

Thinking Straighter

Why the world's most famous atheist now believes in God. BY JAMES A. BEVERLEY

ANTONY FLEW, one of the world's leading philosophers, has changed his mind about God. And he has agnostics worried.

Some are mystified and others are angry. Typical of many responses is this one skeptical blogger: "Sounds to me like an old man, confronted by the end of life, making one final desperate attempt at salvation." Richard Carrier of *The Secular Web* even accuses him of "willfully sloppy scholarship."

His pedigree in philosophy explains the recent media frenzy and controversy. Raised in a Christian home and son of a famous Methodist minister, Flew became an atheist at age 15. A student of Gilbert Ryle's at Oxford, Flew won the prestigious John Locke Prize in Mental Philosophy. He has written 26 books, many of them classics like *God and Philosophy* and *How to Think Straight*. A 1949 lecture given to C. S. Lewis's Oxford Socratic Club became one of the most widely published essays in philosophy. *The Times Literary Supplement* said Flew fomented a change in both the theological and philosophical worlds.

Flew taught at Oxford, Aberdeen, Keele, Reading, and has lectured in North America, Australia, Africa, South America, and Asia. *The Times* of London referred to him as "one of the most renowned atheists of the past half-century, whose papers and lectures have formed the bedrock of unbelief for many adherents."

Last summer he hinted at his abandonment of naturalism in a letter to *Philosophy Now*. Rumors began circulating on the internet about Flew's inclinations towards belief in God, and then Richard Ostling broke the story in early December for the Associated Press. According to Craig Hazen, associate professor of comparative religions and apologetics at Biola, the school received more than 35,000 hits on their site that contains Flew's interview for *Philosophia Christi*, the journal of the Evangelical Philosophical Society. At his home in Reading, west of London, Flew told me: "I have been simply amazed by the attention given to my change of mind."

So what exactly is the reason for and nature of his "change of mind"?

JEFFERSONIAN DEIST

Flew has had to assure former students that he does not now believe in revealed religion. "Even one of my daughters asked if this meant we were going to say grace at meals," he said. "The answer is no."

Flew is also quick to point out that he is not a Christian. "I have become a deist like Thomas Jefferson." He cites his affinity with Einstein who believed in "an Intelligence that produced the integrative complexity of creation." To make things perfectly clear, he told me: "I understand why Christians are excited, but if they think I am going to become a convert to Christ in the near future, they are very much mistaken."

"Are you Paul on the road to Damascus?" I asked him.

"Certainly not."

Comedian Jay Leno suggested a motive for the change on *The Tonight Show*: "Of course he believes in God now. He's 81 years old." It's something many agnostics have said more seriously. However, Flew is not worried about impending death or post-mortem salvation. "I don't want a future life. I have never wanted a future life," he told me. He assured the reporter for *The Times*: "I want to be dead when I'm dead and that's an end to it." He even ended an interview with the *Humanist Network News* by stating: "Goodbye. We shall never meet again."

Flew's U-turn on God lies in a far more significant reality. It is about evidence. "Since the beginning of my philosophical life I have followed the policy of Plato's Socrates: We must follow the argument wherever it leads." I asked him if it was tough to change his mind. "No. It was not hard. I've always engaged in inquiry. If I am shown to have been wrong, well, okay, so I was wrong."

THE IMPACT OF EVANGELICAL SCHOLARS

Actually, Flew has been rethinking the arguments for a Designer for several years. When I saw him in London in the spring of 2003, he told me he was still an atheist but was impressed by Intelligent Design theorists. By early 2004 he had made the move to deism. Surprisingly, he gives first place to Aristotle in

Profile

hypocrites. "The GOP wants to cut the money for feeding kids. They only get two of the values of the New Testament. Do they talk about having walked among the least of these?"

THE RIGHT LANGUAGE

Dean said that Democrats have failed to use language that common Americans could relate to. "We need to get away from slogans and ideology," he told fellow Democrats.

Dean declared that though the Democrats have tried to follow maybe 25 of the 27 main values of the New Testament, they have been poor at communicating this story. Dean declared, "Lord, family values—how could we possibly lose! We are the party of family values!"

But will the Democrats follow through? Dean told the African American caucus to judge his commitment to a more diverse party by the appointments to his transition

more open about their values. A skeptic might say that you're just asking them to package their positions into more religious language.

I think this is wrong. Yes, there are Democrats who realize in failure and in defeat that they better change the way they talk about this because of demographics. I see some genuine soul-searching going on among Democrats. Religious fundamentalists have too much influence in the Republican Party. And secular fundamentalists have too much influence in the Democratic Party. I'd like to see both parties break the hold of those groups on their parties. I don't think the secular fundamentalists are going to finally prevail and prevent a new conversation among Democrats about moral values and about faith.

Do you think that a politician actually should be motivated by Christian faith? Or are you more concerned about a person's values and policies?

When you get to the public arena, you engage in a moral discourse about politics. Religion has to be disciplined by democracy, meaning, you don't win because you're religious. You don't win by saying, "I'm religious, so my position should prevail." No, you say, "I'm motivated by my faith; here's why." Then you have to persuade your fellow citizens that this is the best thing for the

team. "You will see we will walk the talk." Dean said that one of his evangelical supporters said she respected Dean's deep and honestly expressed convictions. "Evangelical

Christians are people of deep convictions," Dean said, quoting the woman.

Still, Dean was not ready to say that he would name an evangelical to his transition team. He told CT that his planning hadn't "got that far yet."

Few rank-and-file Democratic leaders had yet caught on to Dean's new way of talking. The director of the Kerry campaign in West Virginia said, "We haven't really dealt with that yet." In fact there

common good, for all of us—not just for religious people, but for all of us. All of us have an interest in the moral compass of our elected officials.

How would you respond to an evangelical Republican who is suspicious of the motives of people who seem to suddenly be finding religion?

The suspicion goes both ways. [The Religious] Right is a political seduction of religion. To reduce religion to two issues is not authentic religion. There's suspicion on all sides. So let's talk about faith. There are Christians on both sides of the aisle.

What are some areas where both parties could compromise on abortion?

First, we ought to do something about teenage pregnancy. Second, adoption reform is crucial. Third, supporting low-income women economically always reduces the abortion rate.

Plus, you've got to talk about some reasonable restrictions. Waiting periods and late-term abortion restrictions are also ideas. Now there are people on the left side and on the right side who probably won't join that common ground. But most Americans and most religious people in America are probably eager to find that common ground, which could actually save a lot of unborn lives.

were only a few evangelicals sprinkled here and there—a deacon from Alabama, a minister from Maryland, a faith-based community service leader.

'People of faith are in the Democratic Party, including me.'

Howard Dean

Most Democrats preferred to duck the issue. Jim Fraser of the Oklahoma delegation declared that he was "pro-choice, pro-life," and that he doesn't ask people what their religion is. "I am not being very cooperative with you, am I?" he chuckled as he walked away.

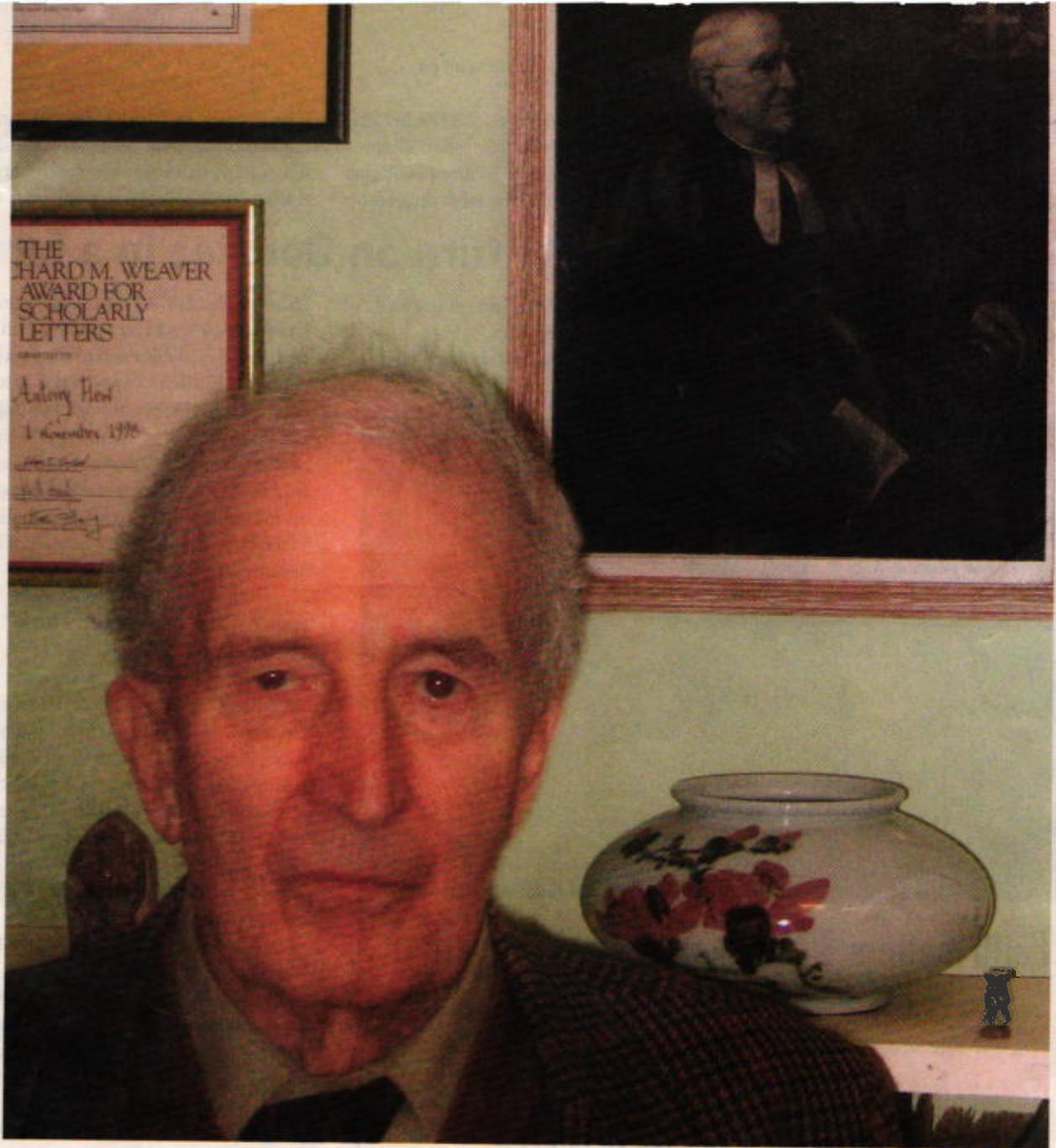
A Maryland pastor, Zina Pierre, who does not hide her evangelical convictions, left the Democrats with a benediction, encouraging her party coworkers, "Be not dismayed at their faces, the Republicans; they shall fight against thee . . . but I am with thee."

As the chairs were being stacked and the cleanup crews came in, Pierre, a pastor at First Baptist Church in Annapolis, Maryland, noted the Democrats' ill timing. "The party needs to put reaching evangelicals at the onset of a campaign, not at the end two weeks before election." She also found it hard to name any political allies who would know she was quoting from Jeremiah.

Pierre had been invited to speak only at the very end of the convention. But the emotional high point of the gathering came much earlier. At the gathering of Hispanic Democratic leaders, Gloria Nieto, vice chair of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Caucus, broke down in sobs as she lamented her feeling of rejection as a woman who had illegally married a woman in Boston. She wondered if the Democratic Party would still be a welcoming home for lesbians. At this, Dean leaped off the stage into the audience to hug her. With a sob of his own catching his voice, he brought the audience to a standing ovation when he declared, "That's why I am a Democrat."

To which many conservative evangelicals continue to respond, "That's why we are not Democrats." ❧

Tony Carnes, based in New York City, is a senior writer for CHRISTIANITY TODAY.



having the most significant impact on him. "I was not a specialist on Aristotle, so I was reading parts of his philosophy for the first time." He was aided in this by *The Rediscovery of Wisdom*, a work on Aristotle by David Conway, one of Flew's former students.

Flew also cites the influence of Gerald Schroeder, an Israeli physicist, and Roy Abraham Varghese, author of *The Wonder of the World* and an Eastern Rite Catholic. Flew appeared with both scientists at a New York symposium last May where he acknowledged his changed conviction about the necessity for a Creator. In the broader picture, both Varghese and Schroeder, author of *The Hidden Face of God*, argue from the fine-tuning of the universe that it is impossible to explain the origin of life without God. This forms the substance of what led Flew to move away from Darwinian naturalism.

I studied with Flew in 1985 in Toronto, and he told me then

about the positive impression he had of emerging evangelical scholarship. That year Varghese had arranged a Dallas conference on God, and included atheists, like Flew, and theists. That same year Flew had his first debate with historian Gary Habermas of Liberty University on the resurrection of Jesus, recorded in *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?* They have debated twice since on the same topic.

Flew has also debated Terry Miethe, who holds doctorates in both philosophy and religion, on the existence of God, and he has been involved in philosophical exchanges with J. P. Moreland, another well-known Christian philosopher. In 1998 he had a major debate in Madison, Wisconsin, with William Lane Craig, research professor at Talbot, in honor of the 50th anniversary of the famous BBC debate between Bertrand Russell and F. C. Cople-

Philosopher's Heritage: Anthony Flew's father (shown in portrait) was a widely respected Methodist minister.

ston, the brilliant Catholic philosopher.

In Reading, I asked Flew more explicitly about the impact of these and other scholars. "Who amazes you the most of the defenders of Christian theism?"

He replied, "I would have to put Alvin Plantinga pretty high," and he also complimented Miethe, Moreland, and Craig for their philosophical skills. He regards Richard Swinburne, the Oxford philoso-

phy of religion professor, as the leading figure in the United Kingdom. "There is really no competition to him." He said that Habermas has made "the most impressive

Flew's U-turn on God lies in a far more

case for Christian theism on the basis of New Testament writings."

These Christian philosophers have uni-

form respect for Flew as a person and as a thinker. Craig spoke of him as "an enduring figure in positivistic philosophy" and was "rather surprised by his giving up his athe-

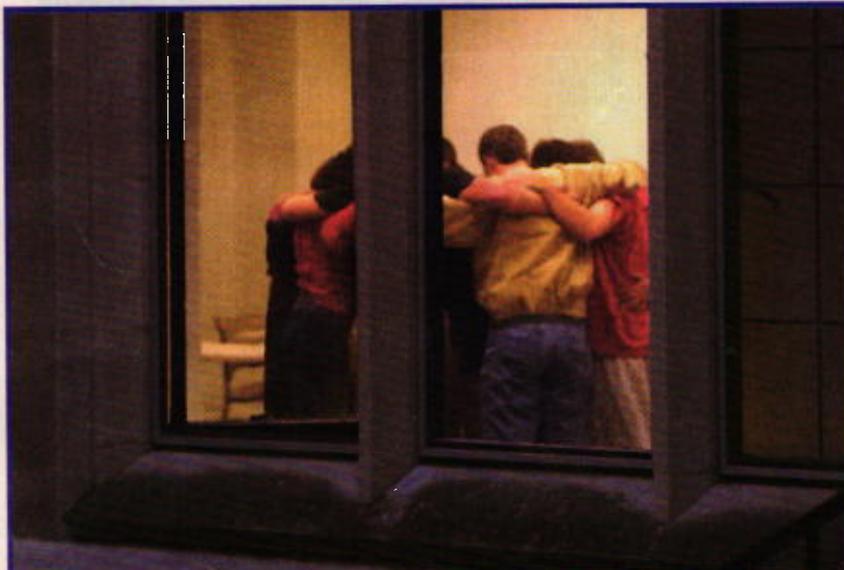
istic views." He, Miethe, and Habermas have found Flew to be a perfect gentleman both in public debate and private conversations. Swinburne says Flew has always been a tough thinker, though less dogmatic as the years went by. Plantinga, the founder of the Society of Christian Philosophers, said that Flew's change is "a tribute to his open-mindedness as well as an indication of the strength of current broadly scientific arguments against atheism."

WHAT HOLDS HIM BACK FROM CHRISTIANITY?

Flew's preference for deism and continued dislike of alleged revelation emerge from two deep impulses in his philosophy. First, Flew has an almost unshakable view against the supernatural, a view that he learned chiefly from David Hume, the 18th-century Scottish philosopher. Flew, a leading authority on Hume, wrote the classic essay on miracles in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

What is rather surprising in Flew's dogmatism is that he believes Hume did not and could not prove that miracles are, strictly speaking, impossible. "If this is the case, why not be open to God's possible intervention?" I asked. He replied by saying that the laws of nature are so well established that testimonies about miracles are easy for him to ignore. He is not impressed by people who hear regularly from God. He did concede, reluctantly and after considerable discussion, that God could, in principle, puncture his bias against the supernatural.

Of more significance, Flew detests any notion that a loving God would send any of his creatures to eternal flames. He cannot fathom how intelligent Christians can believe this doctrine. He even said in his debate with Terry Miethe that he has entertained the thought that the Creator should punish, though not endlessly, only those who defend the notion of eternal torment. On this matter, Flew is willing to entertain fresh approaches to divine jus-



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tice. In fact, he had just obtained Lewis's book *The Great Divorce* in order to assess Lewis's unique interpretation on the topic of judgment.

change in Christian scholarship over Flew's career has been remarkable. When Flew originally attacked theism more than 50 years ago, there were few Christians

gospel. It is, of course, no small matter that one of the world's leading philosophers has moved somewhat closer to the side of the angels. 

significant reality. It is about evidence.

When I asked Flew about his broader case for deism, he asked rhetorically: "Why should God be concerned about what his creatures think about him any more than he should be directly concerned with their conduct?" I reminded him of biblical verses that also ask rhetorically: "He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see?" (Ps. 94:9) It seems incredible to argue that any human cares more about the world than God does. "Is the Creator really morally clueless?" I asked. Flew responded to what he called this "interesting argument" with openness. Moreland, who teaches at Biola, says he hopes that Flew "will become even more curious about whether or not God has ever made himself clearly known to humanity."

Unlike many other modern philosophers, Flew has a high regard for the person of Jesus. Early in the interview, he stated rather abruptly: "There's absolutely no good reason for believing in Islam, whereas in Christianity you have the charismatic figure of Jesus, the defining example of what is meant by charismatic." By *charismatic*, he means *dynamic* and *impressive*. He dismissed views that Jesus never existed as "ridiculous."

Later I asked, "Are you basically impressed with Jesus?"

"Oh yes. He is a defining instance of a charismatic figure, perplexing in many ways, of course." Beyond this, Flew remains agnostic about orthodox views of Jesus, though he has made some very positive remarks about the case for the Resurrection. In the journal *Philosophia Christi* he states: "The evidence for the Resurrection is better than for claimed miracles in any other religion." No, he still does not believe that Jesus rose from the dead. However, he told me, the case for an empty tomb is "considerably better than I thought previously."

Plantinga, the dean of Christian philosophers, told me that the radical

working in philosophy. Now there are a large and growing number of scholars committed to intellectual defense of the

James A. Beverley is professor of Christian apologetics at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto. For more information on the interview with Flew, see Beverley's website at www.religionwatch.ca.



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