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## Editorial

One of the misapprehensions held by many people is that Christian faith, being based on events and documents from many years ago, cannot be relevant to our ‘modern’, ‘scientific’ age. I trust that this issue of *Faith and Thought*, as with earlier ones, shows that to be untrue.

As I write this, there is ongoing discussion, in parliament and the coroner’s court, of the harm that unregulated social media can do. Our lead article, by Calida Chu, could not be more relevant. In reviewing *The HTML of Cruciform Love* in *Faith and Thought* 71 (Oct 2021) p81, I commented on how some of its writers ‘demonstrate how ancient theology can become relevant anew in these times.’ One of the contributors to that volume was Eric Stoddart, who is giving our lecture on 14<sup>th</sup> November, which you will be able to access online, as explained later in this issue.

One reason for the ‘toxic’ nature , that Chu mentions, of much modern discussion that takes place on social media, is that there is no common agreed basis for ethical decision, so people can only try

and win their case by shouting louder than the other! David Instone-Brewer's article on altruism may show the possibility of a way forward.

In this edition, you will find other ways in which our world-view is not as 'primitive' as is often portrayed, but can speak to current controversies. Explore!

Bob Allaway (Chairman and Co-Editor)

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

**Calida Chu**

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We live in a dichotomised world, where you can find a ready supply of news with contrasting facts and opinions. We live in a post-truth world, where facts no longer matter — people only concern themselves with their own opinions. Facts are used merely to complement an individual's views, and it becomes unnecessary for views to be developed based on facts. In light of this dichotomy, I hope to offer some practical responses for you to consider in this time when conversations online are getting increasingly toxic and seem to have reached a cul-de-sac. This paper employs theories from digital theology, communication studies, and family therapy to ponder how

we can avoid toxic communication and indeed improve our communication skills.

To begin with, this paper offers some insights with regards to the correlation between theology and the digital space, as well as the theological concerns raised from the issues discussed, especially about the incomprehensibility between theology and the digital world. As a digital theologian who is concerned about public issues and their interaction with theology, I have based many of the discussions below on my observations online when collecting data for my research about public theology.

The second part of this paper discusses dysfunctional communication, such as the concepts of conflicting messages and symmetrical relationships, as well as what effective or functional communication looks like. The last and most substantial part of this paper provides some practical suggestions for dealing with toxic communication, drawing on theories of family therapy about Time Out, speaker-listener technique, overcoming gridlock, and the hierarchy of disagreement, as well as the importance of prayer in Christian online life.

Note that in this paper, I prefer to use the term 'communication online' over 'online communication', as the former implies that digital space is to be used as a medium to facilitate communication in the 'offline' world, while the latter suggests that communication occurs in the online environment, irrelevant to the offline world. This distinction modifies Christopher Helland's usage of the two terms 'religion online' and 'online religion'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Helland, 'Scholar's Top 5: Christopher Helland on Online Religion and Religion Online', NNMRDC Blog Series, 2012,

## Theology and the Digital Space

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been debates about the position of the digital space in the field of theology and religious studies, especially regarding God's immanence in the digital space. In other words, such questions as 'In what ways does God work and be present in the digital space?' may be raised. Even after two years of intermittent lockdowns, opinions are diverse. Scottish theologians Oliver O'Donovan, Trevor Hart, and David Jasper comment that 'God's presence cannot be replicated in the virtuality of the internet'.<sup>2</sup> As Scottish Episcopalians, they argue that God is truly present in the 'true Eucharist' and cannot be replaced by an online Eucharist. Following this logic, they argue that God is only fully present through a gathered congregation in person. This deals with the concept of materiality in theology: Is God only present through materials? And how may one understand the immaterial presence of God?

If we consider theology as 'faith seeking understanding', according to Anselm's definition, then digital theology is the process of faith seeking understanding to comprehend the nature of God, or of God's interaction with the digital space, or of the digital space's exploration of the mystery of faith.<sup>3</sup> For digital immigrants, those who do not frequently use digital devices or engage with online activities, digital spaces may seem to be cold and inhuman, and thus they may assume such spaces have nothing to do with God.

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<https://digitalreligion.tamu.edu/blog/mon-05142012-1132/scholar's-top-5-christopher-helland-online-religion-and-religion-online>.

<sup>2</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, Trevor Hart, and David Jasper, 'Learning from the Pandemic', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 21, 2 (2021): 145.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 2.

Indeed, the terms 'real' and 'virtual' were first developed within media studies, but the problem with these binary terms is that the term 'virtual' seems to suggest that our communication online is unreal. Many of us have experienced 'real' communications during lockdown because of physical distancing. Do we count our online conversations with our friends and families as 'unreal'? Certainly not. This raises the question of the ways in which an interaction is perceived as real or unreal. Even before the rise of WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, we would not even think of our tele-conversations with our loved ones as unreal, even though we could not see their faces.

### **Five Theological Concerns**

Speaking of theological issues relating to the digital space, digital theologian Katherine G. Schmidt indicates five theological concerns: anonymity, vitriol, authority, access, and disembodiment.<sup>4</sup> While she perceives these as concerns, I argue that it is because of these phenomena that communication can become toxic, whether or not one is aware of the motive behind one's communication with others.

First, anonymity allows internet users to hide their identity online, whether the medium has preset this function or the users choose to do so. The problem of anonymity is that one may 'produce words and images without accountability'.<sup>5</sup> Second, vitriol refers to the mistreatment of others in the digital space; in other words, the nastiness people aim at each other is partly because of the anonymity provided in an online environment. Third, authority deals with the church's role in interpreting the Word of God. The phenomenon of 'digital immediacy' through which all information can immediately be

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<sup>4</sup> Katherine G. Schmidt, *Virtual Communion: Theology of the Internet and the Catholic Sacramental Imagination* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/ Fortress Academic, 2020), 1–23.

<sup>5</sup> Schmidt, *Virtual Communion*, 3.

available online is now the norm of the digital age. In theological dialogue, this may raise the issue of whether the authority of the internet is over the authority of God, in terms of how one may determine the truthfulness of knowledge. Fourth, the question of access concerns the easy access of information as well as the discrepancy of information among different groups, which is termed as the 'digital divide'. There are a number of causes for the digital divide. Political scientist Pippa Norris identifies three aspects: (1) the global divide, which differentiates between industrialised and developing countries; (2) the social divide, referring to the gap between information rich and poor in each nation; and (3) the democratic divide, considering the difference in digital resources to engage, mobilise, and participate in public life.<sup>6</sup> Fifth, the concern of disembodiment, as discussed earlier, reflects on the dilemma of real and unreal interactions. For the purpose of this essay and the audience in the United Kingdom, I will mainly discuss the second and third points: vitriol and authority.

Besides these theological concerns proposed by Schmidt, it is noteworthy that the sins appearing in the offline world can also be transformed and worsened in the online world. This famous picture (See figure 1) about the seven deadly sins captures the issue of how misuse or wrong intentions in using different social media apps can trigger sinful motives and/or behaviours both online and offline.<sup>7</sup> For example, Twitter may develop our wrath because we are so used to grumbling about our daily life, so it may not always be righteous

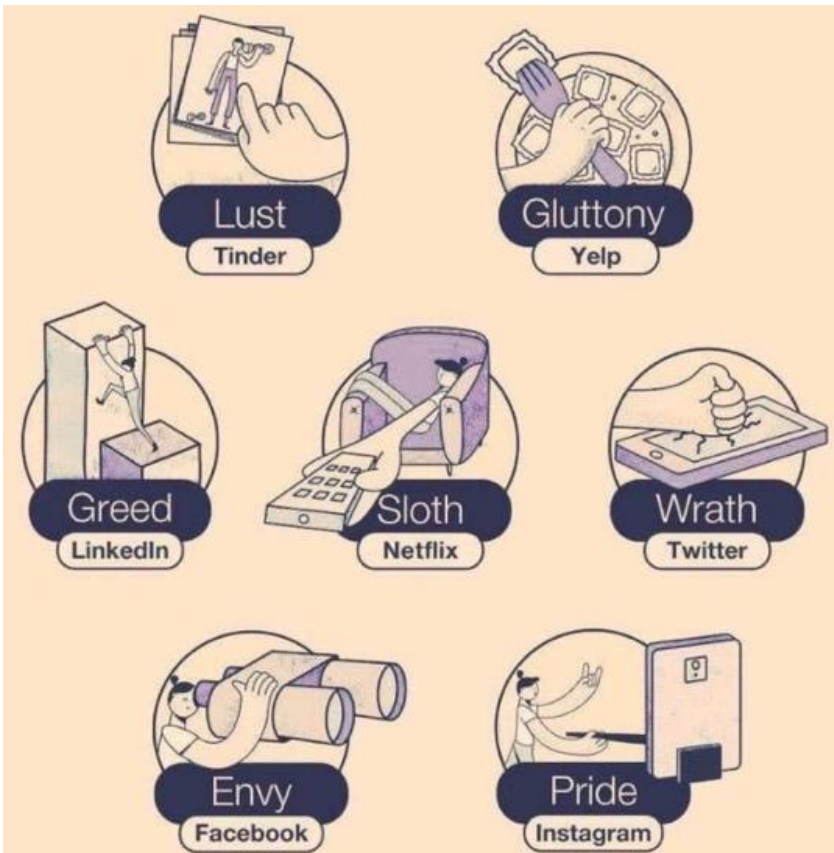
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<sup>6</sup> Pippa Norris, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Rokas Laurinavičius, '7 Deadly Sins in the Modern World You're Probably Guilty of', *Bored Panda*, accessed 9 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3FAC7IL>.

anger. Envy may be cultivated in our daily stroll on Facebook when we only see the good sides of our Facebook friends' lives.

This leads to the main topic of this essay, regarding our communication online. Here I want to clarify that I do not define myself as a feminist theologian, simply because I do not employ any feminist methodologies to develop my theology. But I will offer some theological thoughts as a woman and as a theologian, because I perceive that I cannot escape from my gender and perhaps ethnicity to develop my theologies.



*Figure 1 Seven Deadly Sins on Social Media*

## Communication

In our daily conversation, when we talk about 'communicating' with others, we tend to think that it means speaking to others or having others respond to us. However, in communication studies, the definition is broader than that: Communication includes thinking, expressing, listening, interpreting, understanding, and responding.<sup>8</sup> Communication is about a process of sharing information and not merely the action of sharing it. Therefore, even not responding is a form of communication, because it represents our decision to not convey a message. Another minor note related to this is that when communication theories were first developed in cybernetics, they were supposed to study the systems of information processing in humans and robotic systems.<sup>9</sup> In other words, it implies that the wordings sent between nodes A and B should be identical. This may be possible in computer systems but it is not viable in human communications.

I am sure many of you or your kids have played the game 'Chinese Whispers', which involves conveying messages through a chain of people. The group that delivers the correct message by the end of the chain is the winner of the game. The idea of this game is to create confusing messages at the very beginning, as a way to force the groups to make funny gestures during their communication and have a laugh. Even as kids, we are told that we cannot convey the exact message we intend to deliver. Sometimes I wonder why we adults expect that we can always let people 'get' our thoughts, or that we do not need to speak a word for our soulmate to understand us immediately. I will spend a large portion of this essay elaborating on

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<sup>8</sup> Ascan F. Koerner and Mary Anne Fitzpatrick, 'Toward a Theory of Family Communication', *Communication Theory* 12, 1 (2002): 70–91.

<sup>9</sup> Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1972).

issues that have to be improved in communications, so forgive me if your communications do not consist of the problems I mention.

### **Dysfunctional Communication**

Dysfunctional communication can be categorised into two types: intentional and unintentional. The first one, in my opinion, is easier to deal with, because you know the speaker deliberately distorts the message he or she is supposed to deliver. In other words, the speaker knows his or her intention, and perhaps it is easier to correct in this way.

The second type, which I call unintentional, is more difficult to detect, because the listener may not be sure if he or she has just received the wrong message, or if the speaker has initiated a conflict with the listener on purpose.

### **Conflicting messages**

In the online space, as we most likely do not know the people we are interacting with, we have to interpret the meanings of certain kinds of messages from strangers. In the case of double binds, the speaker may deliver conflicting messages, which may discount one another or be mutually exclusive.<sup>10</sup> For example, perhaps you invited a colleague to come over for dinner one time, and she told you that she could not take dairy products. At that point, you thought she might be lactose intolerant, but when you dined with her again a few months later, you found her enjoying her cheese platter. When you asked about it, she told you that she could not take dairy products the previous time because she had given them up for the Lent season. If you had not asked further, you would not know the reason behind the conflicting

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<sup>10</sup> Rebecca Bokoch, 'Communication in Couples and Families', *Encyclopedia of Couple and Family Therapy*, edited by Jay Lebow, Anthony Chambers and Douglas C. Breunlin (Cham: Springer, 2017); Bateson, *Steps to an ecology of Mind*.

messages. So, in case this may happen to some of you during communication, it is beneficial to both sides to be clear, although it is sometimes difficult, depending on your relationship with that person or the social context that may allow you to elaborate on the reasons behind your messages.

### **Symmetrical relationships**

Besides conflicting messages, another type of dysfunctional communication is, in contrast, a symmetrical one, in which the elements of symmetry can lead to toxic conversations. As we may notice, we tend to mirror the actions or gestures of our loved ones. We like to duplicate others to show our affection towards them. However, it is not healthy to mirror others in toxic communication.<sup>11</sup> For example, if someone attacks your appearance or personality online, and it makes you furious, you may attack them back with the same technique and use even worse wording. Therefore, it is important to break the cycle of toxic communication, which I will elaborate on in the next section.

### **Effective/Functional Communication**

Ideally, effective or functional communication allows the speaker and the listener to share information about their thoughts, feelings, and needs, in a way that each of them can understand.<sup>12</sup> To ensure that both sides are heard, active listening and expression are important. Active listening involves acknowledging and respecting others' points of view. Even just nodding or saying 'I hear you' can help. If conflicting

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<sup>11</sup> J. Gregory Briggs and Michelle A. Finley, 'Symmetrical Relationships in Couples and Families', *Encyclopedia of Couple and Family Therapy*, ed. Jay Lebow, Anthony Chambers, and Douglas C. Breunlin (Cham: Springer, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Bokoch, 'Communication in Couples and Families'.

messages are received, it is best to clarify the language, by asking questions or restating what one may have heard.

In a physical interaction, this is easier since the communication involves body language, so we at least get some clues as to what others feel through their gestures and postures. However, this is not possible online, except in the case of video calls. Thus, if you are in a conversation about controversial topics, you may want to drop in a sentence like 'I understand you are in this position about certain issues; here is my view on this', to illustrate that you are willing to understand the other person's perspective, even if he or she may take an opposing side to yours.

Another point worth highlighting is intercultural communication. Although the internet helps us to connect with people from all parts of the world, our lived experience is based on our geographical location, so sometimes we are not aware that our communication style is based on the social circle we frequently interact with. The meaning of our messages in intercultural communication is expected to be constantly modified and reformulated, based on the cultures we are interacting with. On top of this, social, political, and economic contexts should also be considered during our communication online. Different social classes, even in the same country, may be differentiated in their styles of communication, which may cause misunderstanding.<sup>13</sup> My point here does not imply that you should not communicate with people from different cultural or economic backgrounds than yours. I believe that God creates creatures with diversity to make lives more interesting. Therefore we should not expect that people are all the same, even if they join the same online

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<sup>13</sup> María Assumpta Aneas and María Paz Sandín, 'Intercultural and Cross-Cultural Communication Research: Some Reflections about Culture and Qualitative Methods', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 10, 1 (January 2009): Art. 51.

interest group as you. Seeking understanding should be the key to communication online.

## **Practical Suggestions**

To offer suggestions to improve our communication online or at least reduce the toxicity of those conversations, I will elaborate on a few theories from family therapy, because I find them more useful when dealing with conflicts. However, I understand that these theories are most effective when those involved in difficult conversations are willing to cooperate, and most of us know that this is often not the case. Even if we want to do what is good, we sometimes fail like Apostle Paul because of our sins (Romans 7:21–25 NRSV). Nonetheless, I wish to propose several approaches for you to try and test what works best for you. These approaches, strictly speaking, can be employed in all difficult conversations, whether they are online or offline.

### **1. Time Outs**

Time Outs are one of the most frequent techniques we use during conflicts when we simply do not know how to respond. For those of you who are parents, it is perhaps quite relatable to you if your kids shout at each other. Maybe one of them intentionally raises his or her voice in order to be heard, not only by the other kids, but also by you. As parents, you stop them in order to calm them down and let them speak about their concerns, so that they stop merely saying hurtful words to you or to other kids.

Using this technique is important when we experience flooding and simply cannot produce any good words from our mouths. However, the duration of the Time Outs should be well defined: Is it for one hour, one night, or longer? The period of silence should also be handled with caution, in case the person you argued with has created

bitterness and resentment towards you.<sup>14</sup> It is not uncommon to hear married couples talking about each other's shortcomings that happened ten years ago. It can happen that the problem remains unresolved, but it is also true that sometimes the problem was handled in a delayed manner which causes your other half to feel resentment, even if it has found an appropriate response. Moreover, a prolonged Time Out may cause stonewalling, when you no longer communicate with each other. This scenario is perhaps fine when dealing with strangers, but it is unhealthy when communicating with your friends and loved ones online.<sup>15</sup>

## **2. Speaker-Listener Technique**

The next skill set I want to introduce is the speaker-listener technique, which is supposed to tackle four 'communication danger signs' in conflict discussions. For American psychologists Howard J. Markman, Scott M. Stanley, and Susan L. Blumberg, these four signs are invalidation, negative interpretation, escalation, and withdrawal.<sup>16</sup> Firstly, invalidation dismisses the other's thoughts or feelings as if their perspective is inappropriate or irrelevant. For example, you may perceive acts of service as a love language and request that your partner do more chores to express love, but he or she dismisses you, thinking it is irrelevant. Secondly, negative interpretation is toxic to

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<sup>14</sup> Whitney Christmas and Amy Wu, 'Time Outs in Couple and Family Therapy', in *Encyclopedia of Couple and Family Therapy*, ed. Jay Lebow, Anthony Chambers and Douglas C. Breunlin, (Cham: Springer, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> John M. Gottman and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage* (London: Seven Dials, 2018), 38–39.

<sup>16</sup> Howard J. Markman, Scott M. Stanley, and Susan L. Blumberg, *Fighting for Your Marriage: A Deluxe Revised Edition of the Classic Best-Seller for Enhancing Marriage and Preventing Divorce* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010); Neslihan James-Kangal and Sarah W. Whitton, 'Speaker-Listener Technique in Couple and Family Therapy', in *Encyclopedia of Couple and Family Therapy*, ed. Jay Lebow, Anthony Chambers and Douglas C. Breunlin (Cham: Springer, 2017).

communication because it assumes the received message to be critical, hurtful, or rejecting. As a teacher here in Edinburgh, I have to mark term essays and give constructive feedback. Sometimes I have to give lower marks to students because their essays have not reached a certain standard, even though I know they have worked hard. But some of the students may take it negatively and think the teacher does not like them. Therefore, carefully shaping my comments to convey the correct message is also part of the job I need to learn as a scholar and a teacher. Thirdly, escalation indicates the intensified conflict in communication that leads to a much larger argument because both sides respond with increasing negativity. This is similar to the symmetrical (negative) relationship examined in the previous section. Fourth, withdrawal represents that the parties involved in the discussion simply avoid looking into the problem or the conflict again, leaving it unresolved. Note that this is different from the Time Out technique, where re-communication is expected after an agreed time frame.

In order to provide a healthy communication environment, the speaker-listener technique encourages the listener to focus on the speaker's perspective and suggests three rules for good communication. Instead of feeling an urge to express our opinions, as we always do when we think we are doing communication online, the focus should be on others. The first rule is that the speaker has the floor to elaborate his or her thoughts. Even if the listener disagrees with it, he or she should try to understand the speaker's perspective. The second rule is that the floor should be shared by both the listener and the speaker. In other words, both sides should be in an equal position in a conversation. The listener is encouraged to shift his or her role to become a speaker, after the original speaker finishes sharing. The third rule is that both sides should try to understand the other's perspective, before rushing to problem-solving. The key is to

comprehend each other's opinions before jumping to a conclusion or any other action plans. I find the perspective of the speaker-listener technique to be quite helpful in conversations. In online debates, we tend to think of ourselves more highly than others (Romans 12:3) and believe that strangers should hear us. But we forget how important it is to treat others how we want to be treated (Luke 6:31; Matthew 7:1-2).

On some practical notes for using this technique, the speaker rules suggest that the speaker should use 'I' statements so that the arguments or feelings one proposes are about the speaker and not the listener. While this can help the listener to understand his or her own perspective, it also minimises the risk of accusing others or saying something others may not have intended. On the other hand, the listener rules encourage the listener to demonstrate his or her understanding to the speaker by paraphrasing or quoting the speaker's words back to him or her. The listener may ask the speaker questions if clarification is needed. On top of that, the listener is reminded not to rebut the speaker's perspective, either verbally or nonverbally. This can be difficult during a heated debate, so the speaker-listener technique should be used when both sides have at least calmed down.<sup>17</sup>

### **3. Overcoming Gridlock<sup>18</sup>**

The third technique worth considering is the theory of overcoming gridlock from American Jewish psychologist John M. Gottman (b. 1942), developed in his influential book *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, which though specifically written for couples, is widely used among therapists. In online conversations, we tend to

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<sup>17</sup> Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, 249–251.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 236–259.

become furious when we hear people 'talking nonsense' on the issues we are passionate about. We react with vigorous emotions towards the words and reactions of strangers because we care about certain issues, such as politics, or particular cultural and religious traditions we are upholding.

In short, Gottman observes that most conflicts happen because there are dreams underlying our arguments and actions. These dreams are fundamental for us because they can be the goals and values that keep us moving in a certain stage of life. For example, if you are a Christian feminist, you may be upset that a male acquaintance is body shaming another woman online, and perhaps you want to argue with him and persuade him that everyone is created equally and is seen as good in God's eyes. No matter what values you disagree with in the acquaintance, or in your brothers and sisters, you should be reminded that you are pushing back against their values and not the people you are interacting with. Whatever terrible things they may say online, they are also created by God, despite their seemingly ungodly values.

To help the listener understand the speaker's underlying dreams, Gottman suggests that the listener ask questions about the values behind their disagreement. Again, the essential element is to seek understanding and show interest in the speaker's values, even if you disagree. After asking questions, the second step is to soothe the situation, if possible. It may happen that after the conflict discussions, both of you experience flooding—feeling overwhelmed; You may have thoughts of righteous indignation that urge you to defend your position, or you may have thoughts of innocent victimhood, wondering why this person is picking on you. Either way, it is helpful to stay away from social media and calm down first before saying

harmful words to others.<sup>19</sup> The final step is to soothe each other if either of you has said insulting words that hurt the other's feelings.

#### **4. The Hierarchy of Disagreement**

Gottman's proposal is helpful when the person you interact with is willing to compromise. However, we know that this is not always the case in the online world. Therefore, it is also wise to master the art of disagreeing with others, when you recognise that the debate has reached to your non-negotiable areas.

In Paul Graham's (b. 1964) hierarchy of disagreement, he indicates seven levels that appear in conversations of disagreement: name-calling, ad hominem, responding to tone, contradiction, counterargument, refutation, and refuting the central point. For Graham, name-calling, such as calling someone as an idiot, is the lowest form of disagreement. It does not have anything to do with the argument and is merely shaming the speaker. The second-lowest level is ad hominem. Though not using insulting words, the disagreeer may dismiss someone's opinion because of the latter's character, motive, or the other attribute that has nothing to do with the argument. For example, say your children catch a cold and you ask them to take some medications. They may ignore your advice because you are not a physician, but this is not necessarily related to the truthfulness of your argument. The third form of disagreement considers the tone of the speaker, rather than the argument itself. For instance, your spouse may ask you to do the washing up because it is your turn today. You may not listen to him or her simply because the request came in a tone that sounds like an accusation that you did not do it last week.

The fourth form, contradiction, refers to a statement opposite to the speaker's view, but without supporting evidence. For example, in daily

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<sup>19</sup> Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, 179–184.

conversations, it is common to hear someone say, 'I hate that person', without clarifying the reason for disliking that person. It can be the person's character or even appearance that he or she dislikes, but without supporting evidence, it is difficult to justify one's stance. Here we do not try to devalue others' opinions, but rather to ease communication. Therefore, it is unhelpful if we discredit someone's opinion this way, even though we may not agree with it. On another note, this is also different from what we said earlier about contradicting statements—the previous discussion is about contradicting messages that can be with or without evidence, but the different messages simply confuse the listeners because of ambiguity.

The fifth to seventh levels are the goals we should aim at in discussions. The fifth level, counterargument, provides the reason for the disagreement with supporting evidence. The sixth, refutation, pinpoints the mistakes of one's argument and explains the disagreement using quotes. The seventh and highest level of disagreement is to refute the central point of someone's argument.<sup>20</sup>

## 5. Prayers

This may sound cliché, but I find that the most practical response to a heated debate online is to pray. As 1 Corinthians 12:7 states, 'to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.' If our intention for the prayer is to seek peace, the Holy Spirit will guide us on what to speak. If you do not know what to pray, *The Merton Prayer*, written by American Catholic monk Thomas Merton (1915–1968), may give you some guidelines:

My Lord God,  
I have no idea where I am going.

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Graham, 'How to Disagree', March 2008, <http://www.paulgraham.com/disagree.html>

I do not see the road ahead of me.  
I cannot know for certain where it will end.  
Nor do I really know myself,  
And the fact that I think I am following Your will  
Does not mean that I am actually doing so.  
But I believe that the desire to please You  
Does in fact please You.  
And I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.  
And I know that if I do this,  
You will lead me by the right road  
Though I may know nothing about it.  
Therefore will I trust You always,  
Though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.  
I will not fear, for You are ever with me,  
And You will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.<sup>21</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Being Christian does not mean that we always know what we are doing or that we have never engaged in wrongdoing. But the awareness of seeking God's will is the first step towards detoxifying toxic communications and indeed drawing ourselves to communicate with others with God's love. I understand that in this paper, I have proposed a lot of communication theories, but in real life, when we are in a heated debate, we forget what we learn and follow our old ways of attacking people online, simply because we value our dreams—we attack people online to defend our dreams and wish that those we care for will affirm our dream in return. As I am wrapping up this paper, I am reminded of Paul's words in Ephesians 4:22–24 (NRSV): 'You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Merton, *Thoughts In Solitude* (New York: Macmillan, 1956).

self ... and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.'

I am not saying that it is easy to follow these rules. Human beings are human beings. We fail to do good, just as people or conversations online may disappoint us. But we have the Holy Spirit if we are committed to Christ, who will teach us everything, and remind us of all that God has said to us (John 14:26 NRSV). Instead of treating the digital space as somewhere inhuman, it is worth recognising that God is omnipresent, every day with us, online and offline.

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## **Where Does Altruism Come From?**

**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)

**Acts of kindness and self-sacrificial heroism occur in all populations. Are they signs of divine action in someone's life, or are they simply normal traits that we should expect to find in humans?**

When disasters such as fires, earthquakes, or tsunamis strike, we often see the best side of humanity. People rush in to rescue complete strangers, spending hours carefully clearing rubble to find victims or flying to dangerous situations just to help those who are suffering. They don't do this for fame or fortune, and their own families gain nothing. Sometimes groups are organized by churches and other religions, but the volunteers are just as likely to have no active faith or even be militant atheists. So what motivates us to do good?

The Bible can be interpreted as saying that humans are incapable of doing good without God's help and motivation, and that he gave us laws to make sure we recognize our sinfulness. Another interpretation is that we can do *some* good, and that God's laws are to encourage and educate us to do better, though this goodness is never enough to undo our sin. Which is right? Are we capable of doing good without God's help?

The Bible is realistic about humans right from the start; none of us have ever been faultless. Even when humans were in the perfect environment of Eden, without any provocation or needs, they had the inclination to break rules. We can recognize ourselves in the account of Adam and Eve; we, too, would end up ignoring the prohibition not to eat from the forbidden tree – either because we were curious or we wanted self-advancement, or simply because it was a challenge.

### **All have sinned**

The rest of the Old Testament confirms that humans repeatedly ruin their lives and the lives of others by breaking moral codes and rules of law; and the New Testament presents the theological conclusion: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," because we are "slaves to sin" who are merely "gratifying the cravings of our flesh" (Rom 3:23; 6:20; Eph 2:3).

Some theological systems take this further, almost to the point of saying that humans can't do anything that is really good. This is a common interpretation of the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity. Strictly speaking, though, Calvinism doesn't entail the idea that humans are incapable of doing good. This theology says only that they are incapable of deciding by themselves to repent of their wrongs and turn to God because every part of them, including their minds, is affected by sin.

The existence of altruistic and other “good” behavior toward strangers is sometimes used as proof that God’s goodness affects humans, because a purely evolutionary approach would predict that you only help those who are genetically related to you.<sup>1</sup> This is confirmed somewhat by animal studies. For example, red squirrels will sometimes adopt a baby squirrel if the mother has been killed by a predator, but researchers found they had to be somewhat related to the mother.<sup>2</sup> This is similar to the way that people are more likely to help each other if they can find some commonality – such as being from the same ethnic group or religion.

However, it is nevertheless true that most people will naturally help someone whether or not they are related. This suggests there is a biological basis for this apparent natural goodness.

### **Human cooperation and God’s law**

Recently some interesting work in the field of anthropology has helped to explain how morality can naturally arise in a human population.<sup>3</sup> It suggests that the need for cooperation in times of food shortages means that individuals who are good at teamwork and collaboration with others are more likely to survive and have children than loners who try to find food on their own. Since we inherit a lot of characteristics, such as extroversion and introversion, we are also likely to inherit the tendency to cooperate. Therefore, most of us are descended from those who were good at cooperating with people

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Brad Harrub, “Altruism and Evolution,” *Apologetics Press: Reason & Revelation* (April 2005) ([tinyurl.com/HarrubAltruism](http://tinyurl.com/HarrubAltruism)).

<sup>2</sup> See Brian Murphy, “Red Squirrels: Altruists or Self-Serving Survivalists?,” *EurekaAlert*, June 2, 2010 ([tinyurl.com/AltruisticSquirrels](http://tinyurl.com/AltruisticSquirrels)).

<sup>3</sup> A good review of the following ideas is in Jonathan Birch, “Book Review: Michael Tomasello // A Natural History of Human Morality,” *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* (2017) ([tinyurl.com/TomaselloMorality](http://tinyurl.com/TomaselloMorality)).

who weren't necessarily part of their family, because they were the ones who survived disasters such as famines.

If someone loses the trust of others, perhaps by stealing more than their share from the food store, they will be expelled from their community, so they are less likely to have any descendants. However, if they then show contrition and convince the others that they won't do it again, they may be readmitted and survive. So another characteristic we are likely to inherit is a sense of guilt and the wish to be reconciled with people we have hurt. This is a possible start to what we might now regard as a moral code, along with concepts of remorse and restitution.

This theory makes sense as an origin for human morality and the capability and desire to do good deeds toward others. In early history, humans needed to work with each other in order to successfully hunt wild animals such as aurochs – an ancestor of the cow that was as large and agile as a horse but as dangerous as a rhinoceros.<sup>4</sup> If we are descended from people who successfully worked in teams, this could explain why it seems more exciting to achieve something alongside others rather than just by ourselves. It's true that we get a sense of gratification from completing something on our own, but that is very different from the high-fives and whoops of mutual congratulation that greet the completion of a difficult task by a team. That most of us prefer to work in groups and get lonely on our own might suggest that we are mainly descended from those who *did* cooperate rather than from the loners, whose family line tended to die out in famines.

If our morals do spring from our need to cooperate, we'd expect them to be universal – the need for moralists to teach them to “uncivilized” societies would simply not exist. Indeed, Christians who have tried to convert Native Americans and Māoris found that they already knew

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<sup>4</sup> See Wikipedia, “Aurochs” ([tinyurl.com/WikiAurochs](http://tinyurl.com/WikiAurochs)).

that theft, adultery, and greed were wrong. In fact, the “natives” were also sometimes surprisingly altruistic – willing to share their meager food with missionaries who had come unprepared – though, of course, many others were not so welcoming. These missionaries had to learn that preaching the gospel was not about civilizing and teaching morality, but teaching about Jesus, who had a cure for sin.

But if human goodness can arise simply by a history of cooperation, what part does God’s law and his guidance play in our lives?

I think it is significant that the first home given to humans in the Bible was a garden, in which the first pair were told to cooperate by tending it together. Subsequently, God gave the Israelites laws forbidding murder, theft, or even coveting what belongs to your neighbor. These laws also encouraged cooperation because you are much more likely to trust someone if they don’t lie or steal from you. Jesus later internalized these laws by turning them into attitudes. Instead of outlawing murder and theft, Jesus said we should not hate or retaliate when wronged, and we should show love even to our enemies (Exod 20; Matt 5). Jesus therefore turned laws into a morality that helps to hold society together.

Paul said that the purpose of the law was not only to inform us what is right and wrong, but also to tell us that we are bad and not righteous (Rom 3:19–20). But they also had another purpose: to help us improve, and become a better person than when we started. We inherit a sinful nature that tempts us to commit acts such as adultery, lying, or stealing for our own benefit, but God wants to help us overcome that tendency and to grow in virtue. The Old Testament was only able to list the offenses that God wanted us to try to avoid, but the New Testament tells of a new power that will help us succeed – the indwelling Holy Spirit. The process of sanctification – making us as holy as the Holy Spirit within us – becomes the goal and purpose of life for someone deciding to follow Jesus.

## Natural goodness

If our tendency to cooperate and help others is inherited, then some people have a head start on being “good.” Some individuals are born with naturally “good” characteristics, in that they are innately empathic and willing to work together with and help others. Other individuals are born with unhelpful or difficult characteristics such as selfishly caring only for their own needs and wants. Although they accept the help of others, they rarely reciprocate unless they think they will gain by doing so.

A few individuals are born with “bad” characteristics that lead to antisocial behavior. This might range from committing acts of theft and damage, without any regard for the harm they cause, to deliberate cruelty in order to feel superior to others. Not many are born like this because, in the past, the family line of such individuals tended to die out. Being born with these “bad” traits doesn’t excuse anyone for immoral behavior, but we should be aware that some people find it harder than others to be “good.”

Whatever characteristics we are born with, we can change for the better. Those with bad traits can overcome them, and those who naturally do beneficial things can become even better. This is the process of sanctification for a Christian.

Theologically speaking, all types of people are sinners, whether they are naturally cooperative or naturally selfish, because no one is perfect. The Bible presents the apparently harsh conclusion that everyone is destined for hell, whether they are good or bad, unless they repent and turn to follow God. This seems unfair until we take on board the conclusion from social anthropology that we have inherited a lot of our morality. If God judged us by how much good or evil we did, some of us would be disadvantaged because we were born with a stronger inclination to be selfish, violent, or sexually promiscuous.

The Bible implies that God is not interested in our natural goodness or badness, but is only interested in our repentance and willingness to let his Holy Spirit transform us.

This process of sanctification can transform us into someone more Christlike, but it won't have the same end result for everyone in this lifetime because we don't all start from the same point. Someone with a psychopathic personality who takes up charity work has clearly had his life totally transformed. If that same level of change were applied to the respectable people he works with who were born naturally empathic and "nice," they would be transformed into absolute saints. In other words, you can't tell from the outside who has allowed themselves to be transformed the most.

None of us are born "good" in God's eyes, but as a society we regard some people as better than others. God sees the potential in us all and gives us a target to aim for. The direction and distance that we travel in God's strength is much more important than what we actually achieve in this life because in the end, when Christ appears, all those who follow Jesus will become like him (1 John 3:2). In the meantime, we each need to strive to let the Holy Spirit transform us into better people than when we first started. And, importantly, we need to do that without judging those who have had a greater handicap in that goal.

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## Chaos at Creation?

Alan Millard

*Alan Millard is Emeritus Rankin Professor of Hebrew and Ancient Semitic Languages at the University of Liverpool and a Vice-President of The Victoria Institute.*

In his paper 'Roger Penrose's conformal cyclic cosmology and the Christian doctrine of creation',<sup>1</sup> Rodney Holder observes that 'Many scholars believe that Genesis 1 stems from a priestly writer (the source "P") during the Babylonian exile and is reacting against the Babylonian creation myth *Enuma elish*.' Further on he says Genesis 1: 1, 2 'may represent God as creating out of pre-existing chaos'. A year later in 'Icons of Science - A Visual Approach to Science-Faith Dialogue',<sup>2</sup> David Gregory has stated, '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 ...' (p. 14).

The following paragraphs present the results of recent studies of the Babylonian poem and the Hebrew texts to show that the idea of God overcoming chaos at creation is ill-founded.<sup>3</sup>

In 1876 a British scholar, George Smith, identified parts of a Babylonian poem about creation among the fragmentary cuneiform

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<sup>1</sup> *Faith and Thought* 70, April 2021, 3-13, see p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Faith and Thought* 72, April 2022, 2-24, see p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> This paper is based on my essay, 'From Woe to Weal: Completing a Pattern in the Bible and the Ancient Near East' which is indebted in turn to Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction*, 2005.

tablets brought to the British Museum from Nineveh. Since he published parts of that Babylonian Creation Epic, *Enuma elish*, all sorts of comparisons have been made with Genesis.<sup>4</sup> In 1895 a German scholar, Hermann Gunkel, examined the biblical and the Babylonian texts and claimed they describe a great battle between the forces of chaos and the forces of order at the beginning of creation. He deduced that the Babylonians believed their gods had to conquer the threatening forces of primeval chaos before they could create the world. That chaos was personified as the ocean, Tiamat, and her spouse Apsu, while the gods stood for order, ultimately led by the god of Babylon, Marduk. Gunkel argued that, at some point, Tiamat and Apsu, monsters of chaos, rebelled against the gods, resulting in the struggle which he called the 'chaos battle' (*Chaoskampf*). He saw traces of this battle in Genesis 1 in the words 'without form and void' (*tohu wavohu*) which could equate to chaos, while 'the deep' (*tehom*) was equated with Tiamat, so before the world we see was created there existed a situation of chaos and only after God had overcome those elements of chaos could he establish an ordered universe. Gunkel found references to the battle in other biblical passages in Psalms, Prophets and Job, which mention God subduing the sea or sea monsters, including those named as Rahab and Leviathan. Examples are Psalm 89: 9, 10 and Isaiah 51: 9. According to Gunkel, the ancient Hebrews borrowed Babylonian mythology and re-wrote it.

Most Old Testament scholars have accepted Gunkel's idea. But since he wrote his work, more pieces of *Enuma elish* have been found, filling some of the broken passages. It has been clear for many decades that the opening lines do not depict a chaotic world.<sup>5</sup> Firstly they tell of

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<sup>4</sup> For the Babylonian Creation poem see Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 2013, or Foster, *Before the Muses*, 2005, 436-86.

<sup>5</sup> See Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 1951, 3, 89.

two primary beings, the female Tiamat and the male Apsu, whose waters mingled when no other gods existed. Then the gods were created within them: two pairs followed by Anu and his son Ea. Then, as children do, they disturbed their mother Tiamat, who wanted to quieten them. The poem says, 'The divine brothers came together, their clamour got loud, throwing Tiamat into a turmoil. They jarred the nerves of Tiamat ... Their conduct was displeasing to her, yet though their behaviour was not good, she wanted to spare them'. Apsu was less lenient, he wanted to destroy the gods so that he could have a good night's sleep! Despite Tiamat's objection, he planned to kill the gods. The gods found out and, after Ea had killed Apsu and set up his home on him, they made Ea's son Marduk their hero giving him supreme power, so then he killed Tiamat and created the world from her corpse. Clearly the chaos was not there at the beginning; it was the gods who caused it! All had been calm and peaceful; their frolicking upset Tiamat! There was, therefore, no chaos in the way Hermann Gunkel assumed. The gods did not have to conquer chaos to produce order, they fought against Apsu and Tiamat to preserve themselves. It was their noisy behaviour that angered Tiamat and Apsu against them. In this light, the widespread idea that there was a Babylonian source for a battle between God and a monster of chaos before the creation of the world in Genesis 1 should be abandoned.

Moreover, there is now agreement that no direct link exists between the Hebrew word *tehom* and Babylonian Tiamat, as Gunkel asserted. The two words are cognate because the Hebrew and Babylonian languages are closely related, but the Hebrew word is certainly not borrowed from Babylonian. In addition, study of the words 'without form and void' (*tohu wawohu*) applied to the earth, shows that they mean 'unsuitable for human habitation', but not a state of chaos, see Jeremiah 4: 23; Isaiah 34: 11. In these passages the phrase describes a place which can no longer support human life; Isaiah 45: 18 makes

that clear; God did not create the world to be uninhabitable, but, through his process of creation, to be a place fit for human beings to live in.

The Babylonian Creation Epic, *Enuma elish*, gives no grounds for supposing the Israelites believed God defeated a monstrous chaos before he created the world! The scattered biblical passages taken to refer to such a battle are well explained as poetic descriptions of the Exodus events.

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# Minutes of Annual General Meeting for 2022

Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> May 2022

Hybrid Meeting, held online via Zoom

and in-person at Goff's Oak Methodist Church EN7 5SS

Council members present: Rev R Allaway (Chairman), Rev J D Buxton (Hon. Treasurer), Dr A P Kerry (Hon. Secretary) Mrs J Mead, Rev Dr Sally Nelson.

22 individuals attended the May 2022 Open Lecture. 14 members remained for the AGM

## **OPENING**

Rev. R Allaway welcomed members to the meeting and opened the meeting in prayer.

## **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

Copies of the minutes of the 2021 AGM were available on the website. These were approved as a correct record and signed by the chairman.

## **ACADEMIC GRANT**

Details of an academic grant application had been received and considered by the council who supported the application and asked the AGM to approve the awarding of the grant of £1000. The subject is 'An Analysis of William Lane Craig's Argument for Divine Temporality.'

The applicant (Dr David Watkis) is also prepared to stand as Council member (see below) but it was stressed that these two matters were being dealt with entirely separately and without prejudice. The proposed grant award was unanimously approved.

## **ELECTION**

The meeting agreed to the re-election of:

President (Sir Colin Humphreys),

Vice-Presidents (Prof. Malcolm A. Jeeves, Prof. Kenneth Kitchen, Prof. Alan Millard, Prof. J. W. Montgomery)

Honorary Treasurer (Rev. John Buxton is willing to serve to the end of the current financial year. Mr Andrew Dipper has kindly offered to assist and John will arrange to hand over to him)

Council Rev. Bob Allaway, Rev. John Buxton, Dr Alan Kerry, Mrs Joanne Mead, Rev. Dr Sally Nelson and Prof. Meric Srokosz (ex officio) as Council members for a further three years.

Council were pleased to announce that Rev. Dr David Instone-Brewer and Dr David E. Watkis were prepared to join Faith & Thought Council. It was proposed that each should hereby be elected as a Council Members and Trustees and they were both individually approved by the meeting.

The meeting also agreed that once he has relinquished the role of treasurer, John Buxton should be approved to continue to serve on Council as trustee.

## **AMEND CONSTITUTION**

Members had been notified in advance of a proposed change to the constitution to enable online / hybrid (online and in-person) meetings for Council and AGM in future (details available on the website). It was noted that we were already doing this for this meeting, as had been necessitated during COVID-19 lockdowns but the charity commission's flexible approach during the COVID-19 period came to an end on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2022 so to continue to do this requires a change to the constitution. The

proposed change was to add Clause 7 regarding meetings (see updated document online) and to delete the redundant 'Notes' section at the end of the constitution was unanimously agreed. Alan will contact the Charity Commission to update these changes

## **ANNUAL ACCOUNTS**

The annual accounts were presented by John Buxton explained that due to unforeseen circumstances, the annual accounts for 2021 have not yet been finally examined. He provided the latest version which were tabled for approval subject to examination (also available on the website prior to the meeting). This was agreed.

The year-end deficit is £519.5, the end of year cash balance is £9,569.8.

The share valuations total £115,734

John has served as our treasurer for 17 years and was thanked for his long and valuable service. He will arrange handover to Andy Dipper as 'finance assistant' while we continue to look for a longer term replacement treasurer.

The financial situation is satisfactory.

The accounts were accepted subject to final examination

Margaret Pratt was approved as independent examiner for the accounts

## **PLANS for 2022-2023**

Alan was pleased to announce the second lecture for 2022 on our theme of 'Doing God Online' will be by Dr Eric Stoddart from St Andrews University who will speak on 'The Internet Gaze'. This will be an online event on Monday 14<sup>th</sup> November at 7:00pm.

He briefly reported on the responses to a recent questionnaire regarding the future of Faith & Thought, and explained that Council has planned an additional 'Strategy Meeting' for 7<sup>th</sup> July (7:30pm via Zoom) to discuss this further with regards to practical planning for future symposia / lectures and the emphasis of the organisation on science and faith, or covering wider matters of philosophy and sociology.

For 2023, Council are considering the theme of 'A Good Death' for lectures / symposium.

**CLOSE**

The Chairman closed the meeting in prayer and invited all present to say 'the Grace ...' together.

# Faith&Thought

RELATING ADVANCES IN KNOWLEDGE TO FAITH WITHIN SOCIETY

**Open Lecture November 2022**

## The Internet Gaze

**Dr Eric Stoddart**

**St Andrews University**

**Monday 14th November 2022**

**7:00pm**

Join us 'Live' ONLINE for lecture and discussion

**[www.faithandthought.org](http://www.faithandthought.org)**

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Sharrad Kachhi and Alex Andrews

Photo by

## Particles of Faith

**Sir John Theodore Houghton, FRS, FLSW**

**30<sup>th</sup> December 1931 - 15<sup>th</sup> April 2020**

On Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> May 2022, my wife and I attended a Service of Thanksgiving for the life of Sir John Theodore Houghton held at Neuadd Dyfi, Aberdyfi. This was actually two years after his death, but Covid had prevented a fitting tribute being held before then. I attended as Chair of Faith and Thought, of which John had been President from 2001 to 2013, but Sylvia and I were also there in a personal capacity. We had known John as a fellow member of Kidlington Baptist Church, in Oxford, when I was training there, and Sheila, his widow, had been one of Sylvia's grown-up bridesmaids at our wedding.

Neuadd Dyfi is the village hall: a wise choice, as it was larger and more comfortable than any possible churches, and also provided neutral territory for those who did not share his faith.

While we were walking there, we fell into conversation with a fellow pedestrian, who testified that John had changed the direction of his life. Hearing a lecture by John led to a particular topic for his PhD, from which much else followed.

The meeting was compered by Simon Morgan, one of John's fellow elders at 'The English Church' (of which more, later). As well as familiar hymns (e.g. *How Great Thou Art*) there was a hymn that was new to me, by Timothy Dudley-Smith: *The God who set the stars in space*.

Prof. Robert White FRS gave the eulogy, and had printed copies of a brief biography, which we were all free to take.

We had not realised how precocious John had been. He had entered Rhyl Grammar School at the age of nine, and matriculated at 16 with the best results in the whole of Wales, which won him a scholarship to Jesus College, Oxford. At first, Oxford wanted him to delay entry till he was a bit older, but when he threatened to go to Manchester instead, they relented!

John had shared his father's Christian faith, but, unlike his father, never saw any conflict between biological evolution and Scripture. They agreed to differ on that!

John's calling was to Meteorology and Climate Science. Dr Bruce Callander, who had worked with John in IPCC, shared his memories. John's determination to set the facts before the world won him many enemies, but his refusal to sensationalise, and his integrity, helped protect him. Unfortunately, as Robert White's booklet recounts, that did not stop one journalist attributing something to John that he had never said. In the end, he felt forced to take legal action to set the record straight. Sadly, the lie is apparently still circulating on the internet.

John's children and grand-children also contributed to the service. His first wife, Margaret, had died of cancer in 1986. Their shared faith and eternal hope in Jesus had helped them through that time. Sheila, a long-time family friend, had married John in 1988. Sadly, John's later years were afflicted with Alzheimer's. Yet though, by the end, he could no longer remember Sheila's name, he never forgot he was loved by her.

Rev. Stuart Bell gave the address. We gather that, when he was a vicar in Aberystwyth, he had a big ministry among students. Since his retirement, churches like 'the English Church' appreciate his ministry.

On the Sunday, it seemed obvious to attend the service at 'the English Church' (actually, English-speaking Welsh-Presbyterian). This is a small, bright yellow building on the sea-front. I was intrigued to see a plaque with Psalm 111v2 on its front. This is the text above the entrance to the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge. Was it John's idea to put it there? We highly recommend attending their service.

We also recommend a trip on the Talylyn Railway, one station up the coast in Tywyn. They are very helpful. Rev. W Audrey of the Thomas the Tank Engine books was a founder member, and they have his study reconstructed in their museum.

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Bob Allaway

## **Engaging with Science – Keswick Ministries**

October 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> 2022 <https://tinyurl.com/ym9ebbym>

Bioethics is becoming an ever-more important topic as advances in biology, medicine and technology continue to push the boundaries of what it means to 'edit' the human body or 'play God'.

In partnership with The Faraday Institute for Science and Religion, Keswick Ministries are putting on a two-day conference which aims to equip those in Christian leadership and those with a particular scientific or ethical interest to be able to engage faithfully with challenging questions around bioethics. The keynote speakers are:

- Cheryl Hunt: The theological basis for bioethics
- Keith Fox: Current bioethical issues
- Trevor Stammers: Gene editing

There will be space and time both to discuss these issues, share fellowship and to enjoy the beautiful Lake District.

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### **Archie Battersbee**

The tragic case of Archie Battersbee hit the headlines recently as several court cases sought to determine whether or not to withdraw life support on the basis of brainstem death. The courts ruled in favour of the hospital NHS Trust against the wishes of his parents to allow the withdrawal of life support.

Brian Weller, former Honorary Secretary of Faith & Thought has written the following short piece in response to the case.

### **Dead or Alive?**

Faith, Law and Truth have common cause to approach this Question. Ethics and medicine are interested in it, especially since the great advance in human knowledge and the sciences.

In essence it comes down to the loss of persons who are loved and valued and whose death will bring grief and despair to some, possibly many. But whether famous or not, this question hovers at the point where it must be judged and appropriate action taken.

One voice expresses sympathy and understanding, another will be interested in facts to the exclusion of feelings. This writer believes that there is a God and that His name is Love. If you wish to know the basis for this opinion, it rests solely upon the revelation which is the Christian's bedrock, that I belong to Him because He died my death before I was born. This in turn rests upon the inerrancy of holy scripture as originally given, The Bible. And may I add in deference to other monistic brethren, that it also will be found true for those of you who will because of your trust in this loving God, be willing to acknowledge from the heart that "He died for me" whether after or before I died/die, because it was a transaction before all beginnings, in the realm known as 'spiritual' suffered by God in flesh on a cross, thought expedient by the rulers and Roman Governor Pontius Pilate.

The man Jesus, unrecognised as the Christ, by most of his fellow countrymen, but whose manner and conduct throughout his execution, drew from the Roman Centurion in charge on that hillside the exclamation, "Certainly he was innocent!" He was the expert in mortality, for years of brutal executions made the roman soldier an expert butcher. What a surprising conclusion from such a man.<sup>1</sup>

Like many, this writer after losing a beloved wife or husband after many long happy years remains convinced that God is love, has redeemed all who remain faithful to the end, and will fulfil all His promises and prophesies. Many mysteries are unpacked within the Old and New Testaments. They relate to beginnings and endings here on earth with relevance to what follows. The phrase; 'man proposes, but God disposes,' is appropriate. The first question above is simply, when does a person become a corpse? The law says, when death has been certified by a qualified doctor and the death certificate signed and registered.

Yet most people find it hard to believe that the person loved and greatly missed, no longer exists, somehow or somewhere. Compassion determines what can be said in such circumstances, yet the Bible alone contains much that is comforting and helpful, enabling millions who having lost someone very close to their hearts resume intelligent thought, empathy with others in similar circumstances, joy in life and a hope in death.

Scripture reveals to those with faith in a loving God<sup>2</sup> that Truth demands we also face the fact of the supernatural world which modern man has lost sight of. Religion is nothing but organisations. Faith is different. Faith is about the character of the God one believes in and His, or its, worth and power to determine ultimate questions. The Bible reveals that mortal death does not necessarily mean ultimate death. There is what has always been known as the day of judgment.<sup>3</sup>

In conclusion allow me to place before you the words of the One God and Saviour of the world, Jesus the man who gave His life for it, for you, the Christ of all the faithful, now God in manhood, the door to heaven, the bread of life and the wine of consummation which is immortality;<sup>4</sup>

What do you think? Responses to this piece would be welcomed, as next year we are planning a series of talks based on the theme of 'A Good Death' and we hope this might serve as a conversation starter.

Contact the editor at [admin@faithandthought.org](mailto:admin@faithandthought.org)

*Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives to me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up at the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the*

*Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."*

John 6:35-40 ESV

Live and act according to your faith and conscience and you will be safe, when rightly focussed.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 23:47 also Mark 15:39 although only John (of the gospel writers) is mentioned as witness to this event.

<sup>2</sup> John 3:16 and following.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 12:36-37 also Revelation 20:11-15 so by our own priorities (words and actions).

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 17:15 also Romans 6:5 and 23.

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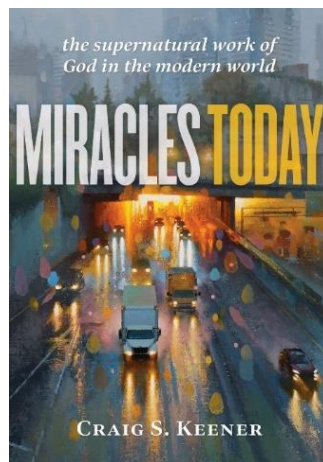
## Book Reviews

**Craig S. Keener** *Miracles Today: The Supernatural Work of God in the Modern World*

Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021

ISBN 978-1-540963833 \$24.99

Professor Craig Keener (1960) teaches New Testament in Kentucky, USA, and is the author of some large and influential biblical commentaries, for example on John, Galatians and Revelation. His commentary on Acts is in the largest in existence, published in four volumes with a combined thickness of 27 centimetres! Keener is married to a woman from Zaire who was refugee in her own country and who holds a French PhD in something non-theological. No wonder he is interested in how the Bible is received in non-Western cultures. On his homepage, <https://craigkeener.com/> he comments on the present book and much else.



In 2011 Keener published *Miracles: the credibility of the New Testament accounts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic) in two volumes with a combined 1100 pages, a multi-disciplinary defence of the historicity of the New Testament accounts. He has now followed this with a book which collects accounts of miracles in our time. He calls this book short (174) but it still comes in at 284 pages: 238 large pages of text and 46 of endnotes.

This book is a collection of descriptions of supernatural healings, plus some revivifications (including footballer Fabrice Muamba in 2012) and a few nature miracles. The vast majority of these miracles took place in the last forty years or so, and nearly all are well-documented. They are divided over forty short chapters, some of which are introductory, and three short appendices. Some chapters focus on one case, others contain multiple reports. Most reports are inevitably from the USA, but many also from the Majority World, with Europe underrepresented. (Johann and Christoph Blumhardt and Georg Müller are mentioned, but they lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.) Chapter 9 pays attention to Lourdes, chapter 12 to the faith healer Kathryn Kuhlman (1907-1976) and chapter 31 to healings in Keener's own family, whereas chapter 34 contains Keener's personal experience, but he does not claim the gift of healing for himself.) There are separate chapters on the healing of blind people, deaf people, cancer patients and more. Chapter 3 and Appendix B interact critically with David Hume, the Scottish philosopher who denied the possibility of miracles *a priori*. One of the longest chapters (36) is about spiritual factors which enable or prevent God to act in a miraculous way; like the rest of the book this is carefully worded. Keener is clear that miracles are exceptions, not the rule, but that they happen nonetheless.

The book is well-written and – given that it contains many personal stories – quite factual and down-to-earth. I warmly commend it as a great testimony to what God is still doing in our world, which belongs in every good library and can be shared with non-believing persons without any (false) shame.

*Reviewed by Revd Dr Pieter J. Lalleman  
Knaphill*

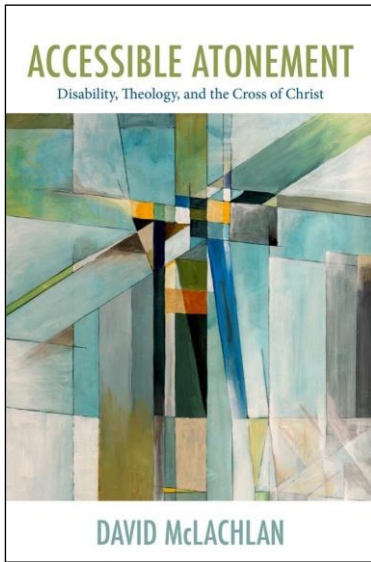
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**David McLachlan** *Accessible Atonement: Disability, Theology and the Cross of Christ*

Baylor University Press 2021

ISBN 978-1481313674, 225pp

Like many reflections on disability, this book was triggered by experience: in this case, by questions about and from church members and friends which arose in the course of David McLachlan's pastoral ministry. It is the story of the search for a truly robust basis for inclusion - one that is not simply



predicated upon a vague sense that churches ought to do better by people with disabilities. It is rooted in the theological tradition rather than being primarily biblical or experiential, and it digs deep into the many Christian understandings of atonement. This makes it rather different from most of the disability books on my shelf, but is also a mark of the developing maturity of the whole field of disability theology. For example, in recent years there have been some excellent biblical studies such as the work of Louise Lawrence and Jeremy Schipper. This rapid evolution makes disability theology an

exciting and interesting area to watch, and McLachlan's doctoral work is a solid addition to the corpus.

*Accessible Atonement* offers a closely argued case for seeing the atonement (understood as the key reconciling act of God in history) as the inclusive root for all people in the gospel story. McLachlan uses the term 'atonement-as-participation' to describe the grounding principle of his argument - not a new model of atonement, but a theological perspective to understanding the atonement that foregrounds God's intimate involvement at the Cross with all aspects of God's creation.

McLachlan takes this approach because he wants to tackle what he terms the 'awkward' connection of sin, disability and healing, which he sees as critical in a consideration of the work of atonement. Disability has often been understood as being the result of sin, which is the 'problem' the atonement addresses. McLachlan explores the validity (and sometimes the invalidity!) of this connection of disability and culpability thoroughly in the light of cosmic and personal sin and evil, but also in the knowledge that not everyone of faith is healed of their disability, which leaves the church with something of a conundrum. He wants to offer a theology that is truly inclusive of those with disabilities, those who seem not to be 'healed', without recourse to a special case of theology for those who are disabled. He argues that the disability movement often focuses on problems and rights, not the more fundamental fact of our relationship to God and the salvific work of Christ. In short, this book is an alternative apologetic for considering people with disabilities as fully human – rather than exploring what is meant by the *imago dei*, it begins with the reach of the Cross.

In the course of the book, McLachlan addresses all the main questions of disability theology - some at greater length than others, but no significant stone is left unturned. In each area he is able to make use of his motif of atonement-as-participation to challenge and re-orient the argument to an inclusive position - sometimes the use of the motif feels a little stretched, but he makes it work.

I am impressed by the consistent and detailed application of the motif and the theological rigour behind it, and I commend the author's insistence on a sound theological base for disability theology: one that is neither emotive nor advocacy driven. Yet I finished the book feeling slightly uneasy. I may be wrong, but the book reads like an objective defence against the position that people with disabilities are 'not like us'. While this position may indeed typify the actual unreflected attitude of many churches, I feel compelled to start disability theology from a place of confidence that we are all fully human and already included in Jesus' work, rather than to begin by arguing for that inclusion. The sin 'associated' with disability is more likely to be in the eye of the judgemental beholder than in the person with disabilities.

The book argues that God's action in atonement incorporates all of humanity in all its variety (p35): I want to say: 'Of course it does! Who thinks it doesn't?' Unless we propose a limited atonement (which the author does not), then there are no exclusions – so let us not make inclusion the goal, but the first whistle. As part of a family that has been impacted by disability for 24 years, I can confirm that disability has affected every educational, leisure and career decision, our finances, housing and life choices, and has excluded us as a family from many areas of life, including (sadly) full involvement with some of the churches to which we have 'belonged'. Speaking from this place, the book addresses a question I am not asking. It is not God who has excluded us, but 'normate' human structures and attitudes. The problems we experience lie in human judgements of difference, not in what God did or did not do.

Further, I am always a little anxious about isolating the Cross from the whole life of Jesus. I still believe that the questions of disability are more convincingly addressed through an exploration of human personhood and therefore through a holistic approach to the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. These questions also raise matters of our views of the nature of reality. Creation cannot be without God (as McLachlan says) but I would argue that if that is so, the atonement alone is not the hinge point of the human drama: rather, the hinge is the incarnation of the Second Person in all His fullness. Given these hesitations, which I fully recognise not everyone will share, I am deeply grateful for McLachlan's robust theological approach, which lends gravitas to the whole subject area.

To whom would I recommend the book? It isn't a quick and easy read, but for anyone who is teaching or researching in this area, it is a must - not least because it challenges us to do our theology well and to remember our Christian tradition.

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*Reviewed by Sally Nelson*

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