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## Editorial

*‘Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name.’*

Isaiah 40:26

This edition of Faith & Thought carries two papers that encourage us to look at the stars. One invites us to use scientific imagery in an imaginative way which might lead to Divine encounter, the other asks what stars are for. These different but complementary viewpoints raise a pertinent question for Faith & Thought as an organisation. In recent years we have carried more articles that are not strictly ‘scientific’ in their focus and we would like to hear your views on this. We have drafted a few questions on page 33 and would be very grateful if you could take a few minutes to share your thoughts in reply.

Alan Kerry (Editor)

# **Icons of Science - A Visual Approach to Science-Faith Dialogue<sup>1</sup>**

## **Rev Dr David Gregory<sup>2</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

Noting trends within popular science presentations within the visual media, an approach to science-faith dialogue is explored based upon a spiritual reading of scientific imagery. The importance of visual experiences in encountering God within the Bible and through art is reviewed. Differences between the transmission of imaginative ideas through art and science are recognised. To open possibilities of Divine encounter through scientific imagery, a move away from science's solid mechanisation of the world is suggested. A lens allowing a more fluid sacramental reading of imagery is developed combining insights from the thirteenth century Franciscan theologian Bonaventure's notion of "vestiges" of God within creation with sociologist Peter Berger's idea of "signals of transcendence" within the everyday world.

### **1. Introduction**

Sian Ede asks, "can science images be art?"<sup>3</sup>. It might be argued that within popular media, stunning scientific imagery is perhaps more

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<sup>3</sup> Ede, *Art and Science*, 2006, p. 187

familiar than images that have traditionally be seen as art. Science stories regularly feature on news streams accompanied by images that capture the wonder of creation. Science and natural history documentaries – such as Brian Cox’s “Wonders of the Universe”<sup>4</sup> and David Attenborough’s recent “A Life on our Planet”<sup>5</sup> - also rely on awe inspiring imagery to both entertain and inform, at times exaggerating a vision of the cosmos in which science triumphs over faith.

This use of imagery marks a shift in how ideas are communicated in the more visual culture that developed through the late twentieth century with the advent of television and the internet. Yet, the dialogue of science and faith within the Christian community has not adapted to this new visual age. Celia Deane-Drummond suggests it is primarily shaped by “theoretical questions and narrow specific concerns in the interests of clarity and academic respectability”<sup>6</sup> around issues such as the action of God within a scientific vision of the world, with a slant towards apologetics. She asks whether “such studies are somehow missing the point? That is, what if they are bypassing the breadth of experience that sustains the conversation at the popular level or equally important, ignor[e] the wider, larger audience that is gaining interest in such topics?”<sup>7</sup>

Deane-Drummond further observes that “finding something wonderful through science is a very common human experience ... [among both] those who learn and listen as well as those engaged in the research”<sup>8</sup>. Some attempts have been made to visually engage the wonder of creation that science reveals with the wonder of the creator that faith

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<sup>4</sup> *Wonders of the Universe*, BBC, 2011 - also published as a book by Collins, 2020

<sup>5</sup> *A Life on our Planet*, Netflix, 2020 - also published as a book by Ebury Press, 2020

<sup>6</sup> Deane-Drummond, *Experiencing Wonder and Seeking Wisdom*, 2007, p. 587

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 587

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 587-588

espouses. Louie Giglio and Matt Redman book "Indescribable"<sup>9</sup> explores images from the Hubble Space Telescope. While this chimes with Deane-Drummond's call, it remains shaped by an apologetic tone which is apparent in much science-faith dialogue, at least that which arises from within the evangelical spectrum of the church. As such it remains an expression of what Pope Francis calls the "technocratic imagination" inherent to Modernity where "creation in all its glorious diversity ... [is] manipulated for our satisfaction"<sup>10</sup> - whether that is to satisfy scientific curiosity or security of faith.

This technocratic approach to creation developed gradually through much of the past millennium, originating in what Charles Taylor sees as a radical theological shift in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries within the western Church. From Exemplarism, an expression of Realism, which drew upon a "sacramental imagination" in which God revealed himself "through signs and symbols", towards Nominalism. Ironically, it was led in part by leading thinkers such as Grosseteste, Roger Bacon and Ockham, members of the Franciscan order whose theological origin drew heavily upon Exemplarism. These and others helped lay the foundation for later scientific developments, leading to what Taylor suggests - in Weber's terminology - was a gradual "disenchantment" of the world. This resulted in a "mechanisation of the world" where God's purpose is known through "scripture; or from examining what [God] has made"<sup>11</sup>. Humanity's quest for God is expressed through being "agents of instrumental reason, working the system effectively in order to bring about God's purposes; because it is

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<sup>9</sup> Giglio & Redman, *Indescribable*, 2011

<sup>10</sup> Radcliffe, *Alive in God - A Christian Imagination*, 2019, p. 302

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2007, p. 98

through these purposes, and not through signs, that God reveals himself in his world"<sup>12</sup>.

Stimulated by the call for a more popular engagement between science and faith, and noting the shift from printed to visual communication, here I explore a visual approach to the dialogue of science and faith. I seek a lens that allows scientific imagery to be viewed with a sacramental imagination that counters the disenchantment of the world and allows encounter with the transcendent presence of God through signs and symbols. Drawing upon previous experience of visual approaches to spirituality, I reflect on "can science be art", exploring how art expresses and transmits both humans and divine ideas. A theological lens is constructed using the Franciscan Bonaventure's exemplarist theology of "vestiges" - marks within creation of "the creator's supreme power, wisdom, and benevolence [that] shine forth in created things"<sup>13</sup>. These are combined with insights of Peter Berger as to how disenchantment might be countered by "signals of transcendence ... phenomena within the domain of our 'natural' reality ... that appear to point beyond that reality"<sup>14</sup>. An example of how the lens might be used is shared, examining the Hubble Telescope Deep Field view of galactic structures. Discussion concludes with suggestions of how this visual approach might enhance the experience of worship and mission beyond the Christian community.

## 2. **Imaging and Imagining the Divine**

In common with other monotheistic faiths originating within the Middle East, in Christianity a written text, whose form is shaped by human creativity and culture, is viewed as a divinely inspired bearer of revelation. However, this flows from the central act of God's revelation

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 98

<sup>13</sup> Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God*, 1978, p. 63

<sup>14</sup> Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, 1970, p. 70

- the Incarnation. John's gospel begins with a description of Jesus as "the Word", a seemingly rational emphasis that resonates with an emphasis upon written communication of thought. Yet, within the Johannine tradition there is recognition that people's encounter with "the Word" is a multi-sensory one; "we declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life"<sup>15</sup>.

Reflecting upon the Orthodox tradition, where Icons play a key role in personal and corporate devotion, Jaroslav Pelikan declares that "the ancient priority of hearing in Biblical thought ... had now been forced to yield to the priority of seeing, as a consequence of the incarnation. ... as Word, [Jesus] was still to be heard and obeyed; but as Light, he was now to be seen as well – and therefore visualized"<sup>16</sup>. Visual encounter of the divine can be found throughout scripture, commonly drawing upon creation. Following the Flood, God affirms his care for all living things - human and the whole community of creation - in "setting my rainbow in the clouds"<sup>17</sup>, a purely visual phenomenon. Similarly, at the end of Job's dialogue with God, in which the Divine invites him to gaze on the wonder of creation, Job declares "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you"<sup>18</sup>.

Jesus' parables rely much on the visual, painting imaginative, vivid word pictures that rely of the prior visual experiences of their hearers. Through them, Jesus imaginatively connects everyday events and objects with the character and action of God. When asked about parables, he comments "the reason I speak to them in parables is that

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<sup>15</sup> 1 John 1v1-2, *The Bible, New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV)

<sup>16</sup> Pelikan, *Imago Dei*, 1999, p. 99

<sup>17</sup> Genesis 9v13, NRSV

<sup>18</sup> Job 42v5, NRSV

seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand”<sup>19</sup>.

Forbes suggests that in the parables Jesus is seeking to “expand the imaginations of his followers”<sup>20</sup>, enabling them to see in a new way, beyond rational mode of understanding. This captures something of the interaction between an artist and the audience who view the image created. Michael Polanyi and Kevin Prosch suggest that art is the “work of the artist’s imagination ... [expressed in] artificial patterns ... [that] ... transmit[s] their imagination to the public ... and depend[s] upon the imaginative powers of these people to accept the works of their imagination as meaningful”.<sup>21</sup>

Dependent upon the imagination of the originator and those receiving the work, this is an open relationship. The received meaning may be different from that intended by the originator. Different spatial and temporal contexts of both may also lead to a shift in meaning or for meaning not to be perceived at all. Yet, like parables, art has the capacity to stretch the imaginative vision of the viewer, even facilitating transcendental encounter. Karl Rahner among others note that “religious experience has its origin in sense experience[.] ... Every time we see an object, [it is] ... a kind of sensory experience of transcendence ... [that] ... refers the sense-endowed spiritual subject to God”.<sup>22</sup>

### **3. Scientific Imagination**

So, can science and its imagery convey a similar experience? Drawing upon artistic language, Hayes (1999, p. 978) suggests “the entire cosmos can be seen as a vast symbol of God ... a work of art that

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<sup>19</sup> Matthew 13v3, NRSV

<sup>20</sup> Forbes, *Imagination - Embracing a Theology of Wonder*, 1986, p. 55

<sup>21</sup> Polanyi & Prosch, *Meaning*, 1977, p. 101

<sup>22</sup> Rahner, *The Theology of the Religious Meaning of Images*, 1984, pp. 150, 158

expresses the divine idea in something that is not God"<sup>23</sup>. Science explores the work of the divine artist, through technology that expands the scope of natural senses and human vision across a wider range of spatial scales - from the micro to the macro. Yet is the vision of the cosmos that science projects open to imaginative interpretive experience that leads to transcendent encounter with that beyond the purely human and material?

In asking, "can science be art?", Ede reflects upon different perspectives on "knowing" between art and science. She comments, "as a whole artists [do not] believe that real knowledge can be found; ... they question and doubt claims to absolute truth and fixed taxonomies. Meaning depends upon countless variables"<sup>24</sup>, including personal perspectives of the artist and viewer. In contrast, science attempts to "negate the human agency from the intervention [seeking] objective meaning"<sup>25</sup>, a universal understanding of the material world. This seems to preclude an exercise of the imagination from the scientific process, a position entrenched in Logical Positivism's view of science. This views science as a "work of pure detachment and objectivity, orientated only by the facts"<sup>26</sup> established through a cycle of hypothesis, observation of the material world, and formulation of theories that explain the observations and make predictions to be tested.

However, alternatives views of science have arisen that recognise the importance of imagination. Polanyi suggests that "science is based upon [the] power to discern coherence in nature ... [through] ... imaginative anticipations of unknown facts"<sup>27</sup>. Starting from an intuitive

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<sup>23</sup> Hayes, *Bonaventure : Mystical Writings*, 1999, p. 978

<sup>24</sup> Ede, op cit, p. 180

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 187

<sup>26</sup> Polanyi & Prosch, op cit, p. 64

<sup>27</sup> Polanyi & Prosch, op cit, p. 56, referring to an earlier work, Polanyi, M., 1946, *Science, Faith and Society*

idea, which the imagination then shapes, it proceeds forwards seeking out the best path of experimentation and observation, concluding in the form of a theory. Utilising both intuition and imagination, "science integrates fragmentary clues to an initially unknown coherent meaning"<sup>28</sup>.

Thomas Kuhn designates such coherent meanings "paradigms", being "an accepted example of actual scientific practice ... which provides models from which spring particular coherent traditions of scientific research"<sup>29</sup>. Such models are in themselves imaginative constructs, drawing upon sensible human experience of the mesoscale world to explain both the micro-scale quantum nature of reality and to the macro-scale vision of an immense universe. In seeking a coherent understanding across these scales, scientists employ "imagination in new and unpicturable ways .... to describe the character of the universe"<sup>30</sup>. Scientific models extend human imagination beyond an experience of the world gained by natural, technologically unaided human bodily senses, perhaps opening possibilities for fresh divine encounter.

However, while models in the sciences might be products of an imaginative processes, allowing the transmission of ideas from their originator to others, they lack the fluidity of the way ideas are conveyed through art. A work of art projects the imaginative vision of its creator, provoking the viewer to be moved through their own imaginative response. While individual personality and style may shape the creative way science is pursued, and the imagination leads to the integration of scattered pieces of evidence, the "fusion of these previously

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 97-99

<sup>29</sup> Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1970, p. 10

<sup>30</sup> Green, *Imagining God*, 1998, p. 64

unconnected clues will thereafter be quietly accepted as a fact<sup>31</sup> rather than being open to further imaginative interpretation.

#### 4. **Imagining and Imagining the Divine Through Science**

The process by which scientific imagery arises may therefore not lead to inherent meaning. Nevertheless, as with the natural human experience of creation, for example a beautiful sunset or the intricate patterns of a flower, scientific images evoke feelings of the sublime. To move from this experience towards transcendental meaning, imagery and nature need to be viewed through an imaginative, metaphorical lens, melting the solidity of the technocratic imaginative vision that science offers, allowing divine encounter through the fluidity of sacramental imagination.

In "A Rumour of Angels", Berger suggests that the current sense of disenchantment of the world that is fostered by the technocratic imagination might be softened through exploration of human experiences which point beyond the material. He suggests several such "signals of transcendence"<sup>32</sup> including the experience of wonder, human playfulness, and a seeking of order. The first of these is often evoked by the scientific vision of the cosmos and indeed can drive it further forward. The latter two are not only characteristics of scientific exploration but appear inherent to the fabric of the material universe itself. Science playfully explores the playful and rich diversity of the material world, attempting to bring to it some sense of cognitive order. While God's challenge to Job "where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding"<sup>33</sup> is often viewed as a call for humility before the wonder of the cosmos, it might

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<sup>31</sup> Polanyi & Prosch, op cit, p. 101

<sup>32</sup> Berger, op cit, p. 70

<sup>33</sup> Job 38v1, NRSV

also be seen as an invitation to explore such wonder using human capabilities endowed by God, which mirror God's own creative intent.

Berger assumes that these human experiences are implicitly connected to the supernatural, rooted in a divine being. However, even within a theistic framework a broad range of explanations might be drawn, not necessarily shaped by the Christian notion of God. This might be said of the wider discussion between science and faith, where often the general idea of God is related to science in broad terms rather than the Christian God of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Seeking to give greater focus shaped by a Christian understanding of God, here Berger's insights are imaginatively combined with the Franciscan Bonaventure's Trinitarian notion of vestiges within creation<sup>34</sup>.

The concept of vestiges flows from earlier Platonic Exemplarist theology, in particular the views of pseudonymous 'Denys' in the fifth and six centuries; "everything expresses God just as it is because of God's presence in all creatures"<sup>35</sup>. The subsequent Franciscan movement popularised this nature mysticism, Bonaventure encouraging contemplation of "vestiges" - signs of the divine presence within creation - as the first step towards encountering God<sup>36</sup>. His three-fold Trinitarian vision casts creation as a symbol of God's creative power, while divine wisdom is displayed by the diversity of material creation, each reflecting in part the fullness of the Incarnation. Finally, the perceived purpose of an object or creature is understood to point to its ultimate purpose - being drawn towards unity in the love of God.

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<sup>34</sup> The lens might be described as a concave-convex lens. Optically, a physical lens of this type with one side being convex, the other concave, can bring objects into focus rather than disperse its image.

<sup>35</sup> Thompson & Williams, *Christian Spirituality*, 2008, p. 28

<sup>36</sup> Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 1999, p. 112

Combining Berger's and Bonaventure's vision, God's creative power is connected to the experience of wonder, while divine wisdom, seen in the diversity of creation, is brought alongside playfulness and God's purpose within creation with seeking order. Viewing creation through such a lens leads to a recognition that the deepest truth of creation is not to be found in knowledge "of [its] chemical makeup" but "in awareness that each creature is a symbol pointing beyond itself to the eternal archetype"<sup>37</sup> and the eternal God.

### **a) Wonder and Power**

Wonder over creation is an almost universal human experience. Its mystery provokes scientific investigation, yet often leaves a restlessness; "a sense of the transcendent ... religious awe, comparable to that portrayed through religious art"<sup>38</sup>. This is a search for meaning beyond conceptual understanding, which Rahner views humans as being inherently attuned to, "[being] on the lookout for a sign from heaven ... [that] ... arises from ... a drive towards transcendence"<sup>39</sup>.

Bonaventure saw wonder of the material world as a sign of the creator God. More recently, John Macquarrie suggests that wonder is evoked by the immanence of God, for while "God is not part of the world ... [if God is] universally present there is a sacramental potentiality in virtually everything"<sup>40</sup>. If so, then the experience of the power and vastness of creation points beyond mechanism and physical energy towards the divine power at work in bringing creation into being, not only in the origin of creation but in the continuation of creation. Wonder is "not so much an explanation or hypothesis, about how or why things work

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<sup>37</sup> Hayes, op cit, p. 125

<sup>38</sup> Deane-Drummond, *Wonder and Wisdom*, 2006, p. 133

<sup>39</sup> Macquarrie, *A Guide to the Sacraments*, 1997, p. 11, referencing Karl Rahner, *Hearers of the Word*, 1969

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 8

as they do, but an experiential noticing or awareness of their being as opposed to their non-being"<sup>41</sup>.

## **b) Play and Diversity**

The transcendental possibilities of play have also been noted. Johan Huizinga describes humanity as "*Homo ludens*" - the player - a characteristic he suggests humans share with the wider creation; "[the] animals have not waited for (humans) to teach them their playing"<sup>42</sup>. Jurgen Moltmann suggests that "creation is God's play, a play of his groundless and inscrutable wisdom"<sup>43</sup> seen in the rich diversity of form that creation displays. God's invitation to human beings to partake in creative play is seen as Adam imaginatively names "all cattle, ... the birds of the air, ... and ... every animal of the field"<sup>44</sup> in the Biblical stories of creation.

The diversity of creation as a mark of the creator is the second of the Bonaventure's vestiges, signifying "the overflowing goodness of God in the myriad life-forms of creation"<sup>45</sup>. God is not only the source of creation but defines its shape. Within creation, the ultimate divine exemplar is the Son; "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation"<sup>46</sup>, in whom "all things came into being"<sup>47</sup>. Each element and being in the diversity of the creation is "a sign-giver", each expressing in material form "an exemplary idea in the creator, which is the likeness of the creature"<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> Brockelman, *Cosmology and Creation*, 1999, p. 71. Quoted by Deane-Drummond, *Wonder and Wisdom*, 2006, p. 31

<sup>42</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 2016, p. 1

<sup>43</sup> Moltmann, *Theology and Joy*, 1973, p. 39

<sup>44</sup> Genesis 2v20, NRSV

<sup>45</sup> Delio, *Simply Bonaventure*, 2019, p. 101

<sup>46</sup> Colossians 1v15, NRSV

<sup>47</sup> John 1v3, NRSV

<sup>48</sup> Cullen, *Bonaventure*, 2006, p. 73, 77

Robert Ellis suggests "*Deus ludens* creates and enters into relationship with *Homo ludens*"<sup>49</sup>, revealing further insight into the meaning of humanity as *Imago Dei*. God's invitation to Adam to engage with creation playfully and imaginatively continues through science. Robert Gilbert suggests that "play [is] fundamental to how science works"<sup>50</sup>. Playful imagination is expressed in the development of hypothesis, experimental design, interpretation of data and formation of models, as well as in the relational nature of scientific discussion and argument.

### **c) Order and Unity**

Through playful creativity, science expresses Berger's final signal of transcendence noted here; the human "propensity to order reality [that comes with] an intrinsic impulse to give cosmic scope to this order"<sup>51</sup>. Indeed, while starting from the locality of human experience, science's anthropocentric view of the universe seemingly expresses the order of the cosmos from the micro- to the macro-scale.

However, increasingly, science recognises that this ordered world is Chaotic in nature. Not the chaos of absolute disorder, a meaning often attributed to the term within common and theological discourse. Such a view stems from the creation narrative in Genesis, where the wild, disordered ocean at the beginning of creation is gradually contained by the creative action of God. Rather, scientifically, "Chaos" appears to be a fundamental feature of the nature of creation, "a subtle interplay between order and disorder, future behaviour being unpredictable but not totally haphazard"<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>49</sup> Ellis, *The Games People Play*, 2014, p. 144

<sup>50</sup> Gilbert, *Science and the Truth of Beauty*, 2017, p. 63

<sup>51</sup> Berger, op cit, p. 71

<sup>52</sup> Polkinghorne, *Science and the Trinity*, 2004, p. 79

For Bonaventure, the order of unity with “God is the goal of all created beings”<sup>53</sup>. This goal is found in the disorder of Jesus’ death, and the hope of new creation – expressed in his rising. Actions through which “God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things ... by making peace through the blood of his cross”<sup>54</sup>. Reflecting theologically on the Chaotic nature of creation, Polkinghorne suggests that “the creativity at the edge of chaos could be seen as a pale reflection” of the “Trinitarian rhythm [of] sustaining [and] redeeming”<sup>55</sup>, revealing the purposeful love of God within the fabric of creation, drawing forward, and redeeming all things. Viewed at least metaphorically, “Chaos” shows “the kenotic nature of God, shaping the ontology of creation, drawing it to fulfillment through a continual resistance to disorder”<sup>56</sup>.

## **5. Reflection – Hubble Extreme Deep Field**<sup>57</sup>

Hayes asks, “is it possible ... to look out at the physical cosmos with the lens of contemporary science ... [and see] ... the manifest mystery of God?”<sup>58</sup>. A question that resonates with Ede’s noted earlier; “can science be art?” To explore the answer to both, the lens constructed combining Bonaventure “vestiges” with Berger’s “signals of transcendence” is used to reflect upon an iconic scientific image – the Hubble Space Telescope Deep Field (see front cover photo). What is sought is an encounter with God through the image in a similar manner to that which visual art has offered through the centuries. Combining scientific and theological insights, the lens softens the frozen technocratic imagination of science to one shaped by a more fluid imaginative sacramental view.

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<sup>53</sup> Hayes, *A Window to the Divine*, 2009, p.46

<sup>54</sup> Colossians 1v20, NRSV

<sup>55</sup> Polkinghorne, op cit, 81

<sup>56</sup> Gregory, *How far can Chaos Theory give insight into the Christian Notion of Redemption*, 2016a, 22

<sup>57</sup> [https://apod.nasa.gov/apod/image/0403/hudf\\_hst\\_big.jpg](https://apod.nasa.gov/apod/image/0403/hudf_hst_big.jpg)

<sup>58</sup> Hayes, *The Gift of Being*, 2001, p. 67

Edvard Munch's famous painting "The Scream"<sup>59</sup>, with its open-mouthed figure facing the viewer against the background of a blood red sky, expresses the depth of human fear. The experience of wonder in the face of nature may elicit such a perturbed emotion. In part a self-portrait, or expressing a deeply intense personal experience, Munch records in his journal that on seeing a blood red sky at sunset, "I stood there trembling with anxiety - and I sensed an infinite scream pass through nature"<sup>60</sup>. The gaping mouth of the figure, turned towards the viewer, depicts this silent scream expressing and yet resisting Durkheim's "anomie", absolute disorder.

Scientific technology has expanded the range of human wonder beyond that of our natural perception, from the quantum world to the edges of the cosmos. The Hubble Deep Space Field is one such image, capturing the vastness of the cosmos, yet being only a pin prick of the night sky. The result of ten years of observations, the image captures an area one hundredth the size of a full moon and reaches back in time 13 billion years through a universe revealed through light. Each of the objects within the image are not stars but galaxies, collections of hundreds of millions of stars. In total within this minute field of view there are over five thousand galaxies. Scaling this up to the whole night sky a quarter of a trillion galaxies are now in view from the Earth<sup>61</sup>. In the Bible, God's challenge to Abram was to "look up at the sky and count the stars – if indeed you can count them"<sup>62</sup>. While such numbers are not beyond the range of science's counting, like Abram they remain beyond human knowing and imagining.

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<sup>59</sup> <https://www.nasjonalmuseet.no/en/stories/explore-the-collection/edvard-munch-and-the-scream-in-the-national-museum>

<sup>60</sup> Quote on display in the exhibit *Edvard Munch : Love and Angst*, British Museum, Summer 2019

<sup>61</sup> [https://www.nasa.gov/mission\\_pages/hubble/science/xdp.html](https://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/hubble/science/xdp.html)

<sup>62</sup> Gen 15v5, NRSV

The Psalmist writes:

“The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;  
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.”<sup>63</sup>

As with Munch, an infinite yet silent voice passes through nature. A voice not of painful angst, but of praise to the creator through whose word the universe is created. The Hubble image both suggests the power of the creator along with the terror of smallness in the face of a vast universe, inviting a response of humble praise, human voices making the silent praise of the cosmos audible.

Children often express playful delight at the magnitude of the numbers that the image reveals, a response that links wonder to the joy of play. Divine playfulness may be found in the variety of shapes and colours the galaxies exhibit. As the dance of divine and human playfulness entwine as Adam names the animals in the Biblical creation myths, so in the early twentieth century Edwin Hubble named the galaxies according to their morphology; spiral, elliptical, irregular. Yet this ordering fails to eclipse individual uniqueness, for not one galaxy is identical to another.

Such seemingly infinite individuality may evoke feelings of lostness. Yet perhaps the silent scream that this elicits might be turned to one of praise, for the divine voice behind creation is described in these words:

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<sup>63</sup> Psalm 19v1-4, NRSV

“He heals the broken-hearted,  
and binds up their wounds.  
He determines the number of the stars;  
he gives to all of them their names.  
Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;  
his understanding is beyond measure.”<sup>64</sup>

These words evoke a sense of being known within the vastness and variety of the cosmos, a feeling enhanced by the coming of Christ Jesus. For while “all things in heaven and on earth were created ... through him”<sup>65</sup>, he affirms our individuality as he “became flesh and lived among us”<sup>66</sup>.

Within the long and varied existence of each galaxy, there is the constant chaos of the birth, life, and death of stars. Each is birthed by the force of gravity drawing together and then crushing clouds of the simplest elements, hydrogen, and helium. These are fused together in the intense heat and pressure in the heart of stars, creating the heavier more complex elements of the everyday macroscopic world and life - carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen along with silicon and iron. The energy released by this fusion cause stars to shine brightly throughout their lives, and in their deaths to scatter abroad the heavier elements. These endings sow the seeds of new beginnings and the possibility of life, which originating in star dust may, through senses enhanced by technology, not only read the story of the stars told by their light, but also divine presence and purpose.

The light within creation recollects the divine “light that shines in the darkness”<sup>67</sup> drawing creation towards fulfilment. Yet, darkness too

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<sup>64</sup> Psalm 147v3-5, NRSV

<sup>65</sup> Colossians 1v16, NRSV

<sup>66</sup> John 1v14, NRSV

<sup>67</sup> John 1v5, NRSV

plays its part, for scientifically mysterious dark matter binds stars into galaxies and draws galaxies into clusters, painting their pattern across space. While neither emitting nor absorbing light, dark matter is sensed by its gravity which bends the path of light from the galaxies. A hidden presence echoing the hidden divine presence that shapes and sustains, and in whom "all things hold together"<sup>68</sup>.

God's purpose is "to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross"<sup>69</sup>. Jesus' death embraces the disorder of creation, his resurrection taming it towards a new order. Yet, scientific understanding questions this hope. For the light of the stars will dim, the galaxies will scatter and be smeared out as the universe expands towards a cold darkness, the tendency to disorder seemingly overcoming the struggle towards order. Is this the death of hope, the silent scream that fills creation? Does darkness eventually overcome even Divine Light?

Yet, while God limited himself in incarnation, the psalmist writes:

"If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
and the light around me become night',  
even the darkness is not dark to you;  
the night is as bright as the day,  
for darkness is as light to you."<sup>70</sup>

These verses are often quoted at funeral services, giving comfort and hope for those living under the shadow of death. They suggest that God is not limited by the material sensibility of the world. Even at the end, when darkness dims light below human perception, might God still perceive hope and purpose?

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<sup>68</sup> Col 1v17, NRSV

<sup>69</sup> Col 1v20, NRSV

<sup>70</sup> Psalm 139v11-12, NRSV

Yet, perhaps divine hope is not to be found in this far future moment of which scientific understanding catches a glimpse, but in the journey of creation and life itself, for as Paul writes, "in God we live and move and have our being"<sup>71</sup>. In the silent praise of a myriad galaxies shining out in the darkness. Galaxies whose existence is shaped by redeeming Chaos that within them brings forth "a specific set ... of forms of conscious agency distinctive in the universe [that express divine purpose through] growth in creativity, sensitivity, and community"<sup>72</sup>. The embodiment of divine purpose is not to be found at the end, but through the journey of human lives, that seek signals of transcendence that change their cry of anguish to one of praise.

## 6. Further Discussion

Celia Deane-Drummond observes that "finding something wonderful through science is a very common experience ... [and] ... opens up a sense of amazement"<sup>73</sup>. Yet Charles Taylor notes that science also has the capacity to disenchant the world, demanding trading "in a universe of ordered signs in which everything has meaning, for a silent but beneficial machine"<sup>74</sup>. Here, an approach has been explored that seeks to re-enchant the world beyond the rational apologetic dialogue that is commonly found in science-faith dialogue within the Christian sphere.

Centred upon an exercise of "sacramental imagination"<sup>75</sup> that resonates with the Romantic movement and the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins resistance to Enlightenment ideas, an imaginative theological lens that softens the solidified metaphors of scientific understanding behind scientific imagery has been sought. This seeks connection with the

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<sup>71</sup> Acts 17v28, NRSV

<sup>72</sup> Ward, *God, Chance and Necessity*, 1996, p. 163

<sup>73</sup> Deane-Drummond, *op cit*, 2007, p. 587ff

<sup>74</sup> Taylor, *op cit*, 2007, p. 96

<sup>75</sup> Radcliffe, *op cit*, p. 304

Divine through the human experiences of wonder, playfulness, and the hope of order, three of Berger's signals of transcendence. These signals are given specific Christian shape in combination with Bonaventure's notion of vestiges which flow from an understanding of creation as originating, journeying, and returning to God. While arising in different historical contexts, their combination bridges the paradigm shift between the Exemplarism's sacramental and Nominalism's technocratic imagination, from which Taylor suggests the scientific rationale arose.

An imaginative reading of an iconic scientific image - the Hubble Deep Space Field - has been presented. As new scientific investigations produce further images, such as those anticipated from the successor to Hubble, the James Webb Telescope, such reflection may allow greater appreciation of science with the wider Christian community beyond academic and apologetic engagement. Such reflections might enable the the development of a variety of liturgical and formats, from personal or group reflections to more formal liturgies and prayers based around imagery. Noting the Franciscan origin of Bonaventure's thought, this lens may also provide a greater appreciation and value of nature beyond the imagery commonly found in hymns and liturgy, connecting with the growing appreciation and awareness of nature in faith communities today associated with concern over climate change and environmental degradation.

Given the wide interest in science within current culture, engagement with spirituality and faith through a more reflective process around imagery may open new avenues to reconnect people with the supernatural. Beyond faith communities, reflection groups either meeting in person or virtually may allow wider exploration of the transcendent, as might larger exhibits. For example, the 2016 "Other

Worlds” exhibit at the Natural History Museum<sup>76</sup> in which high resolution, wall-sized images of planets within the Solar System were displayed, allowed the viewer to be engulfed by the scale of wonder revealed, provoking - at least for the author – a transcendental encounter. Combining the scientific story with theological reflection enhances such an experience.

However, from the perspective of missional engagement there are some risks in this approach. The dialogue between science and faith that I have sought is an open ended one. It seeks to allow the silent praise of creation to be perceived as the technology of science reveals a wider spectrum of the Divine Light that shines through it. A conversation that creates space for both an experimental and experiential exploration of the possibility of divine encounter. Yet, the outcome is not certain or guaranteed. While imaginative metaphors are drawn from the image to elicit meaning, insistence on a precise interpretation would move towards solidification of the metaphor that Polanyi and Prosch suggest is not a part of the creative exercise in the arts as it is in science<sup>77</sup>. This would be akin to an artist insisting that their own metaphoric meaning is the only one possible, rather than allowing the viewer freedom to draw meaning from their own perspective.

Whatever the outcome, conversation around the image creates a point of dialogue, perhaps echoing the Divine invitation offered to Job<sup>78</sup> recast by Richard Rohr; “those who continue to look through microscopes and telescopes are surrendering to the mysteries of an

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<sup>76</sup> *Other Worlds - Visions of our Solar System Exhibit*, Michael Benson, 2016, Natural History Museum

<sup>77</sup> Polanyi and Prosch, op cit, p. 101

<sup>78</sup> Job 38-42

infinite, creative spectrum .... and ... had best come to the[m] ... with [their] shoes off."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Rohr, *The Wisdom Pattern - Order, Disorder, Reorder*, 2020, p. 142

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## **What Are the Stars For?**

### **David Instone-Brewer**

This article is a reprint of a chapter from *'Modern Sciences & the Bible: Interpreting Two Sources of Truth'* by Dr David Instone-Brewer (Lexham Press 2020). There is an accompanying website at [www.biblecontexts.com](http://www.biblecontexts.com)

**The stars aren't gods (as pagans thought in Bible times), or holes in the dome of heaven (as the medieval church thought). We know they are suns, and we now know why God created so many.**

How do you feel when you look up at the stars on a clear night? Overawed? Inspired? Insignificant? All those suns, many with planets, put our existence into perspective. We might be forgiven for concluding that we are unimportant, but the Bible's creation narrative encourages us to thank God for the creation he made specifically for us. However, if this universe really is made for us, it can be difficult to understand why there are so many stars – what are they there for? In the vastness of the universe, our insignificance makes us seem like an accident looking for a purpose, but modern astronomy may help us understand what the Bible tells us about stars and their purpose in God's creation.

In ancient times, when people looked at the heavens they were awed and somewhat terrified – believing they were seeing gods. It was a logical conclusion: the stars twinkle and move with apparent life, and they are clearly a long way away, so they must be huge. Also, they appear to be powerful because their movements reflect events on Earth: seasons change with the stars; the moon moves the tides; and the sun changes the weather.

In the face of this widespread belief, it is remarkable that the Israelites, and subsequently Christians, came to believe that there is only one God. One of the ways that the Bible asserts this is to say that this one God created and controls the stars. Instead of attempting to challenge the concept that the stars are gods by simply denying it, the Old Testament

writers refer to them as God's "army." This is how they are described in Genesis 2:1, which says (translating word-by-word), "And he completed the heavens and the Earth and the whole army" – though most English translations use the old English word for an army: "host."

## **LORD of hosts**

Israel called their God "the LORD of hosts" because he commanded the armies of stars. The word *tsava* (translated "host") is the normal Hebrew word for an "army," so the phrase "LORD of hosts" was an excellent translation in the days of King James. Nowadays we should perhaps translate it "LORD of armies," and this is how it is translated in most non-English Bibles. For example, traditional Spanish Bibles use "JEHOVÁ de los ejércitos" – though I do like the phrase "Dios del universe," which replaces this in some modern Spanish Bibles. However, "LORD of armies" sounds rather militaristic, so English versions such as the ESV, NRSV, and NASB tend to stick with the archaic word "hosts." The NIV often uses "LORD Almighty," following a convention that started before Jesus' day in the ancient Greek translation (see the quotation of Isa 6:3 at Rev 4:8).

The title "LORD of hosts" completely changed ancient Israel's perceptions about the stars. Instead of thinking of them as gods, people in the Old Testament regarded them as part of God's workforce or entourage. Occasionally, stars were identified as angels (Pss 103:21; 148:2; Job 28:7), but never as foreign gods (though Deborah almost implied this at Judg 5:20–23). This was an amazing contrast to other nations' belief that the stars were gods.

Keeping so many Bible authors on message over hundreds of years helps to convince me of the Holy Spirit's intervention in writing Scripture. Claiming that the national deity of Israel controlled all the stars in the universe is as audacious as a hacker who claims to control all the computers on the planet. Nevertheless, this assertion won the day in Israel, and then in Christendom. Even the monotheism of Islam

was inspired by the Bible, which was Muslims' holy book before the Qur'an. (The Qur'an refers to the Bible as "the Book," and Muslims still regard a printed Bible as too holy to place on the floor even for a moment.) But as well as teaching that God is in charge of the whole universe, the Bible has another implied message: humanity is at the center of the universe, surrounded by the stars.

We now know that all stars are suns like our own sun, and many have planets around them. But the road to acknowledging this was a bumpy one. Not only did it raise questions about the purpose of so many "extra" suns, but it also created new theological problems, as people found out when they started to voice their discoveries and new ideas.

### **Life on other planets**

In celebration of our thirtieth wedding anniversary, my wife and I rented a small apartment for a couple of weeks near the Campo de' Fiori ("field of flowers") in Rome. This beautiful piazza was witness to an ugly history. In the middle of the market square is a statue of Giordano Bruno that looks exactly like the grim hero of *Assassin's Creed* (a popular computer game). He has the same hood, the same menacing stance, and the same angry glare – which is directed across the river at the Vatican. The statue marks where Bruno was burned at the stake in 1600 for, in addition to questioning several key Christian doctrines, suggesting that the stars are actually suns that could have planets of their own.

It wasn't until nearly four hundred years later, in 1992, when the first planet was found around another star, that astronomers could be sure that Bruno was right. The Kepler space telescope later discovered another 2,662 planets around stars in our galaxy before it ran out of fuel.<sup>1</sup> These include an extreme variety of bodies – one consists mainly of diamond! Earth remains very special, not only because very few of

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<sup>1</sup> See Wikipedia, "Kepler Space Telescope" ([tinyurl.com/KeplerST](http://tinyurl.com/KeplerST)).

these planets are potentially friendly to life, but mainly because we are adapted to this planet – this is our home.

Is there intelligent life on other planets? This suggestion got Bruno burned at the stake. He was accused of various other heresies, which he denied, but he insistently defended his book *On the Infinite Universe and Worlds*.<sup>2</sup> In this he describes the heavens as “the void, in which are all those worlds which contain animals and inhabitants no less than can our own Earth, since those worlds have no less virtue nor a nature different from that of our Earth.”<sup>3</sup>

One of his heresies was saying that there may be life on other planets – but what’s wrong with that? The answer is that the Bible teaches that Christ died only once to deal with all sin, in contrast to the Old Testament sacrifices, which had to be repeated constantly (Rom 6:10; Heb 7:27). If other worlds had sinners, this teaching was a problem. Would Christ’s death on Earth cover them too, or does “die once” refer only to him dying as a human?

C. S. Lewis had an intriguing solution for this problem in his novels about life on Mars and Venus.<sup>4</sup> He suggested that the Earth may be different from other planets because Satan came here and corrupted humans – unlike on other planets, which never suffered the fall. This means Jesus would never have had to die on another planet to save its inhabitants from sin.

Personally, I don’t see any problem with the idea that Jesus redeems other planets. Perhaps he has several forms or faces in heaven, like some angels do (Ezek 10:14; Rev 4:6–8). That way he could represent every

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<sup>2</sup> See Wikipedia, “Giordano Bruno” ([tinyurl.com/GioBruno](http://tinyurl.com/GioBruno)).

<sup>3</sup> See Giordano Bruno, “Third Dialogue,” in *On the Infinite Universe and Worlds* (Venice, 1584) ([tinyurl.com/BrunoWorlds](http://tinyurl.com/BrunoWorlds)).

<sup>4</sup> See Wikipedia, “The Space Trilogy” ([tinyurl.com/CSL-Space](http://tinyurl.com/CSL-Space)).

planet he has saved. And I see no reason why we should expect the Bible to tell us about all of this, because it wasn't written to instruct us about the whole universe – only about how God wants to rescue us and how we should live.

However, whether or not Jesus redeemed other planets, this doesn't answer the question of why there are so many stars in the first place. Even though there are planets around many of them, these are mostly uninhabitable by any form of complex life that we can imagine. We have still not received any signals from intelligent life, and so far there is no evidence that even simple life has formed elsewhere. If life occurs on only our own or a few planets, why did God create all the billions of stars with no planets or dead planets?

### **We need all those stars**

Astronomers can now answer that question: we need a universe as large as ours in order for there to be even one planet where life can form. The atoms life is made of (such as carbon and oxygen) can only form within the core of the largest stars, and other heavier essential elements (such as iodine) can only form when those large stars explode as a supernova. This means that complex life can't form until some of the first stars have shone, collapsed, and exploded. These events fling complex elements into space, which can then coalesce to form solar systems with planets that can sustain life. A universe lighter than ours would expand too thinly, so these large stars would never form, and a universe heavier than ours would soon stop expanding and then contract before these large stars had time to explode and form the elements for life. Our universe, however, is just the right size to form life-supporting planets.<sup>5</sup>

Together, the Bible and science have produced a useful answer to the question of the stars. Not only do we know *what* they are, but we also

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<sup>5</sup> See Ethan Siegel, "Going Nuclear: How Stars Die," Science Blogs ([tinyurl.com/HowStarsDie](http://tinyurl.com/HowStarsDie)).

know *why* they are there. Even if there is no other life in the universe, this huge surplus of uninhabited star systems is still necessary. Our universe *needs* to contain a billion trillion stars – because if it contained any fewer, life could never exist on even one planet.

When we stare into space, we may realize how small we are in the universe, but we are certainly not insignificant. The Bible’s message is that God created this huge universe with a purpose: to support intelligent life – that is, us! The brief words “God created the heavens and the Earth” contain a far larger event than we had previously realized, and indicate how much preparation and investment was put into producing and supporting intelligent life. In other words, the vastness of empty space doesn’t teach us that we are insignificant – it shows us the opposite. We are so significant to God that he created this vast universe in order to give us a home where we can live.

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## **Instructions for Authors**

We welcome contributions to the journal in the form of original papers, book reviews or short pieces for inclusion in ‘Particles’. Please email any of these to [admin@faithandthought.org](mailto:admin@faithandthought.org)

Do not worry too much about formatting, but a short note describing the author, in about 25 words, should be included.

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## **2022 Open Lecture and AGM**

Instead of an annual symposium for 2022 we are planning a series of lectures looking at the theme of 'Doing God Online'. The first of these will be held on Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> May and will include our AGM. This will be a hybrid event, taking place in person and online so you will be welcome to attend in person or virtually. The lecture may be delivered 'live' over Zoom, but will be included in the live-stream to YouTube. The in-person part will comprise some members of Council and anyone else who would like to join us at Goff's Oak Methodist Church, London EN7 5SS.

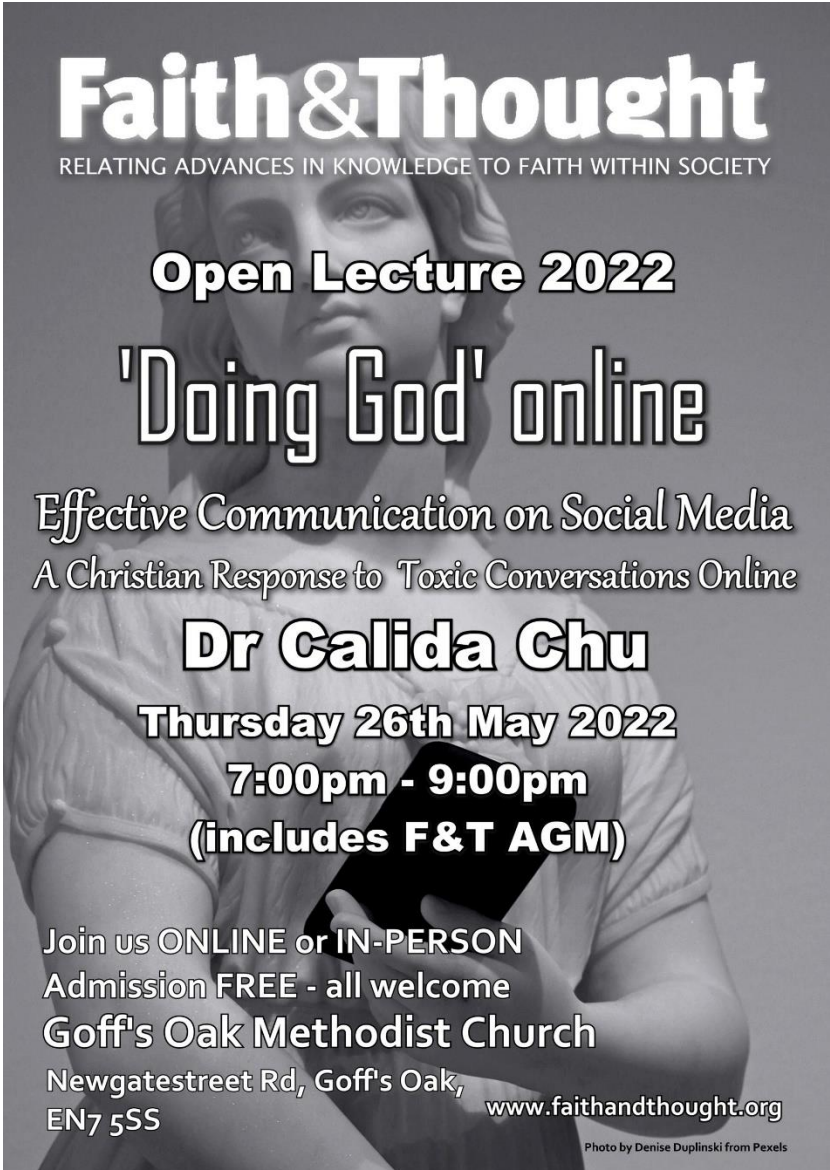
We plan to meet before the lecture at the Goff's Oak pub/restaurant opposite the church at 6pm for a meal. If you would like to join us there you would be very welcome (meals to be paid for by attendees individually). The lecture and AGM will commence at 7:00pm and will include time for discussion., aiming to end by 9:00pm. If you would like to join us to eat then please drop me a line, so we can book a large enough table! [admin@faithandthought.org](mailto:admin@faithandthought.org)

### **Agenda for Annual General Meeting to be held 26<sup>th</sup> May 2022**

Please email [admin@faithandthought.org](mailto:admin@faithandthought.org) if you have not received notification of the Zoom details to join this meeting a few days in advance.

1. Chairman - the Rev. Dr. R. H. Allaway.
2. The Minutes of the previous AGM.
3. Academic Grant Application
4. To approve the re-election of the:
  - a. President (Sir Colin Humphreys),
  - b. Vice-Presidents (Prof. Malcolm A. Jeeves, Prof. Kenneth Kitchen, Prof. Alan Millard, Prof. J. W. Montgomery),
  - c. Honorary Treasurer (Rev John Buxton),
  - d. Council (Rev. Bob Allaway, Rev. John Buxton, Dr Alan Kerry, Mrs Joanne Mead, Prof Meric Srokosz (ex officio)
  - e. Election to council of Rev. Dr David Instone-Brewer and Dr David E. Watkis

5. The annual accounts, which are available on the website, will be presented by the Hon. Treasurer, Rev. John Buxton, for approval and to appoint auditors.
6. Plans for 2022-2023



**Faith & Thought**  
RELATING ADVANCES IN KNOWLEDGE TO FAITH WITHIN SOCIETY

**Open Lecture 2022**

**'Doing God' online**

*Effective Communication on Social Media*  
*A Christian Response to Toxic Conversations Online*

**Dr Calida Chu**

**Thursday 26th May 2022**  
**7:00pm - 9:00pm**  
**(includes F&T AGM)**

Join us ONLINE or IN-PERSON  
Admission FREE - all welcome  
**Goff's Oak Methodist Church**  
Newgatestreet Rd, Goff's Oak,  
EN7 5SS [www.faithandthought.org](http://www.faithandthought.org)

Photo by Denise Duplinski from Pexels

## Membership Survey

As mentioned in the editorial, we would like to canvass members opinions for the future direction of F&T. Please email [admin@faithandthought.org](mailto:admin@faithandthought.org) with any views you might have, in particular with reference to the following:

1. Symposium or Lectures? Would you prefer a one-day Symposium with three or four speakers or separate lecture events (probably in the evening) spread throughout the year?
2. Focus of our organisation. Faith & Thought has tended to cover a wide range of disciplines including archaeology, science, philosophy, theology and sociology. Is this breadth helpful or would you prefer a focus on science matters? The following list is a highly selective list of a few other organisations whose concerns overlap with Faith&Thought to some extent.
  - Other UK based science-faith initiatives and organisations:
    - Christians in Science [www.cis.org.uk](http://www.cis.org.uk)
    - The Faraday Institute [www.faraday.cam.ac.uk](http://www.faraday.cam.ac.uk)
    - Scientists in Congregations [www.eclasproject.org/congregations](http://www.eclasproject.org/congregations)
    - Church Scientific [www.churchscientific.org.uk](http://www.churchscientific.org.uk)
    - Christian Medical Fellowship [www.cmf.org.uk](http://www.cmf.org.uk)
  - Christian organisations with an environmental focus:
    - John Ray initiative [www.jri.org.uk](http://www.jri.org.uk)
    - A Rocha [www.arochoa.org](http://www.arochoa.org)
  - Those with an apologetics focus:
    - Genexis [www.genexis.org](http://www.genexis.org)
    - BeThinking [www.bethinking.org](http://www.bethinking.org)
    - Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics [www.theocca.org](http://www.theocca.org)
3. Online or Paper journal? Many of our members also subscribe to Science and Christian Belief (published by Christians in Science) and they are considering whether to move their journal to online only to save on printing and especially postage costs. I would stress that no decision has yet been made on this matter! What would our members think about this? Would you be happy to access the journal online only or would you prefer a paper copy even if that might necessitate a rise in cost in the future?

## Particles of Faith

### Science and Christian Belief

I was looking at our website shared with Christians in Science and I was surprised to find appearing on my computer another website also called Science and Christian Belief - surprised because it was about a book and an author that had stimulated my interest in the relationship between science and Christian belief from the time when I was at Cambridge training for the ministry in the early 1960's. So just a brief comment, in case anyone else comes across it perhaps by accident.

Professor Charles Coulson was a senior Methodist layman and a professor of applied mathematics at Oxford with special interest in quantum theory and theoretical chemistry. In the book he sets out to show that far from outdated and nullifying traditional Christian beliefs, science is essentially a religious activity playing its part in the unfolding of the nature and purposes of God.

A reviewer at the time in what was still the Manchester Guardian described the book as "most exciting and illuminating" - "a very fine piece of work indeed".

I still have my paperback copy (two shillings and sixpence well spent).

John Buxton

Bob Allaway recalls hearing a lecture by Coulson in which he revealed he had once discovered something that would make a great weapon ... so he destroyed his results!

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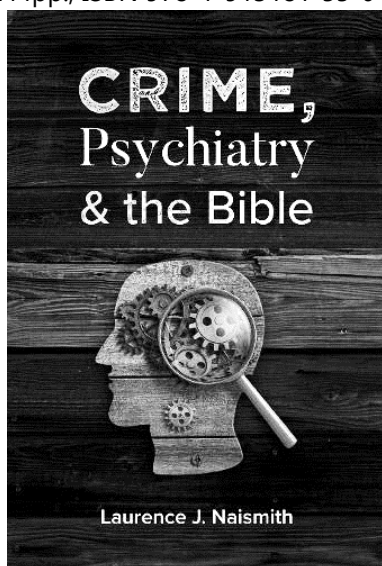
### Sir John Houghton Memorial Service.

A memorial thanksgiving service for the life of Sir John Houghton will be held on 14th May 2022 in the Neuadd Dyfi (Aberdyfi village hall). Bob Allaway plans to attend on behalf of Faith&Thought. We printed an obituary in our April 2021 edition of this journal.

## Book Reviews

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**Laurence J. Naismith** *Crime, Psychiatry, and the Bible*  
Chichester: Faithbuilders, 2020  
244pp., ISBN 978-1-913181-55-0



Laurence Naismith is a retired forensic psychiatrist with a master's degree in theology, who here brings his knowledge in service of our reading of the Bible. The result is a book which combines legal and psychiatric information with biblical interpretation in a manner which can be understood by every interested person and which will be

attractive for the readers of this interdisciplinary journal.

The book is divided into five parts, of which the first is a lengthy introduction to Hebrew, Roman and contemporary law. The subsequent parts deal with crimes against the person, sexual offences, property offences and miscellaneous offences respectively. I had never realised that the Bible contains so much crime! Still Naismith is selective: for example, he discusses various murders but not the ones committed by Moses and Paul.

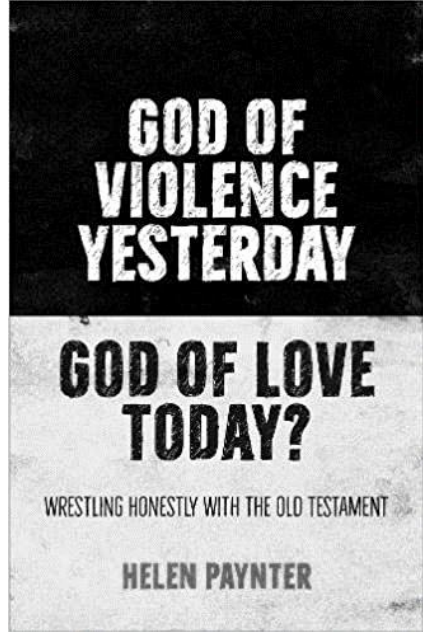
Each chapter follows roughly the same pattern, dealing with the relevant (British) law, the offence in the Bible, psychiatric aspects, the characters and further comment. Various chapters begin with an anecdote about the personal experience of the author as a psychiatrist assessing (alleged) criminals. The biblical passages

under discussion are printed in full and Naismith also takes much time to paraphrase them and to provide background information on the characters in each story. In places the tone of writing is a bit moralistic.

There are some suggestions for crime prevention, but I miss an index of biblical passages. In his interpretation of the Bible, Naismith is careful not to read more into the stories than we can say with reasonable certainty. I think he has been successful in this respect, and also in his overall objective of using his legal and psychiatric expertise to shed light on the Scriptures. Some readers of this journal will frown upon his creationist position, but all will appreciate his taking the Bible seriously. This book will both help and entertain many readers.

*Reviewed by Revd Dr Pieter J. Lalleman  
Knaphill*

**Helen Paynter** *God of Violence Yesterday, God of Love Today?*  
Abingdon: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2019. 176pp, £7.99,  
ISBN 978-0857466396



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Dr Helen Paynter is a Baptist minister and Director of the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence at Bristol Baptist College. So why study violence in the Bible? Helen writes that since 2018, there have been several attempts to use quotations from the Bible to justify violence. There are many

people who cite the violence in the Bible as a reason to blame religion for many of the world's problems. Additionally, many Christians forsake the Old Testament, claiming that the period in history depicted is simply too violent and that it does not fit with their understanding of God as a loving God.

In this book, Helen attempts to help the reader to understand the Bible better, to move away from reading the text literally as a biographical account and to engage with the text in the context of those who wrote it. The Old Testament presents challenges, with many of the writings as we know them dating from the Babylonian exile or shortly after. It is not surprising therefore, that Part One of Helen's book seeks to help us understand what we mean when we say the Bible is God's Word and gain a deeper appreciation what we understand as violence. With these in context, Part One

concludes with a chapter on reading the Bible well. The chapters of Part One are very beneficial and illustrate very well how we read the Bible from a very different perspective from its original audience, even our perceptions of violence and the language are very different. So it is with some understanding of those contexts that we are invited to engage in the hermeneutical spiral. Each time we read a text, we come to it with preconceptions and these change as we re-read and engage again with the passage, allowing our preconceptions to change over time.

Part 2 of the book gets into the nitty gritty by unpicking a series of layers around different manifestations of violence. Our awareness is tuned in to the concept that violence can be described without being endorsed. In the first chapter of Part 2, the story of Samson is used as an example. The author highlights how in the

law given to Moses, the response to misdeeds is proportionate – the eye for an eye concept. We are then encouraged to recognise within the story of Samson, the truth that his actions were not in keeping with proportionality. In telling the story of Samson, the narrator is not necessarily glamorising the violence. The purpose of the book of Judges was to highlight Israel's need for a King. Without leadership, the people did what was right in their own eyes. The story of Samson therefore has a purpose rather than portraying some sort of Israelite superhero.

The chapters that follow continue to encourage us to read the text with a more appropriate lens. The idea of lament in the Psalms is covered as a vehicle for expressing emotions.

When Helen looks at the story of Noah and the flood, she puts forward a very poignant

understanding of what can be perceived as a violent act by God that resulted in the death of many people. Helen points out that when God created life, order replaced chaos. When it came to the flood, the chaos that had originally prevailed was allowed to return before creation is given another chance. There were helpful comments on how we should handle these Bible stories in church and how they can be used much more helpfully in our teaching to children in Sunday School.

Throughout this book, as the different layers of biblical violence are unpicked as sensitively as possible, there is a growing appreciation of how the jigsaw fits together – of how our world is in its very nature violent, and how God wants 'Shalom'. Although it is a word that is often translated as 'peace', its true meaning in the Hebrew is somewhat more holistic than that, a state of

complete physical, mental and social well-being.

The book has a helpful glossary at the back, along with many references and recommendations for further reading. It is a book that needs to be read, and then read again to glean from it all that it has to offer. It is surely a must-read for anyone who is wrestling with the Old Testament and struggling to find its relevance. We would do well to engage with the Old Testament with a

much more heightened awareness of the purpose of these writings and their historical context, but more important than anything else – to read the texts with the knowledge that our God is indeed a God of Love who wants 'Shalom' for his people.

*Reviewed by Joanne Mead*

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- a) Faith & Thought (The Victoria Institute) invites applications for up to two academic grants per year of £1000 each.
- b) Applicants should be undertaking post-graduate study of some form which addresses the interface between contemporary thought and the Christian Faith.
- c) Applicants are required to submit a brief proposal of up to 1000 words outlining the proposed study regarding aims, questions, methodology and impact of the potential insights gained from this work. This should include details of how the grant might assist the applicant in undertaking this work.
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