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Farewell to an Old Friend Remembering Antony Flew

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On April 5, 2010, I spoke at some length with Tony Flew's wife, Annis. Among the items we discussed, the first piece of news caught my attention immediately and dominated the remainder of the phone call. Annis told me that the family was expecting Tony's death shortly. After explaining to her how sorry I was to hear that, I recounted a few personal memories of Tony, things that had stuck in my mind over the years. So while his death was not totally unexpected, neither did I think that I would hear the news so soon: Tony died just a mere three days later, on April 8, 2010. As soon as I heard, I called Annis again and passed on my sincerest condolences.

During those three days and for some time afterwards, I thought quite frequently about Tony's life and his death. It is not an exaggeration to say that memories from our twenty-five years of friendship dominated my thinking during this time. Thoughts about one event would emerge, followed by another memory, often in rapid succession. Strangely enough, my thoughts were not dictated by our several professional debates, dialogues, and interviews. Neither was my thinking centered on Tony's previous atheism nor his proclamation of deism. Rather, more often than not, it was many of the little things—a laugh here, a clarification there, a political moment from the recent news, something about our families, or about Tony's overall demeanor—that I remembered most readily. It was several of these accounts that I had retold to Annis.

In terms of his total literary production, Antony Garrard Newton Flew (1923–2010) was arguably the most able philosophical apologist for atheism—perhaps ever. It is unlikely that any philosopher has ever written more in defense of atheology. His major works such as *God and Philosophy*, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, and *The Presumption of Atheism* as well as a host of other relevant publications are witnesses to his systematic treatment

ABSTRACT: This essay is a personal tribute to the life of philosopher Antony Flew (1923–2010). After some brief comments about Flew's life, the article is divided into academic and personal memories that were shared between Gary Habermas and him. Included are details of various academic publications, debates, critiques, as well as several private discussions.

of the relevant subjects.¹ For the vast majority of his career, he had rejected tenets such as God's existence and attributes, special revelation, the occurrence of miracles, or the likelihood of an afterlife. We studied his works for our classes when I was a student. He was a giant. Only time will reveal the final impact of his life, views, and publications.

So it came as no surprise that, in recent years, he made the headlines worldwide once again, this time after announcing that he had recently come to believe in the existence of God. He reported it many times—it had nothing to do with faith, and he did not affirm any religion's account of special revelation, but he did come to hold to a rather traditional understanding of God's nature and attributes. This was simply a move that he thought he was compelled to make, strictly due to the evidence. As he said frequently over the last few years, especially in relation to his "conversion" to deism, "I had to go where the evidence leads."²

In spite of his age—eighty-seven years—his life came to a conclusion all too soon as far as I was concerned. I was very much saddened to hear of his death. Sure, he had lived a long and good life—the sort that makes people quip that they hoped that they would live so long and so well. However, through the years we had experienced many wonderful conversations, achieved some great insights, and I simply did not want these times to come to an end. But when the time came, I realized anew that I had lost a dear friend.

Some might conclude that my thoughts here had to do more with Tony's conversion from atheism to deism. But that was simply not the case. There is no question that we would have been friends regardless of his change in thinking. After all, we had maintained our friendship for almost twenty years before that time, in spite of our philosophical differences. The majority of our dozens of letters and phone calls had nothing to do with "pushing" each other towards our own positions. For my part, it comes down to this: I would have felt similarly even had he remained an atheist.

But I do not intend the remainder of this article to be primarily concerned with Tony's philosophical positions on this or that issue, or his conversion to Deism later in life, and so on. There is still much more of the latter story to be told, to be sure, but that will have to wait for another time. Rather, this essay will be concerned chiefly with anecdotes and memories of Tony

1. *God and Philosophy* (1966; Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2005); *Hume's Philosophy of Belief* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961); *The Presumption of Atheism* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976); "Theology and Falsification," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (New York: Macmillan, 1955); "Miracles," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967); *The Logic of Mortality* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987); introduction to *Of Miracles*, by David Hume (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1985).

2. E.g., in a personal conversation with me, September 9, 2004. Cf. "My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: A Discussion between Antony Flew and Gary Habermas," *Philosophia Christi* 6 (2004): 198; cf. the discussion on 210–11.

Flew, as a tribute to a special person. Some of these are academic, and some are personal. For him, the two are intertwined and almost impossible to separate. But it is my hope that several of these stories will provide insights, and perhaps even a few smiles, regarding the man and his character.

Academic Memories

My earliest memory of Tony Flew in person took place at the venue where he and I first met. Roy Abraham Varghese had organized a simply incredible series of debates titled, "Christianity Challenges the University."³ It was an interdisciplinary gathering that featured some of the top scholars in the world in fields such as philosophy, chemistry, biology, psychology, ethics, and New Testament. Perhaps the most celebrated "confrontation" that weekend featured a debate between four of the most prominent Christian philosophers in the world (Alvin Plantinga, William Alston, George Mavrodes, and Ralph McInerny) and four equally prominent atheists (Flew, Kai Nielsen, Paul Kurtz, and Wallace Matson).

Plantinga had been arguing that belief in God was properly basic and, hence, evidence of His existence was not strictly necessary. Flew grew increasingly frustrated with that approach. Finally, during the ensuing dialogue, Tony turned to the crowd as if for support, and in an impassioned plea with his arms waving rather wildly in the air, he cried out, "I need some *evidence* for God's existence. I'll take any kind, but I do need *evidence*!!" Personally, as I told an atheist friend who was present, I thought Tony's plea was one of the atheists' brightest moments during that dialogue.

That evening, Tony, philosophy colleague Terry Miethe, and I had dinner together in downtown Dallas, where the idea of our first debate on the resurrection was proposed and accepted. Miethe would serve as the moderator. During that evening and several times since, I listened intently while Tony expounded on his own reminiscences of having known C. S. Lewis and attended the famous Socratic Club meetings at Oxford University. On this particular evening, again addressing his frustrations with Plantinga's position,⁴ Tony emphasized how Lewis would always provide reasons for his Christian beliefs. While he obviously did not agree with Lewis, Tony emphasized that he could always respect that sort of evidential approach to questions involving theism.

3. Subtitled "An International Conference of Atheists and Theists," the debates were convened in Dallas, Texas, from February 7–10, 1985.

4. Tony was frustrated with Plantinga's emphasis on properly basic truths and his therefore not having to produce specific arguments for God's existence.

A few months later, on May 2, 1985, Tony visited Liberty University on the occasion of our first debate on the Resurrection.⁵ In one of his meetings with our philosophy students, I again found myself absorbed in the conversation while Tony described some of his times with C. S. Lewis, this time describing Lewis's infamous debate with Cambridge University philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe. Tony described how, afterwards, he was walking out of the debate directly behind Anscombe, with Lewis a little ways ahead. Anscombe was obviously elated, thinking that she had won the dialogue, while Lewis looked rather downcast as he went back to his residence at the university.⁶

During and after our initial debate on the resurrection, Tony protested mildly that, in spite of my comments to the contrary, he did not think that he was guilty of rejecting miracles in an *a priori* manner. He insisted that he was open-minded, even towards miraculous events. At the time I disagreed mildly, citing places in his writings where I thought that his stance indicated otherwise. It was not until many years later, between 2000 and the date of his death, that I concluded that, at the very least, he was correct and was far more open than I had suspected. Though he never embraced the occurrence of miraculous events, he showed that he would consider the evidence for many positions, religious as well as otherwise, that were contrary to his own views. In retrospect, I realized what that openness indicated about him. Perhaps this was an early harbinger of later events.⁷

After our second debate on the resurrection of Jesus in 2000, an event that was televised nationally and later published,⁸ I saw another aspect of Tony's character, the honesty of giving his opinion even when it was not to his benefit to do so. We had just walked off the television set, and were proceeding to a nearby room to have our makeup removed. While walking, Tony leaned over to me and made a remark that I'll never forget. Though I had heard his comment, I was so incredibly surprised that I asked him if he would repeat his statement. Once again he made the remark clearly, as if

5. Gary Habermas and Antony Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate*, ed. Terry L. Miethe (1987; Eugene: OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003).

6. Flew describes this occasion in more detail in my interview with him in Oxford, England, on July 29, 2005. See "From Atheism to Deism: A Conversation between Antony Flew and Gary R. Habermas," in *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty*, ed. David Baggett, Gary R. Habermas, and Jerry L. Walls (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 37–9. Incidentally, my dedication in this book was "To Antony Flew, in good friendship and admiration." This account is also told in Antony Flew with Roy Abraham Varghese, *There Is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 22–4.

7. Another example of his openness is a letter that he wrote to me on August 27, 2009. After telling me that he had been "composing a posthumous edition of my *The Logic of Mortality*," he continued, "I am sure you would have wanted to show me the error of my ways and a useful discussion would have been established at my death."

8. Gary R. Habermas and Antony G. N. Flew, *Resurrected? An Atheist and Theist Dialogue*, ed. John F. Ankerberg (Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield, 2005).

something had just occurred to him: "I have no evidence for my position!" I was absolutely stunned, and do not even remember how or if I responded.

A few years later, when the New Atheism was gaining some notoriety, Richard Dawkins wrote a brief comment about Tony Flew that was apparently taken by some as an implication that Tony's coming to believe in God had something to do with his old age, not to mention his being manipulated by Christians.⁹ On more than one occasion, Flew responded.¹⁰ It was a constant topic in our personal discussions.¹¹ Then in 2008, in what may have been his final journal article, Tony published a review of Dawkins' book. Flew referred to Dawkins as "a secularist bigot" and noted that the chief problem was that it was "all too clear that Dawkins is not interested in the truth as such but is primarily concerned to discredit an ideological opponent by any available means."¹²

On another occasion, in March 2008, Tom Wright and I were the speakers at an event held at Westminster Chapel in London, where we were lecturing on the topic of Jesus's resurrection. When Tony heard that Tom and I were together, he asked if he could come and say a few words about Richard Dawkins! The program directors were delighted to have Tony attend and give his critique of Dawkins, even if it was an entirely different topic from the one we were addressing. So Tom, Tony, and I participated in a panel discussion, and Tony explained why Dawkins was so mistaken in his views regarding atheistic evolution, a position that Tony himself would have held in one form or another over the majority of his life!

To be sure, Tony Flew had a remarkable career as a world-renowned philosopher, especially as an apologist for atheism, having been educated at Oxford University and later teaching there briefly, as well as at other major universities. Throughout his career, he exhibited a prodigious mind. Even in his last years, I heard comments from scholars regarding his later publications. Remarkably, in 2005, one of the foremost Christian philosophers in the world made a remark to me that I will not easily forget. He reported that whenever he was invited to a university campus for a debate, which he did a number of times, he responded that he would be happy to dialogue with any other philosopher whose services the university might obtain, with one exception. He would then make it clear that he would not debate Antony Flew. Amazed, I asked him why he made that exception. He said that it was due to Flew's brilliant and exceptionally provocative books. Then just recently, as I began to write this essay, another scholar who had recent contact with Tony told me, "If he can reason like that now in his eighties, think of how brilliant an opponent he would have been in his younger years!"

9. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 106n.

10. E.g., see Flew and Habermas, "From Atheism to Deism," 44.

11. Personal letter, August 27, 2009.

12. Antony Flew, review of *The God Delusion*, by Richard Dawkins, *Philosophia Christi* 10 (2008): 473–5.

Personal Memories

While Tony and I were usually together in academic situations, a number of personal recollections will forever remain engraved in my mind and in some good photographs. Of the two sorts of memories recounted in this essay, several of those in this category remain my fondest.

I mentioned that when I first met Tony in 1985 we left the conference early enough to go out to dinner, where we made the arrangements for what would be our first debate on the subject of the resurrection of Jesus. Terry Miethe, Tony, and I were walking down the street in downtown Dallas, Texas, dodging pedestrians, and making our way to a local restaurant. Tony was waving his arms, rather windmill-like, while he spoke, almost oblivious to others beyond our threesome. At that time I did not know Tony very well, but I was still surprised to see him step off the curb, still talking, directly into the path of a car that was turning the corner. I reached out quickly and stopped him, thinking that I might have just prevented some serious hurt to the world's most famous philosophical atheist!

Just a few months later, Tony visited the campus of Liberty University to debate the subject of the resurrection of Jesus. Tony spent a week or two with us, either at the university or enjoying short trips to several Civil War sites in our area, accompanied by Terry Miethe. One night he was visiting with my family and having dinner with us. When it was time for my small children to go to bed, Tony asked that our youngest at that time, our daughter Holly, come sit on his lap so that he could hold her for a moment and then wish her a good night. As he did so, once again I thought to myself that one of the world's best-known philosophers was here in my home, enjoying the presence of my little daughter! Needless to say, we still have the photographs!

After the televised dialogue that I mentioned above, in 2000, we addressed a number of questions from those in the crowd. Several lively though polite discussions ensued. One woman spoke up, very sincerely, and said, "Dr. Flew, I'm going to pray for you." As I recall, Tony responded good-naturedly, "Good, because I need all the help I can get!"

During one of our dialogues in England on the subject of Tony's philosophical career, his memories of C. S. Lewis, and his later conversion to deism, I was thrilled to witness a brief reunion that took place just before we began. Basil Mitchell, another world-class philosopher and longtime professor at Oxford University, walked into the gathering to listen to the discussion. Tony had not seen Mitchell for quite a while, and was visibly affected to see his old friend once again, in spite of their having long been on opposite sides of the philosophy of religion spectrum. But I enjoyed being a silent witness to their brief reunion as they shared together for a few minutes before Tony and I walked up on the stage.

After the dialogue, Tony accompanied my wife Eileen and me to dinner in Oxford. The three of us enjoyed the meal, and then we spent some time walking around the city. Because Tony was returning the next morning to his home in Reading, he stopped at one of the ATMs to get some cash. The machine refused to work properly, and my wife had to come to Tony's aid to help him out. Afterwards, we walked him to his hotel. As we stood in front of the elevator, Eileen reached up rather spontaneously, pulled down on Tony's neck, and kissed him on the cheek. Somewhat embarrassed, Tony straightened his disheveled glasses, stood up straight and tall with his hands at his side and announced happily, "Well . . . I guess that's it for this trip. Cheerio!"

Before the appearance of Tony's much-discussed book with Roy Abraham Varghese, *There Is a God*, Tony sent me a prepublication copy. It occupied a few of our discussions thereafter. He both wrote and told me that the book was fully accurate, and that he "won't shut the door" to either special revelation or to hearing a word from God.¹³ During one phone call, I told Tony that I did not question that he had had a substantial role in the content of the volume. One way I knew this to be the case, I quipped, was that I had made a note of numerous "Flewisms"—comments in the book that had his imprint all over them, passages that spoke the way he often did. Examples included the remarks that his wife Annis was "much younger" than he¹⁴ or his positive observations regarding Jesus and Paul.¹⁵ He frequently made these same remarks, in just those identical words. Tony found the term "Flewisms" to be rather amusing, and on this occasion, he giggled like few other times I have heard him. His spontaneous and heartfelt response has remained in my mind.

I have saved for last a memory that actually happened earlier, after our third debate on the resurrection of Jesus. This dialogue happened under the auspices of the Veritas Forum and took place at Cal Poly University, in San Luis Obispo, California, in January 2003.¹⁶ As Tony and I were heading back to our hotel, we were teasing about doing another debate on the Resurrection. Tony responded that three dialogues on the subject were plenty. Then we arrived at our hotel and the elevator stopped at my floor. As I stepped out, I had what I have called "a surrealistic experience." I turned and extended my hand through the open elevator door to shake hands with Tony. Then I quipped, "When you become a Christian, I want to be the first one to know."

13. Personal conversation with Antony Flew, October 3, 2007.

14. Flew, *There Is a God*, 25.

15. *Ibid.*, 185–6.

16. This dialogue was published as *Did the Resurrection Happen? A Conversation with Gary Habermas and Antony Flew*, ed. David Baggett (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009). Although the dialogue took place in 2003, the actual publication date presumably made this volume the last one to be published during Tony Flew's life.

Tony graciously answered, "I think you've earned that right."¹⁷ Interestingly enough, a few years later, Tony told me that he was closer to Christianity than before, though he was not enthusiastic about the prospects.¹⁸

Conclusion

One night in 1985, several days after our first debate, I was driving Tony back to his hotel. That evening we had been discussing the possibilities of an afterlife. As we were driving along, I asked Tony if he was afraid to die. He chose to respond this way: "I should think that I have a good many years yet to live." He was indeed correct, as he lived precisely twenty-five years after that evening. But as I said earlier, even at eighty-seven years of age, his life ended too early for my liking. I will miss Tony Flew profoundly.

17. I recounted this story in Tony's presence in Flew and Habermas, "From Atheism to Deism," 46. As I also did on that occasion, I want to make it clear that I am not intending to state or imply that I am the only one who has influenced Tony over the years. E.g., we have already mentioned the role played by Roy Varghese.

18. Personal conversation, October 3, 2007.