

## Debating Bill

### Bill Cooke

I was more than a little ambivalent about debating William Lane Craig. I know, or know of, many of his opponents in previous debates in America. He's been doing this for so long and has every trick in the book up his sleeve. And the topic, 'Is God a delusion?' was not one I felt especially motivated to argue about. It's a yes-or-no question when the answer is rarely going to be as simple. And to make matters worse, it turned out I was debating him not once, but twice; in Auckland on June 17 and in Palmerston North two nights later.

The negotiations leading up to the debate were an eye-opener. I suggested we consider a less either-or topic. My suggestion was we both present an account of how we live our lives in the style of our respective beliefs, with only a short right-of-reply time, leaving the rest for audience questions. Answer: no. I also tried to alter the format and time allocations. The twenty minute opening statement seemed too short and the two rebuttals, coming in at twenty minutes as well, seemed far too long, particularly as there was a five minute closing statement after that. All this time in he-said, she-said disputation takes time away from the question time from the audience, which is almost always the most interesting means by which real communication can take place. So, I asked Craig's minders, how about different time allocations? Answer: no. Okay, how about a different format, with fewer rebuttals? Answer: no. One of them sent this email:

I put the compromise format of the debate as I discussed with you to Dr Craig. He definitely wants ONLY the original format... This is the standard debating format. ONLY this is acceptable to him. (emphases in the original)

So, clearly negotiation and looking toward a reasonable compromise acceptable to both parties was not an option. Craig needs this format for his well-crafted piece of evangelical theatre to pan out as desired. He had his argument all worked out; I got the impression it was a stock presentation pulled out of the third drawer. From his point of view, it didn't really matter who the opponent was, or what they said.

Once it was clear I was stuck with this topic and format, I had to prepare accordingly. Rule number one in a debate is never concede any more ground to your opponent than you have to. I was determined not to debate Craig on terms set entirely and exclusively by him. Once you accept someone else's tune, you have to dance to it. With that in mind, my argument was drawn more from my area of expertise, the history of religion and religious/non-religious thought. But it was also a point of principle. Craig was passing off his notion of God as the only credible way one can be a Christian, which is palpably false. If we are to live together in the twenty-first century, then we are going to rub along even though we may not agree with one another, and winner-take-all tussles about the existence of God are, at best, irrelevant to toleration, and, more likely, a positive barrier against it. Against this, Craig assumes

that there is one way only, and that is his way. Evangelical websites, including Craig's own, call this 'Christian particularism'. Others call it dogmatism.

The danger of my approach was that it would seem we were talking at cross purposes. My opening address in the first debate in Auckland set my case out as well as the time allocation permitted, and I was happy with that. But I didn't handle the rebuttals particularly well, and was unable to stake out my own ground as clearly as I wanted. The evangelicals were delighted. Having an either-or mindset, they were looking for a no-holds-barred fight-to-the-death, and interpreted my refusal to accept Craig's dictation of terms as unwillingness to engage. At no time did they see the need to answer reasonably my charge that there are plenty of ways one can be a religious person, and Craig's insistence that his way alone is true desperately needs some evidence beyond mere assertion and repetition. What I learned from Craig that evening is to never underestimate the power of repetition. All this said, it is only being truthful to acknowledge that Craig 'won' the debate, in the sense that he was able to keep hammering away at his simple line of argument, and I was not able to set out clear alternative ground as well as I wished.

But two nights later, in Palmerston North, it was a different story. I was better able to deal with the rebuttal section of the debate, while also retaining the integrity of my line of inquiry, without dancing to his tune unduly. I had some invaluable assistance from Ray Bradley, a prominent Honorary Associate of the NZARH, and emails from philosophers in Britain, the United States as well as from New Zealand. It's incredible how quickly news moves these days.

Judging from the applause levels from the 1400-strong Palmerston North audience, and the time it took to leave the building after the debate, I think it's reasonable to claim that the honours were even, with even a suggestion of my having come across better. At Palmerston North, I was more able to stand on my own ground and present a credible case why, even from a religious perspective, Craig's argument is narrow and exclusionary. The overwhelming majority of the audience was evangelical of some description or other, and I would certainly have lost a vote, had one been put at the end of the evening, but I think it's fair to say I had the better of the evening, even if only because of not having lived down to the view the audience had of atheists. Several young evangelicals who came up to me after the debate felt moved to apologise for the behaviour of people sitting around them who were making disparaging comments about me during the debate. I heard none of them, of course, being up on the stage. A couple of people felt moved to apologise more broadly for evangelical Christianity as a whole; a most interesting experience.

Speaking to various academics after the debates, the question I faced most often was: "Why bother debating people like Craig? You'll never persuade him, and it's a waste of time going showing, yet again, how wrong-headed his claims are." It's a fair question. Debating along his yes-or-no debate theme exposes us to appearing as rigid and inflexible as the evangelicals – just two sides of the same coin. But I still think it's worth engaging in exercises such as this. Here's why.

The Palmerston North event was put on by the Crossroads Church, which is seriously evangelical. This is the second debate they have sponsored at which I have taken part. They handled both events with scrupulous even-handedness and were genuinely keen that both sides be heard at their best. They were generous in providing flights, accommodation, and covering other expenses. I don't expect to persuade any of these people that I am right. It is enough that they can see some good in atheists. If we don't come across as dishonest and smelling of sulphur, we have gone a fair way to breaking down entrenched old stereotypes. If at their next bible study session, a young evangelical hears a comment made about the dishonesty of atheists or of wicked secular humanist plots to undermine society, that person may well remember the debate at which the atheist, though obviously mistaken, did at least seem genuine in his belief. And at Crossroads at least, one might hope that such comments are not made in the first place. This is the stuff of dialogue.

It is also relevant that the average length of commitment to an evangelical or fundamentalist church is about three years, before they tire of the overheated sense of imminent threat (which only large donations or tithes seem able to cure) and the artificial piety. And having moved on from their fundamentalist phase, the religious traveller may well look to a less rigid form of religious expression. And, they may even look to some other sort of commitment altogether. This is how open societies preserve themselves.

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