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AN END-TIMES DEBATE AT OXFORD

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

In August, 2008 I received an e-mail from the Oxford Union Society in England wanting to know if I would participate in a debate concerning the following motion: "This house believes the end is nigh." After consulting with some friends and colleagues, I accepted the invitation and the event was scheduled for Friday, November 21, 2008. I subsequently journeyed across the pond and attended this event hoping to provide some testimony for the cause of Christ. Thus, I am providing a report of my trip to such a prestigious environment.

OXFORD

Oxford is the oldest university in the English-speaking world and the second oldest in the world, next to the University of Paris.[1] The name of the university is the same as the town in which it resides. Oxford is about 60 miles northwest of London. It is hard to pin down an exact date for the founding of Oxford, but it is known to have sprang-up in the late 1100s.[2] Oxford, like most European Universities, began when different colleges began to be established in the town. Thus, today the University is made up of "38 independent colleges, and 6 permanent private halls."[3] "Academically, Oxford is consistently ranked in the world's top 10 universities."[4]

The debate was sponsored by the largest student organization affiliated with the University—the Oxford Union Society. The Oxford Union is said to be "the world's most prestigious debating society." "It was founded in 1823 as a forum for discussion and debate, at a time when the free exchange of ideas was a notion foreign to the restrictive University authorities. It soon became the only place for students to discuss political topics whilst at Oxford."[5] Its debate chamber is very similar to the British Parliament at Westminster that many Americans have seen on C-Span and for good reason. Many members of Parliament first honed their debating skills at the Union while students at Oxford. Many famous world leaders and spokesmen have appeared at the Union, including Jerry Falwell in June 1984. Dr. Falwell debated the Prime Minister of New Zealand, David Lange on the morality of nuclear weapons. The event was televised all over the world and Dr. Falwell was heckled by the students for his views.[6] Winston Churchill once called the student audience at the Oxford Union "callow ill-tutored youths."[7] Other than a few occasional frowns from the audience when I stated biblical truth, responses toward me while at the Union were hospitable. In fact, I received the second loudest applause, out of five speakers, when I finished my opening statement.

THE END IS NIGH

There was a panel of five debaters at our event. The other four included in the order of our presentations John Micklethwait, Editor-in-Chief of the *Economist*; a science professor from Oxford whose name I cannot recall; Vinay Mistry, Manager of Exposure Management at Lloyd's of London Insurance; and Philip Stott, Professor Emeritus of Biogeography at the School of Oriental and African Studies in Oxford, and a former editor of the *Journal of Biogeography*.

John Micklethwait went first and spent half of his time talking about what the word "nigh" meant. He did not take a conclusive stand and simply talked about some of the geopolitical problems facing the world. The second person was the science professor

who spoke about some of the problems the world faces from a scientific perspective, but did not really draw any conclusions. I was third the third speaker. Number four was Vinay Mistry from Lloyd's of London who spoke about some of the great risks the world faces from an insurance perspective, including the threat of global warming. The final spokesman was Philip Stott who thought the greatest threat to the human race was still an epidemic of some disease. Stott also ripped global warming and said as a liberal he was embarrassed that fellow liberals have fallen for the greatest hoax of all time. He hoped that in the next decade that issue would fade into the background and we could get on to more important things. He received the loudest applause.

SECULAR APOCALYPTICISM

No surprisingly, I was the only one advocating a biblical perspective concerning the question. The rest took a secular approach to doomsday that is often called secular apocalypticism. This view arose shortly after the development of nuclear weapons and holds that man is now capable of destroying himself. Previously, Armageddon had been seen as a religious issue, but now man has supposedly evolved to the point where he could now destroy the world. The invitation letter from the Oxford Union included the following statement from the perspective of secular apocalypticism:

> The development of nuclear power and threat of nuclear war partially caused the conception of the Doomsday Clock in 1947, which now reaches perilously close to midnight of mankind. Since then, the potential dangers facing humanity have grown to include the specter of environmental catastrophe; . . . the risks of climate change—indeed, some suggest human civilization is poised to change utterly out of recognition as a result. . . . the economic risks of "Peak Oil" may strike at the very heart of modern society; our reliance on petrochemical goods and services ties us to a continually growing consumption of oil, one which we may not be able to continue—and one endangered by instability in the Middle East. It is thus no surprise that in these threats many see the end of the world.[8]

As I noted in the debate, the problem with secular apocalypticism is that it leaves God out and exalts fallen mankind. Therefore, there is no basis in truth to evaluate anything that is happening today and certainly no way to know if the end is nigh.

A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

An abbreviated version of my input at the debate went something like this: We all want to survive! In order to survive we have to have hope. The Bible provides hope based upon reality. The Bible, which is God's revelation to mankind, tells us who we are, where we came from, and where we are going. God's revelation in the Bible is totally unique. All other religions in the world are based upon a philosophy or ethics and are not grounded in historical reality. The Bible certainly has a philosophy or theology and it clearly has ethics, but the Bible claims to be God's revelation to mankind, thus it is rooted and grounded in history. If God did not create the heavens and the earth in six days, if Adam did not fall into sin, if the global flood did not occur, if the call of Abraham and the Exodus did not happen, if Jesus Christ did not live, die, rise from the dead and promise to return, then you can take your Bible and throw it in the nearest recycling bin. BUT THESE THINGS DID OCCUR!

How does the past relate to the future? Prophecy is history written in advance. About a third of the Bible was prophecy when it was written. About half of prophecy was fulfilled at Christ's first coming and half will be fulfilled in the future. Just as there were over 100 specific prophecies fulfilled by Jesus at His first coming, including His place of birth, what Jewish tribe He would descend from, even the time in history when He would show up according to Daniel 9:24–27. Bible prophecy painted a profile of what the Messiah would look like in history and Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled those prophecies in history.

Since the prophecies of Christ's first coming were fulfilled literally and historically, so also will the prophecies surrounding His second coming. Therefore, one who studies the Bible is able to develop a profile of what things will be like before Christ returns. First, the next event on the prophetic calendar is the rapture of the Church when genuine believers in Christ will disappear from planet earth and be taken to heaven. Then, after the rapture, a seven-year period known as the tribulation will take place and there are hundreds of biblical passages that speak of that time. Even today we see signs that God is preparing the world for that time.

Tonight I want to call our attention to three major indicators that the end is nigh. First is the reestablishment of the nation of Israel. No other people in the history of the world have ever been removed from their homeland, scattered across the globe, maintained their ethnic identity, and then returned to their original homeland. No one has ever done this except Israel, God's nation. Second, for the first time in history, we are seeing that Globalism is actually being implemented in our own day. The Bible predicts a global government during the tribulation. Third, the rise of the European Union appears to be a forerunner to a revived Roman Empire that Daniel and Revelation predict will be the center of the coming global government.

CONCLUSION

As the night progressed, I was able to briefly state the gospel to my fellow debaters and audience. We fielded a number of questions from the audience and had some give and take between the five panelists. Overall the tone was one of politeness even though some of the students made faces when I would state clear biblical truth about man's fallen nature, the gospel, and specific prophecies. I was able to talk with and share the gospel with the other debaters and many students for two hours after the debate. I don't know how often there is a gospel witness at Oxford in the days in which we live, but I am thankful for this opportunity to spread a little light in these last days. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

[1] Wikipedia, "University of Oxford."
[2] Wikipedia, "University of Oxford."
[3] Wikipedia, "University of Oxford." "A Permanent Private Hall at the University of Oxford is an educational institution within the university—not as a constituent college, but able to present students for Oxford University degrees." Wikipedia, "Permanent Private Hall."
[4] Wikipedia, "University of Oxford."
[5] From the Oxford Union's website, www.oxford-union.org/about_us.
[6] John Corry, "Falwell in Debate on Nuclear Weapons," *The New York Times* (June 20, 1985; www.nytimes.com).

[7] Winston Churchill, speech on Anti-Socialist and Anti-Communist Union meeting, London, February 17, 1933 (www.bartleby.com/73/2089.html).
[8] Personal letter on file from Josh Roche, The Oxford Union to Thomas Ice, August 18, 2008.