicity of Jesus, greater public awareness of issues concerning the rationality and structure of religious and other belief systems, and also a deepened public understanding of issues concerning if and how critical thinking, philosophy and religion should be taught in schools.

2. Underpinning research

Law's underpinning research explores what might loosely be called 'unreasonable belief'. He focuses particularly, though not exclusively, on the rationality of (i) atheism/naturalism, (ii) traditional monotheism and (iii) a range of other religious and non-religious beliefs, including belief in the existence and miracles of Jesus, Young Earth Creationism and Christian Science. Law examines the intellectual strategies people employ to defend and support beliefs to which they are often powerfully drawn but which may, in reality, be unreasonably held. He has mapped and investigated a number of strategies that he suggests recur across, and play a pivotal role in sustaining, many irrational systems of belief.

Law is particularly interested in strategies used to deal with counter-evidence and counter-arguments. These strategies include appeals to mystery, to scepticism, and the application of a strategy Law calls 'But it fits!'. Law argues that these strategies are employed, for example, in many standard theistic responses to the problem of evil, in many defences of Young Earth Creationism and also in various non-religious belief systems.

One central focus of Law's research is the evidential problem of evil. He argues that this problem has been significantly underestimated by theists both inside and outside academe. He develops a version of the argument ('The Evil God Challenge') that aims to make much clearer the inadequacy of many standard apologetic responses to the problem. Engaging with responses made by both professional philosophers and by the lay public, he argues that they fail to salvage traditional monotheism from the charge of irrationality.

Another thread to Law's research into the rationality of certain religious beliefs questions criteria commonly employed within the discipline of Biblical Studies to determine what might reasonably be believed about Jesus. Law develops a philosophical argument to show that, contrary to much popular expert and non-expert opinion, the existence of Jesus is open to reasonable doubt.

In addition, Law has defended atheism and naturalism against the charge of irrationality developed in a well-known and much utilized line of attack by Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism (EAAN), which is regularly appealed to by religious apologists outside academia, aims to show that atheism/naturalism is intellectually self-defeating and is thus irrationally held. Law argues that the EAAN fails, arguing on the basis that there are certain conceptual links between belief content and behaviour.

3. References to the research

"The Evil God Challenge", *Religious Studies*, 46, no. 3, 2010, pp. 353-373

"Plantinga's Belief-Cum-Desire Argument Refuted", *Religious Studies*, 47, no. 2, 2011, pp. 245-256

"Evidence, Miracles and The Existence of Jesus", *Faith and Philosophy*, 28, no. 2, 2011, pp. 129-151

"Naturalism, Evolution, and True Belief", *Analysis*, 72, no. 1, 2012, pp. 41-48

4. Details of the impact

Law's project of identifying and diagnosing doubtful intellectual strategies for defending belief systems and creating a false impression of reasonableness has obvious practical importance. Raising public awareness of such strategies enables people to think more critically and reflectively about topics of fundamental importance. Law's 'Evil God Hypothesis', his critique of Plantinga's EAAN and his examination of criteria employed by Biblical historians with respect to Jesus also raise questions about the extent to which theistic, Christian and atheistic/naturalistic positions are rationally held. These are on-going debates that are obviously of considerable public interest and significance. Law's research has had far-reaching and significant impact on popular discussion and understanding of these issues, as will be detailed.

Reach

Law has offered versions of his philosophical arguments in popular books, notably *Believing Bullshit: How Not To Get Sucked Into An Intellectual Black Hole* (Prometheus, 2011) and *Humanism, A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2011), as well as contributing popularisations to Blackford & Russell (eds.) *50 Voices of Disbelief: Why We Are Atheists* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) and Warburton & Edmonds (eds.) *Philosophy Bites* (Oxford University Press, 2010, 2012). Total sales of these books prior to July 2013 come to 34,581. Law's books received high-profile reviews, including in *THES* and *The Guardian*, and widespread online discussion, and his contribution to *50 Voices* (on the Evil God Challenge) was singled out by several reviewers, including in the biggest US ecumenical journal *First Things* and the Polish broadsheet newspaper *Gazeta*.

Law's work has also been the subject of numerous reviews and articles published both in print and online. These include a *Newsweek* magazine article (4th September 2011), which focused on Law's thinking on irrational belief systems, a double-page spread interview in *New Scientist* magazine (13th June 2011), an article in the 'Life and Style' section of *The Hindu* newspaper (29th March 2012, circulation 1.5 million) and an interview on irrationality in the Swedish national newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* (13th November 2012). These few examples display the geographical reach that Law's ideas have had, as well as their relevance to and impact within a variety of religious and cultural contexts.

Law's research has also been made accessible to the public via the publication of ideas and papers on his blogs. These have received a cumulative total of over 961,000 views and generated around 15,000 comments since 2008. On his academic blog, 'The Evil God Challenge' has been the most popular – accessed over 4,000 times; on his main blog, 'Evidence, Miracles and the Existence of Jesus' has been accessed 23,390 times. His main blog is accessed from around the world, most notably the US, but it also draws significant traffic from Germany (30,000 views), Russia (9,000 views), and India (4,000 views).

The publication of material relating to Law's academic research has promoted impassioned but content-driven and content-focused discussion from those inside and outside academia, inside and outside religious traditions, and from a number of different countries. Explicit discussion of Law's central claims and arguments appears on over 90 blogs and websites with a cumulative total of over 11,000 comments. Discussions range from Bayesian logic to how Law's challenges might be incorporated into Quaker praxis, demonstrating the variety of debates and audiences Law's research impacts upon. One example is *Reasonable Faith*, the website of William Lane Craig, recognised as one of the world's leading apologetic Christian theologians. Craig has published a number of articles online engaging directly with Law's work, notably on the Evil God Hypothesis and the historicity of Jesus. The website receives an average of 500,000 visitors per month and articles directly engaging Law's work are viewed an average of 1,230 times a month. A second example is *Right Reason*, the website of Dr Glenn Peoples, a Christian philosopher. Peoples has written about Law's Evil God Hypothesis, and recorded a podcast discussing it. The podcast has been downloaded 2,670 times and generated 95 comments. A third example, *Why Evolution is True*, is the website of Dr Jerry A. Coyne, a Professor in the Department of Ecology and Evolution at the University of Chicago. Coyne is an atheist who has published analyses of Law's 'The Evil God Hypothesis' and 'Evidence, Miracles and the Existence of Jesus'. These pieces have generated 285 comments. Finally, *The Malcontent's Gambit* is the personal website of Alan Litchfield, a layperson with a background in technical journalism, who hosts podcasts in the interest of promoting secularism. Litchfield's podcast featuring Law has been downloaded 26,077 times. The websites of Craig, Peoples, Coyne and Litchfield serve as examples for many other blogs and websites where discussion of Law's ideas

can be found. They demonstrate that discussion has been generated on both sides of the theism/atheism debate and has engaged people from a number of different disciplines and backgrounds, professional and lay. Law's research has also found a platform in 51 YouTube videos, with a cumulative total of 279,408 views, 11,300 comments, and 3,580 'likes'. Multiple audio recordings and podcasts are accessible online, with cumulative downloads in excess of 397,500. These are largely recordings of public lectures or debates that Law has participated in, but also include independent third-party discussion of his ideas.

Law has presented his research concerning the rationality of theism and atheism/naturalism, especially 'The Evil God Challenge', in numerous public forums in the UK and abroad. These have included lectures and debates presented in collaboration with high-profile universities and institutes, and lectures to schools and non-institutional societies. He has spoken to over 4,600 school children, and the cumulative total for audience figures for other talks and discussions since 2008 exceeds 2,250 (excluding those mentioned below). One example of a high-profile talk is Law's debate with Craig in Westminster Hall in October 2011 as part of Craig's *Reasonable Faith* tour, which was discussed extensively in the media. BBC Radio 4, *The Daily Mail* and *The Telegraph* all gave the debate prior mention, and Law's Evil God Challenge was singled out for mention afterwards in *The Independent*. The debate, in front of an audience of 1,900, was broadcast on Premier Christian Radio, and discussed and referenced extensively online, including in numerous blog posts, reviews, and even argument maps. The audio and video recordings of the debate have been accessed over 37,881 times. A further example is Law's discussion with Richard Dawkins in the Sheldonian Theatre in February 2013 to a full house exceeding 500, in which Law again drew significantly on his research. The discussion has been made available in a number of places on YouTube. The full videoed discussion has been viewed 116,482 times, generating 1,344 comments and 1,385 'likes'.

A final example of the reach of Law's research into the rationality of belief systems is Law's public voice in the debate regarding potentially problematic beliefs within school curricula, as seen in his piece for Channel 4's *4Thought TV* (22 November 2011) on the teaching of Young Earth Creationism in schools.

Significance

The significance of Law's impact is evidenced by public recognition of his work, notably:

- (i) *Humanism, A Very Short Introduction* was the winner of the \$1,000 Morris D. Forkasch award for Best Humanist Book of 2011. Shortly after its publication, Law was elected a Laureate of the International Academy of Humanism.
- (ii) Law's many public appearances have all been by invitation. He has had repeat invitations to appear on BBC television and radio programmes, such as *The Big Questions*, *Steve Wright in the Afternoon* and others (with cumulative viewing/listening figures of over 1,348,000). He has been invited to contribute multiple times to Oxford THINK week. He has had repeat appearances on *Closer to Truth*, an increasingly influential television series and award-winning online media archive concerned with 'cosmos, consciousness and God', currently broadcast on around 170 US public television stations and in several other countries. Total monthly viewings of *Closer to Truth* in January 2013 was recorded at 184,994,020. Law has had repeat invitations to speak on *Unbelievable*, an award-winning programme hosted by Premier Christian Radio which aims to promote conversation between Christians and non-Christians on topics concerned with the viability of the Christian faith, with an average weekly listening audience of 138,000.
- (iii) Law's Evil God Hypothesis is becoming increasingly established in the accepted catalogue of arguments for atheism. Evidencing this, the University of Cambridge's *Investigating Atheism* website includes a version of the Evil God Hypothesis alongside well-established arguments for atheism. In *The Huffington Post* (8 June 2013), Nathan Schneider's '10 Proofs That Will Change How You Think About God' put Law's Evil God Hypothesis number four on his list.
- (iv) Law regularly receives emails, comments and tweets from members of the public, which include testimonies of how his work has impacted their philosophical studies, their need for teaching resources and their personal intellectual journeys regarding the question of theism/atheism and related issues. The following examples are indicative:

- *I've used your evil God hypothesis often with A level students-always well received.* (Paula Saunders, St Albans, UK)
- *I was a student when [the evil god challenge] was put forward to me, by you, at one of*

Heythrop's seminars for a-level students. I think I was 17... It has had a large impact on me personally, educationally and vocationally. Much appreciation for that. (Phil Carter, UK)

- *I just read Believing Bullshit - and I absolutely loved it. I did not put it down at all - I even missed an episode of Glee so I could continue reading! (D. Spina, Australia)*
- *I am slowly integrating quite a bit of your material into my teaching of Year 13's doing the OCR Philosophy of Religion and Religious Ethics courses at 'A' Level. (Jonny, UK)*
- *I often come across the Evil God Challenge online, especially since the debate with William Lane Craig. Craig was flustered. I think that was because EGC is a genuine advance on previous formulations of the problem of evil. (Tony Lloyd, UK)*
- *I thought I'd already heard all the arguments concerning God and Christianity, and was pretty well bored with the subject. I'm glad I decided to listen to one more debate. My full appreciation of the merits and depth of the EGC took some further reading on Stephen's blog. There was much more to it, it was far more robust than I could take in when I heard it in real time listening to the debate recording. No wonder theists and atheists continue to discuss this argument. It's been added to the canon, it's here to stay! (Greg Burke)*
- *I'm looking forward to your next book, Believing Bullshit, and hoping I can find a way of incorporating into my teaching! (Jeffrey Canton, Lecturer, Children's Studies program, York University, Toronto)*
- *I'm a science professor in Brazil, and I like to discuss with my students how important it is to think clearly, not only in science, but in all areas of our lives... I consider Believing Bullshit one of the best books I've read about critical thinking. (Guilherme Guzzo, Caxias do Sul, Brazil)*

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- *Newsweek article and book review: <http://mag.newsweek.com/2011/09/04/stephen-law-philosopher-of-believing-bullshit.html>*
- *New Scientist article: <http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg21028160.200-a-field-guide-to-bullshit.html?page=2#.UgSe6W0w9EN>*
- *The Hindu article: <http://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/religion/why-must-god-be-good/article3258184.ece>*
- *Dagens Nyheter article: <http://www.dn.se/insidan/filosofen-som-vill-fa-oss-att-avsloja-bluffmakare/>*
- *Reasonable Faith: <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/search/results?q=stephen+law>*
- *The Malcontent's Gambit: <http://www.malcontentsgambit.com/2013/01/15/the-odds-of-an-evil-god-the-truth-of-moral-questions/>*
- *Law and Dawkins at the Sheldonian: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvkiEIAOqU>*
- *An episode of Closer To Truth featuring Law's work: <http://www.closetotruth.com/video-profile/Can-God-Face-Up-to-Evil-Stephen-Law-/2331>*
- *The Huffington Post article: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nathan-schneider/10-proofs-that-will-change-how-you-think-about-god_b_3392636.html*
- *Public feedback to Law's work: <http://stephenlaw.blogspot.co.uk/2012/02/feedback-required-please.html>*